

Living Newspaper in the English Discussion Classroom

Chris Parham

Aoyama Gakuin University

parham78c@hotmail.com

Abstract

Since 2003, the Japanese government has been urging universities to improve and reform the way they teach English to develop young people who can actively and immediately work in global contexts after graduation (MEXT, 2003). Some universities are using drama in the English language classroom to nurture students' creativity, cooperation, and confidence. As has been shown, drama brings a multitude of psychological and communicative benefits – it helps students think about pronunciation, meaning, emotion, motivation, cooperation, confidence, and active participation, all of which can help to promote language acquisition and the spontaneous use of language (Miccoli, 2003; Ranzoni, 2003; Sato, 2001; Shapiro & Leopold, 2012; Zyoud, 2010). With a background in theatre and some useful drama resources at my disposal, I have been seeking ways to give my English classes a communicative and performative edge, and this article examines how I tried to incorporate a drama activity into my university discussion class.

One resource book I frequently refer to in the ESL classroom is *Drama Games for Classrooms and Workshop* (Swale, 2009), a lean and handy compendium with over a hundred drama games and activities. In the *storytelling* section, there is a game called *Living Newspaper* in which students create a living version of a newspaper front page story. For the activity, students must have a copy of a newspaper front page, a bit of imagination and analysis, and be ready to explore the notion of theatre as a social force. The purpose of the activity is to present the news by considering different aspects of the article by getting the students to think about “what do the articles say, what fonts are used, what do the pictures show, are there adverts,

what is the tone, the colour, the image presented to the reader?” (Swale, 2009, p. 133). This seemed like a perfect supplementary activity for my two intermediate-level university discussion classes. In these classes, students lead discussions in English on a recent news story. Each week a student facilitates a small group (3 or 4 students) in a ten-minute discussion by summarizing the story, defining key vocabulary, highlighting the writer’s and their own opinion, and asking three or more discussion questions, repeating the whole process a few times to improve clarity, fluency, and confidence in delivery. The Living Newspaper activity advocated many of the same aims as the discussions: it encourages students to work collaboratively as a group and share their insight and opinions on the news. On top of that, it encourages students to show imagination, creativity, and expression – to take risks and show confidence – and allows them to see that words, beyond simply conveying information, have the power to affect others. The following article explains how I implemented the Living Newspaper activity in two university classes and how the activity deepened the perception of the participating students.

Background

The Living Newspaper idea, or Newspaper Theatre as it is more widely known, is a kind of sociodrama and psychodrama which explores the social and therapeutic potential of theatre through the presentation of real-life events and the exploration of social problems. The idea dates back to the experiments of the Futurists in Europe in the 1920s and their need for something that was not fully prepared but improvised, intuitive, and revealing actuality (Drain, 1995). In the Soviet Union performances of the news were given in public places to make news accessible to the masses and pass on revolutionary propaganda, while in Vienna this idea became a more spontaneous and improvised style of theatre under Jacob Levy Moreno who believed that “when a playwright writes a play about the news he has already lost the thrill of immediacy and actuality” (Cukier, 2007, p. 231). By the 1940s many of the proponents of Newspaper Theatre, most of whom were small independent supporters of the workers’ movement, were either halted by government censorship or the closing down of the theaters, yet it was revitalized and documented in the 1970s by theatre practitioner Augustus Boal in experiments which led to his body of work *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Boal saw theatre as a way of educating and empowering deprived and

under-represented people, and through his work he wanted his spectators (audience members actively involved in the performance) to examine their oppressions and try to make changes to their present situations (Boal, 1979).

The First Attempt

I had learned about some of Boal's techniques during my undergraduate studies, so it was nice to revisit and broaden my understanding of them and apply them in different surroundings. Before attempting this experiment, however, I used the description of the Living Newspaper activity from *Drama Games for Classroom and Workshops* as my stimulus and guide to how to implement the activity since I had it readily available. The week before we did the activity I gave students the short description: "what do the articles say, what fonts are used, what do the pictures show, are there adverts, what is the tone, the colour, the image presented to the reader?" (Swale, 2009, p. 133). As foreign newspapers are not readily available, the one exception I made was that students did not need to choose a front-page news story and instead they could find an online news story.

