English *Noh* Theater Workshop: Lessons from a Japanese University EFL Classroom

Kim Rockell

The University of Aizu

kimusiknz@gmail.com

Abstract

Recognizing the value of performing arts activities within EFL education, teachers have experimented with a wide variety of approaches in their teaching. This article draws broadly on one such project which took place at a prefectural university in Fukushima during late 2016 and early 2017. Here, English was embedded in a traditional Japanese dramatic form and students in a third-year elective course developed an English language *Noh* theatre set in cyberspace. While this work is discussed in detail elsewhere (Rockell, 2019), the current article focuses on some of the practical ways the project was carried out and uses these ways as a basis for a suggested English Noh Theatre workshop to be offered to language teachers in Japan in the near future.

L ike many other language teachers based in Japan, I am fortunate enough to be able to attend local live performances of traditional theatre such as *Kabuki* and *Noh*. As an ethnomusicologist, however, I have never been quite satisfied with being only an occasional spectator. I wanted to discover what it is really like to learn Noh directly from a Japanese teacher. Accordingly, I have been studying Noh as a *deshi,* or beginning student of *utai* (chant) and *shimai* (dance) in Aizu-Wakamatsu, Fukushima prefecture since 2015. At the same time, most of my recent academic work has focused on teaching English through Performance-Assisted Learning or PAL (Kluge, 2018b; Rathore, 2018), and in particular, music (Rockell, 2016; Rockell & Ocampo, 2014). Inspired by the work of Richard Emmert (Emmert, 1994), I began to develop the idea of educational English language Noh drama, which I recently trialed with third-year students at the University of Aizu as part of an elective course. I deal with this English Noh

play extensively in other soon-to-be published work from the points of view of intercultural performing arts, and the sociolinguistic notion of translingualism (Rockell, in press). In this article, however, I will examine some of the practical aspects of teaching Noh in English and set out a suggested workflow for developing educational English language Noh projects. The suggestions made are based on the experience of working with students at the University of Aizu (henceforth referred to as Aizu), learning traditional Noh with a local Japanese teacher, and attending workshops in Japan directed specifically at foreigners. The article is written with a view towards introducing this style of teaching at practical workshops for PAL teachers in Japan in the near future.

First Steps

Traditional Japanese Noh combines poetry, drama, music, song, and dance (Choo, 2004; Emmert, 1994; Hensley, 2000; Komparu, 2005). Nowadays, Noh teachers specialize in teaching only one, or sometimes two, of these areas, though they may well be personally competent in other areas. Written scripts use old style *kanji*, or Japanese ideographs, include antiquated language, and quote liberally from classical literature and Buddhist texts. This makes learning utai chants very challenging, and perhaps even more so for non-Japanese students. Such students can more immediately experience Noh at the very beginning by trying *suriashi* or sliding feet walking style. I noted that this approach was followed at a beginner's Noh workshop hosted by the *Kanze* school of Noh for delegates at the International Musicological Society Congress in Tokyo 2017. Similarly, limited by space, *Kyogen* master Tokuro Miyake the 10th also emphasized stance first when teaching predominately non-Japanese participants at an Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) Professional Communication Society workshop at the Shibaura Institute of Technology in 2018. Thus, a Noh workshop can best commence with a short demonstration of Noh -style walking by the instructor. The start of a workshop also provides an appropriate opportunity to display the wonderfully elegant costumes. Following this, participants can all stand, adopt the *kamae* or basic Noh posture in imitation of the instructor, and try taking their first steps in Noh (Moore, 2014). Of course, it is easier to move on a polished wooden Noh stage wearing the traditional white socks with a toe-separation called *tabi*. These can be made available to

participants to purchase for an additional fee or alternatively participants could be asked to simply bring a pair of white socks to the workshop. If a smooth floor area is not available at the venue, instructors can provide a rectangular mat of thin polished wood, vinyl, or a similarly smooth material and students can line up and take turns passing over the mat. At this stage the instructor coaches the participants individually on weight balance, manner of stepping, and position of head and arms. To complete this phase of the workshop, a Noh mask can be introduced to participants for them to try on and enjoy the fascinating experience of Noh walking with the limited visibility that the mask provides.