On the day of the activity I divided the session in two: the first half for preparation and the second half for presentation and feedback. There was a total of 46 students participating in the activity: 25 psychology majors in my period one Oral English class, most of whom are intermediate level, and 21 English majors in my period two Integrated English class, all of whom are upper intermediate level.

The first attempt at the Living Newspaper was a test-run and I expected students to be hesitant and uncertain about what news they were going to present and how they were going to present it to the group. So, although it was no surprise to see students produce work which was a little superficial in content and unassured in delivery; the work was thoroughly enjoyed by the audience. As expected, the lower level and proficiency of the Oral English class, and the larger class size, were factors in the prudent way the students approached the activity. Their stories included staff discrimination at Starbucks, racial discrimination before a high school prom, the retirement of a well-known baseball player, and the U.S. and North Korea summit in Singapore (which three groups did). Most of the presentations were scripted with students reading their lines off a sheet of paper and their delivery was straightforward and careful – some groups merely stood

in a line in front of the class and read the news. In contrast, the English majors were bold and confident in delivery and more elaborate and opinionated in content – plus all the groups met or exceeded the 6-minute time requirement. There were no crossovers in topic choices - the U.S. and North Korea summit, admission fees at a theme park, birth rate, and gun rental from U.S. vending machines. Also, some of the groups used dynamic and engaging techniques in presentation, particularly the *admission fees at theme park* group which used reconstruction and interview techniques to inform the audience of the different perspectives of the people involved in the news story.

Questionnaire

After carrying out the Living Newspaper activity for the first time, students were given a questionnaire to fill out for homework with the following questions about the activity:

- How was it beneficial as a creator in understanding the story?
- How was it beneficial as a spectator in understanding the story?
- How was it beneficial as an English learner?
- Was it more beneficial to you than the usual group discussion?
- How could the activity be improved?
- Other comments.

The following week I collected 42 completed questionnaires, with the following list of some of the benefits as a creator taken from the results:

- Ten students mentioned that they could freely contribute to the discussion and preparations, and openly share and learn different perspectives of those involved in the story.
- Nine students mentioned that the longer preparation time meant a deeper understanding and interest in the news.
- Eight students mentioned that communication and cooperation between group members improved.
- Five students mentioned that they gained skills in summarizing or simplifying the story for the observer.

- Five students mentioned that they were more motivated as they had to show their work.
- Three students mentioned that greater care was taken in speaking English and this led to more natural conversation being achieved.
- Two students mentioned that an ordinary discussion focused more on learning vocabulary (which is written in their vocabulary book) rather than listening to the story and engaging in discussion.
- Two students mentioned that they felt more responsible for making decisions about the information being used.
- Two students mentioned that the activity gave them basic public speaking skills.
- One student mentioned the Living Newspaper activity had a “talkative” atmosphere whereas during the ordinary weekly discussion there was a “hard atmosphere.”

The following information is a list of some of the benefits of participating as a spectator, taken from the questionnaire results:

- Eleven students mentioned that the act of visualizing the story and embodying the characters aided the observer’s understanding.
- Five students mentioned that the use of voice, gestures, or expression brought the story to life and an immediacy as if the news event was in fact happening before their eyes.
- Four students mentioned that the creative unfolding of the news – the use of narrating, reporting, or reconstructing events – made the act more engaging.
- Three students mentioned that the use of videos, pictures, graphs, or charts helped inform or support the presentation.
- Three students mentioned that the different views of those involved in the story brought an objectivity to the work.
- Two students mentioned that seeing all the performances (listening to three stories like in an ordinary discussion class) meant students could find out about every story which was being shared that week.