The Chant: Approaches to Drilling

Having experienced Noh walking, workshop participants can then try utai (chanting). Depending on the venue and individual health conditions, students can either kneel *seiza* style or sit upright in a chair with the hands placed on their thighs towards the knee and with fingers pointing inwards. Many present-day amateur students of Noh are of advanced age, so a variety of mini-stools and chairs are provided for students who are no longer able to comfortably adopt seiza for long periods. The same rote-learning, call and response imitation method used in traditional Noh lessons can be used with students at English Noh workshops. First, students can briefly experience utai in Japanese. Students' competence in Japanese might vary greatly, so we begin with long single syllables drawn from hiragana such as the vowel sounds あ、え、い、お、う(ah, ei, ii, oh, ooh).

Next, romanized copies of the first two lines of the standard beginners' répertoire *Tsurukame* (The Crane and the Tortoise) can be distributed to participants and drilled using additive repetition and back spacing (building up a sentence syllable by syllable starting with the final syllable). The instructor should also explain a little about *Tsurukame's* narrative and how this play is frequently taught to beginning students of Noh (Moore, 2014). This is the point in the workshop where we begin to move more directly towards English Noh. After giving a brief background to English Noh, focusing particularly on the work of Richard Emmert, the instructor can explain the layout of a traditional Noh stage, the roles of actors such as *Shite* (protagonist) and

Waki (supporting actor), and the underlying syllabic pattern based on *tanka* poetry that is common to Noh. This understanding will make it easier for students to interpret the script, which is distributed to participants at this point in the workshop. In Aizu in 2016, both online and paper versions of scripts were made available, but students unanimously preferred working with paper versions, saying that they felt more comfortable making notes by hand or personalizing them in various other ways. The affordances and constraints of paper vs. online/electronic scripts begs further scrutiny, but at the present time I prefer to provide photocopied scripts for English Noh participants.

The Script

While English Noh plays exist, their scripts are not directed towards language learners. Consequently, a would-be instructor is faced with the task of translating, adapting, or creating a completely new script. The latter is the route I took when working with university students in Aizu, and the following brief description illustrates the breadth of creative freedom that an educational context allows. Usually, Noh stories deal with dramatic or tragic themes. In Aizu, I created *The Coding Catastrophe*, which is an Internet tragedy involving a search for lost data in the cloud and culminating in a robot dance. Any tragic story might be suitable as a theme for English language Noh*,* but here the key point was appropriateness for students. The student participants in Aizu were all computer science majors so a cyberspace theme was chosen in an attempt to interest and motivate them. This, however, was not the only reason for selecting such a theme. It was also chosen in an attempt was made to incorporate mimetic anthropomorphism.
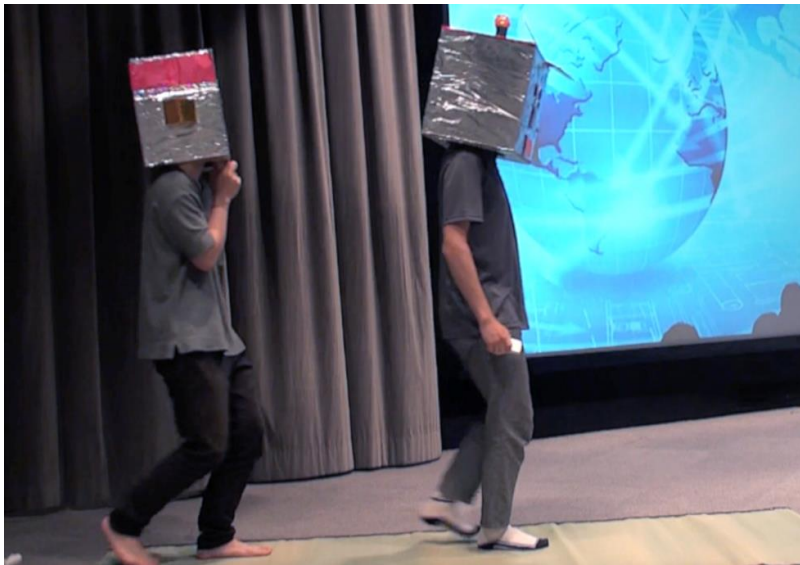
Figure 1. Multiple Shite return from the Cloud transformed into robots.

Mimetic anthropomorphism is an idea that I began working with in 2013. It arose as a result of my colleagues and myself experiencing pressure to adapt in all areas of our professional and personal lives, which were being increasingly colonized by changing technologies. In response, I reverted to a version of mimicry as has been described in post-colonial societies (Fay & Haydon, 2017). The first of these plays was *Smart Phone Baby and the Galapagos Girls*, performed at the Heights Centre English School in Hokkaido in 2013. Here, as seen below, the performers' cellphones are incorporated, worn around the dancers' necks as they bob on the spot performing movements that suggest ringing, buzzing, vibrating, and updating.

Figure 2. Cellphone dance in *Smart Phone Baby and the Galapagos Girls*, HCES Hokkaido, 2013 (Photo by HCES).

This use of mimetic anthropomorphism continued in Aizu with the Noh Shite undergoing a transformation having retrieved lost data from the cloud and returned to save his professional reputation. After personally spending many hours seated at a work computer over a 4-year period, I began to contemplate the idea that humans could become deeply attuned with and influenced by machines, and even develop robot-like walking styles. This was also an inspiration for the English Noh play.

While the themes described above were relevant in their specific educational settings, they may not be appropriate for an English Noh workshop aimed at a broad spectrum of language teachers. For these purposes, it would be more helpful to adapt a script that has already been prepared for an educational context such as Kluge's *Tanabata* readers' theatre script (Kluge, 2018a). To convert a script to a basic Noh style, the following guidelines should be followed:

1. The play is divided into the three sections *jo* (introduction) *ha* (exposition) and *kyu* (denouement).

2. In general, the text is adapted to follow the syllabic pattern of tanka poetry (5-7-5-7-7).

3. The roles of shite (main actor or protagonist), waki (supporting actor), and *jiutai* (chorus of chanters) are determined and represented in the script. While usually there is a single waki, for educational purposes multiple waki can help to increase participation.

4. Jiutai sections can be extended through repetition and the incorporation of more descriptive detail that helps to evoke the context.

As a concrete example, Kluge's setting of *Tanabata* begins:

Narrator: Once upon a time, up in the heavens lived some gods. The king of the heavens was named Tentei.

Tentei: I am Tentei, the king of the sky. I am strong and just. I make sure everything runs smoothly, that everyone is doing their jobs and things are always as they should be.

Chorus: Strong Tentei! Just Tentei! (Kluge, 2018a)

Adapting this opening section for an educational English Noh would see the first lines of the narrator and Tentei both taken on by the waki and the chorus extended as follows. Note that / indicates syllable divisions and the number of syllables follow in parenthesis.

Jo (Introduction)

Waki:　　Here/ in/ the/ hea/vens (5)

　　　　　I/ live/ in/ the/ Sky/ Pa/lace (7)

　　　　　King/ Ten/tei's/ my/ name (5)

　　　　　Strong/ and/ just/ I/ help/ people (7)

　　　　　Live/ safe/ly and/ work/ smooth/ly　　(7)

Jiutai:　　Pa/lace/ in/ the/ sky (5)

　　　　　Migh/ty Ten/tei lives/ on/ high (7)

　　　　　King/ of/ the/ hea/vens (5)

　　　　　Migh/ty Ten/tei rules/ the/ sky (7)

　　　　　Migh/ty Ten/tei/ lives/ on/ high (7)

Note that in Japanese Noh, the n (ん) sound in Tentei (てんてい) would likely be considered as a separate syllable and the full name Tentei would take up 4 syllable units. In our stress-timed English Noh, however, Tentei is considered as having only two syllables.