The activity generated a lot of positive feedback, yet the students noted there was a lot of room for improving the activity, as shown in the following list of suggestions:

- Fourteen students mentioned that the delivery – eye contact, volume and clarity – could be more assured or greater consideration be placed on the way the work is presented.
- Six students mentioned that leaders needed to be more organized and decisive and all the members more willing to actively contribute.
- Five students mentioned that the amount of Japanese spoken during the preparation period needed to be reduced or altogether prohibited as it was expected that the activity be undertaken in English.
- Three students mentioned that memorization could help inhibited or non-confident students with their delivery.
- Two students mentioned that groups and topics should be decided earlier, and all members contribute to researching about the topic.
- One student mentioned that students who are observing should be designated to answer any questions posed by the presenting group to avoid unnecessary pauses and to give every student a chance to speak. The same student mentioned that a vote on the best presentation be made at the end to motivate groups to do well.

Overall, the response to the activity was very positive, and many students even stated that they had “fun”, “enjoyed watching others”, and wanted to “do it many times.” Also, two students stated they preferred it to the ordinary weekly discussions.

Guidelines

Using the questionnaire results and the following research by Meir (2017) on Newspaper Theatre (see Figure 1), I considered ways to improve the activity.

Simple Reading – The news is read without commentary or comment.

Complementary reading – The news is read, and additional information is sourced from other news to find out more information.

Crossed reading – Two contradictory or linked stories are read to shed new light and dimension on the story.

Rhythmical reading – The news item is filtered and read (or sung) with a rhythm as a musical commentary.

Parallel action – The news is read, and parallel actions are mimed to show the reported event.

Improvisation – The news is improvised on stage and the audience can participate by making suggestions or replaying the action.

Historical reading – The news is read along with facts showing a similar event in history.

Reinforcement – The news is read or sung with the aid of reinforcing material, such as audio/visuals, jingles, advertising or publicity materials.

Concretion of the abstract – As the news is read, terms showing the concepts that encompass the work are shown, such as torture, hunger, or unemployment, and real or symbolic imagery is shown for emotional impact.

Text out of context – The news item is presented out of the context, for example, someone portraying the Prime Minister delivers a speech about austerity while devouring a huge dinner.

Insertion into the actual context – The news is read in the real context in which the problem happens, for example, a story about war is presented in a battlefield.

Integration or field interview (the lost technique) – This news is presented as an interview with the subject being interviewed by a host or cross-examiner. This allows for a “hot-seating” and a dynamic investigation with the audience.

Figure 1. Techniques Boal used in Newspaper Theatre (Meir, 2017).

I then changed the instructions to make the task clear and specific for the participants. The following guidelines were given to the students the week before doing the activity again:

The leader is responsible for deciding the news story based on recommendations from the whole group.

No group can present on the same topic.

The story should be relevant to the students, i.e., a problem that affects them or their community.

Each student must find at least two articles about their chosen news story from different sources which offer different perspectives or greater insight.

Each group must use at least one of the following techniques – reconstruction events, interview with a person involved, commentary or summary by an expert, reporting by a host who ties action together, some sort of visual aid – placard, PowerPoint, prop, etc. – in presenting their story.

During the presentation the group must pose one question and elicit an answer from each group

Presentations should be between 6 and 8 minutes long

Figure 2. Changes in instructions for the activity.

The Second Attempt

After I observed the second attempt at the activity I noticed that students in both groups were far more enthusiastic, informed, and confident. In their presentation all the groups provided background information about their news story and showed the different views of the people involved. The psychology majors chose the following news stories – suspicious death of a rich business person, murder on a *shinkansen*, a celebrity taking advantage of an under-aged girl, discrimination on an airline, cost of Olympics tickets, and bomb hoax at Aoyama Gakuin University – and although these topic choices – with the exception of the bomb hoax one – were not necessarily relevant to the students, each presentation was far more assured than the first attempt. The English majors chose the following news stories – power harassment at Nihon University, shrinking food, tattoos in an *onsen*, reducing club activity hours in high school, and overuse of social media – and all the groups produced imaginative work which highlighted the

social effects of the problem. Particularly, one group presenting on reducing club activity hours in high school not only presented the thoughts of the different people in the news story (the National Sports Agency representative, the teacher, the ordinary student and the sports captain) but also revealed how dedication to club activity affected their own high school life.