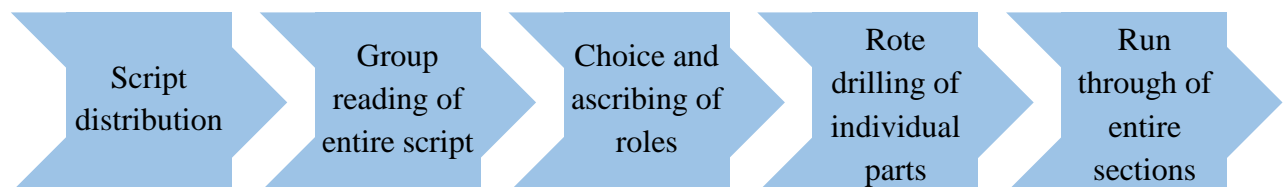A suggested script workflow would follow the following sequence:

Figure 3. Suggested script work sequence.

Although full-length scripts can be prepared for English Noh workshops, the amount of material covered will depend entirely on circumstances such as time frame and number of

participants. At the University of Aizu, seven rehearsals each lasting ninety minutes were required to prepare an English Noh play of six minutes duration. In the case of a large number of workshop participants with a limited time frame, participants could be divided into three separate troupes, rehearsing the *jo*, *ha* and *kyu* sections respectively. Also, while basic workshops should provide ready-made scripts, at more advanced levels participants could collaborate on writing activities and create their own scripts based on their own choice of tragic theme.

Costumes and Set

The traditional Noh stage is simply adorned with only the image of a large pine tree that symbolizes everlasting life painted on the back wall of the stage. At the university of Aizu, we instead used an image of the global Internet in keeping with the cyberspace theme in place of the large pine tree. Although the Noh costumes and masks are of great beauty, the performance space is generally sparse. It thus becomes incumbent on the audience to imbue what they see and hear with a richness of interpretation and imagination. Accordingly, there is no need to prepare an elaborate stage set when conducting an English Noh workshop. On this occasion we also used homemade masks with features that resembled Steve Jobs and the Japanese entrepreneur Horiemon.

Figure 4. Waki on stage performing *The Coding Catastrophe* in the University of Aizu Ubic 3D Theatre 2016.

We also prepared two portable tatami mats. One of these was used by the assembled jiutai and the other was used to approximate the *hashigakari,* or hanging bridge to the other world, by means of which the waki enters and leaves the stage area. Also, students used cell phones in place of the ubiquitous folding fans.

One significant feature of a traditional Noh stage is the vertical pillar, by means of which actors orient themselves spatially, despite limited visibility while wearing masks. In Aizu, we simply placed a chair on the stage where a pillar would usually be, but this was not totally effective and students complained of not knowing where they were on stage. At the time of writing we are still searching for an effective solution to this problem.

For the purposes of an English Noh workshop, the following items should then be prepared:

1. Two portable tatami mats (or blankets if this is not possible).
2. A representative image for wall at the back of the stage (either PowerPoint or a large poster).
3. Masks (basic masks bought from either a toy store or discount store and then adjusted to suit by the workshop organizers or participants – the number required will vary but four would be a good starting estimate).

Other Performance Considerations

As mentioned earlier, the language education context allows for liberal adjustment to the protocols that would normally apply in traditional Japanese Noh. The use of multiple shite and waki so as to give greater speaking opportunities to participants is an example of this.

For a single workshop, it is less reasonable to expect performers to memorize their lines, so scripts should be prepared that are durable and with appropriate-sized font and page breaks that encourage page turns at appropriate places during the play.

In traditional Noh, the *hayashi* or musical group of drums and Noh flute are very important. However, the approximation or incorporation of a hayashi in a basic English Noh workshop is likely to be too complex and draw the focus away from language learning.