Discussion

By doing this activity, teachers can learn how much their students understand the news story they are presenting. This activity encourages students to read deeply into a topic and understand how events affect people in different ways and how journalists write from different perspectives to put forward their argument. Grasping this will benefit students when they work on preparing to be discussion leader in an ordinary discussion class. By monitoring the preparation and presentation process teachers can also see which students make an effort and actively contribute to the work. In an ordinary discussion class, it is difficult to monitor each discussion group as there are several other discussions going on at the same time, so this is a way to monitor, assess and evaluate individual students as well as the leaders.

This kind of activity is a good alternative to straightforward speech presentation. Normally, individual or pair presentations are daunting for Japanese students, whereas group presentations can take the pressure off individual students so they can focus on presenting the story. By implementing this activity, teachers provide students with the opportunity to do something creative as they are asked to retell and recreate their interpretation of the story.

Throughout the process, if students are disciplined to use English throughout, like most of my students were, the students will greatly benefit from using it and be exposed to English throughout the whole period. The one drawback, as students noticed, is that English needs to be used throughout the preparation time, so I recommend that the teacher carefully monitor students to ensure that they are using English.

Since one function is to simplify and summarize information, this kind of activity could work on different kinds of text, such as short stories, fairy tales, narrative poems, epic songs, or even plays, and students could take a fixed idea, comprehend it, make it their own, and share it with an audience. The act of presenting something to the group provides students with the chance

to gain public speaking skills and confidence and allows them to enjoy the act of performing and watching their peers perform.

Conclusion

The Living Newspaper was a great supplemental activity to my discussion class. Students gained skills in researching and understanding a news story from the different perspectives of the people involved in it. Students were creative, collaborative, and opinionated in presenting the news story to the audience. They also overcame inhibition and gained some public speaking skills by showing their work to the whole class. One thing I found difficult was having spectators actively participate in the work, other than through post-discussion questions. I think this activity would need to be refined and repeated several times before Japanese students have the confidence to stand up, participate, and explore its therapeutic potential. But as a way to examine social issues and how they may affect the students, it was a good start.

References

- Boal, A. (1979). *Theatre of the oppressed*. New York: Urizen Books.
- Cukier, R. (2007). *Words of Jacob Levy Moreno*. Retrieved from <https://books.google.co.jp/books?id=wpRJzcupAkUC&pg>
- Drain, R. (1995). *Twentieth century theatre - A sourcebook*. London: Routledge.
- Meir, U. N. (2017, November 16). The 12 techniques of newspaper theatre [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://imagination.org/12-techniques-newspaper-theatre>
- MEXT. (2003). An action plan to cultivate 'Japanese with English abilities'. Tokyo, Japan: Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Japan. Retrieved from <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/topics/03072801.htm>
- Miccoli, L. (2003). English through drama for oral skills development. *ELT Journal*, 57(2), 122-129. <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1093/elt/57.2.122>
- Ranzoni, T. (2003). Keep talking with drama! Reflection on the use of drama activities to improve oral fluency in a young learner context. *ETAS Journal*, 21(1), 1-3.

Sato, R. (2001). Role play: Effective role play for Japanese high school students. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED454709.pdf>

Shapiro, S. & Leopoldo, L. (2012). A critical role for role-playing pedagogy. *TESL Canada Journal*, 29(2), 120-130. <http://doi:10.18806/tesl.v29i2.1104>.

Swale, J. (2009). *Drama games for classrooms and workshop*. London: Nick Hern Books.

Zyoud, M. (2010). Using drama activities and techniques to foster teaching English as a foreign language: A theoretical perspective. *Al Quds Open University*, 1-11. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/297013590>

Chris Parham is from London. His theatre company Black Stripe Theater brings English theatre to Tokyo audiences. Last year the group took on tour a production of A Christmas Carol, which they revived this year alongside their version of Hound of the Baskervilles. When he is not working on stage he teaches at several universities in Tokyo