Nevertheless, the instructor could usefully play a short recording of a typical hayashi to give them a sense of this important musical dimension of Noh, and even include the recording at certain points during the performance. Longer or more advanced English Noh workshops could certainly incorporate live instrumentalists and drummers, and this is an aspect for further consideration.

Conclusion

The techniques set out in this article offer teachers and students alike an opportunity to engage vigorously with English while at the same time learning some of the basic features of a classical form of Japanese drama. While there is some complex decision-making involved in preparing appropriate scripts, the general simplicity of Noh staging reduces the necessary preparation time for would-be English Noh instructors.

Reporting on *The Coding Catastrophe* performed by students at the University of Aizu at conferences, both within Japan and overseas, has frequently invited positive commentary. This, combined with observations of traditional Noh workshops for non-Japanese participants, suggests that English language Noh workshops aimed at English language teachers, based on the workflows and guidelines presented in this paper, could be well received and be a useful potential site of further learning and discovery. Also, during the hermeneutic establishment of the workflow suggested earlier, based entirely on qualitative data from a recent more extensive study, important areas for more future investigation arose. These were:

1. The use of paper vs. electronic scripts

2. Student co-creation of scripts as a potential writing exercise

3. Practical ways of approximating Noh stage pillars as a visual guide for performers

4. The problem of incorporating the hayashi or musical group into English Noh workshops

I am hopeful that when language teachers in Japan are invited to workshops on Noh in the near future and are asked whether they think Noh in English is something they would consider doing in class, their response will be a resounding "Yes."

References

Choo, L. B. (2004). They came to party: an examination of the social status of the medieval Noh theatre. *Japan Forum, 16*(1), 111-133. https://doi.org/10.1080/0955580032000189357

Emmert, R. (1994). Nō: Exploring its non-Japanese possibilities. *Contemporary Theatre Review, 1*(2), 137-144.

Fay, S., & Haydon, L. (2017). *The Location of Culture*. London: Macat International.

Hensley, C. (2000). No business like Noh business. *American Theatre*, *17*(1), 34-38.

Kluge, D. (2018a, July). PAL workshop: The star festival. Paper presented at the JALT Speech, Drama, & Debate SIG Summer Traveling Conference, Kanagawa, Japan.

Kluge, D. (2018b). Performance-assisted learning: A proposal. *Mask & Gavel, 6*(1), 30-38.

Komparu, K. (2005). The Noh theater: Principles and perspectives: Warren, Conn: Floating World Editions.

Moore, K. L. (2014). The joy of Noh: Embodied learning and discipline in urban Japan: Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Rathore, C. (2018, July). Using drama at the university level in Japan: Teachers' experiences, suggestions, and concerns. Paper presented at the JALT Speech, Drama, & Debate SIG Summer Traveling Conference, Kanagawa, Japan.

Rockell, K. (2016). Incorporating music in CALL: An exploratory study establishing a protocol for Computer Assisted Language Learning Incorporating Music (CALLiM). *AsiaCALL Journal, 11*, 18-42.

Rockell, K. & Ocampo, M. (2014). Musicians in the language classroom: The transfer of musical skills to teaching a "speech mode of communication." *English Language Teacher Education and Development (ELTED), 16*, 34-47.

Rockell, K. (in press). The coding catastrophe: Translingualism and Noh in the Japanese computer science EFL classroom. In A Barret & S. Dovchin (Eds), critical inquiries in the sociolinguistics of globalization (pp.147-167). Multilingual Matters. Encounters Series. Bristol, UK: Channel View Publications.

Kim Rockell is an ethnomusicologist, classical guitarist, and EFL educator, particularly interested in language learning through the performing arts. For the past several years he has been learning *Noh utai* (chant) and *shimai* (dance) in Aizu-Wakamatsu, Japan where he has worked as an associate professor at the University of Aizu Center for Language Research since 2013.