

Conducting a Micro-Evaluation in an EFL Classroom for a Performance-Assisted Learning Activity

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Abstract

Performance-assisted learning (PAL) was introduced at the 2017 annual Japanese Association for Language Teaching (JALT) conference. It was revealed to be a “new concept in education” and that EFL university teachers were “extremely excited about its efficacy and power to motivate” (Head et al., 2018, p. 233). However, it was claimed that in many institutions, English department administrators did not share the same enthusiasm, seeing PAL activities as not academic enough. This study aims to gather a variety of qualitative data to validate the use of PAL. Over 5 weeks, a micro-evaluation involving a number of data sets was conducted on two university classes, containing 46 students in total, for a PAL activity (in this case, a four-page skit). The evaluations were individual student journals, peer-assessment, creative writing, teacher observation, and a video. The study describes the 5-week project procedure, and aims to provide more comprehensive evidence to support the use of PAL in the

EFL classroom. Findings indicate very positive student engagement in the project, and a need to give more explicit instruction to students for the creative writing task.

What is Performance-Assisted Learning (PAL)? PAL is an umbrella term that can be used for many different learning activities and is described as “using any kind of performance to assist in learning, consolidation, and assessment of content” (Kluge, 2018). Kluge also suggests that PAL “is the most efficient and authentic form for solidifying learning because it gives students opportunities to use real language in real settings”. In a 2019 interview conducted by Kluge, Rod Ellis said that PAL tasks “make the expression of meaning, the conveyance of meaningful messages, primary”. Such activities could be considered Task-Based Learning activities extended to include real settings. It can include and is not limited to activities such as skits, presentation, drama, music, debates, speeches, plays, oral interpretation, readers’ theatre, etc.

Research into Using Drama and Performance in the EFL Classroom

Using performance in the EFL classroom encompasses a wide variety of language learning techniques. Examples of research in this field include learning ESL through literary texts (Collie & Slater, 1987), measuring speaking performance with a narrative task (Levelt, 1989), story telling by second language learners (Rintell, 1990), actor training to engage L2 learners (Butt, 1998), the educational potential of drama in ESL (Dodson, 2002), using narratives to show a variety of strategies in elaborating a story (Pavlenko, 2006), conversation analysis (Wong et al., 2010), the benefits of drama for second language learning (Davies, 1990; Boudreault, 2010; Stinson & Winston, 2011), the role of feedback in EFL classes (Klimova, 2015), engaging students in the L2 classroom using drama (Barbee, 2016), and the importance of teaching EFL through drama (Abraham, 2018).

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In planning for the variety of empirical analyses gathered in this paper, a detailed framework for task evaluation was borrowed from Ellis (1997, p. 38). This involved choosing a task to evaluate, describing the task, and planning the evaluation.

Purpose of this Study

Despite all of this research discussed above, Hullah (2018) identified *Literaphobia*, “the reticence and nervousness of many teachers and students regarding ‘literary’ materials”. One reason for this is the fact that when using drama, the teacher is challenged, having to play the role of “actor, director, playwright and teacher” (Donegan, 2020, p. 11).

In some Japanese educational institutions, teachers are given almost total autonomy to teach English as they see fit (Prichard & Moore, 2016, p. 75). In this situation, there is no specific need to justify the need to use PAL in the classroom. However, in other institutions, teachers need to convince those in charge of the value of using PAL. As this is ‘a new concept in education’, there is (i) little evaluative research (especially micro-evaluation) to provide such justification, and (ii) few detailed project guides for those EFL teachers thinking of using PAL in their classroom. This study aims to fill such gaps in the research.

Method

Participants

The participants of this study were 46 undergraduate university students from two intact classes, in a small private university (Table 1).

Table 1

Participants' Details

Class	m	f	1 st year	2 nd year	3 rd year	4 th year
Speaking skills	9	16	17 (13f, 4m)	4 (m)	4 (3f, 1m)	
Public speaking skills	12	9		7 (2f, 5m)	11 (5f, 6m)	3 (2f, 1m)
Total (n=46)	21	25	17	11	15	3

The participants' levels of English were mixed, as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Participants' English Ability

English level	Course name	
	Speaking skills	Public speaking skills
EIKEN 1	0	1
EIKEN pre-1	0	1
EIKEN 2	11	7
EIKEN pre-2	8	3
EIKEN 3	3	1
TOEIC (640)	1	0
No English test taken	2	8

Compulsory courses in universities are often split into groups according to placement test results. However, elective courses such as Speaking Skills and Public Speaking Skills where PAL activities usually take place often contain students with a very wide range in English ability. This fact should be considered when discussing the results of the analysis.

Data collection

Qualitative analysis was conducted on the following data:

1. Student journals
2. Peer-assessment
3. Creative writing
4. Teacher observations
5. Video recording

The intended outcomes are listed in the following hypotheses:

- (i) Students will report positive reactions to this learning activity.
- (ii) The teacher will be able to clearly observe students positive engagement with the activity.
- (iii) Students will express a desire to undertake another PAL activity.

The 5-week PAL Activity Procedure

Over a period of five weeks, the skit, “An Unexpected Ending” (see Appendix A), was introduced, practiced, and performed in a class held once a week. Some of these processes used the full 90-minute class, whereas other weeks, time spent exclusively on the skit was shorter. Time spent for each week is given in the weekly reports below. In total, the project was undertaken over approximately five hours, excluding homework that was set twice.

Approximately 40 minutes were spent explaining some cultural references in the script.

One student from the Public Speaking Skills group was asked to video record that group on three occasions for approximately 10-minutes each time. The student was given instructions to focus on groups and individuals during the practices and final performances.

The classroom activity was not observed by external researchers.

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Week 1

Participants were told about a four-page skit they would be asked to perform. They were then given a pre-test, and informed that the teacher predicted they would probably only know about 10-20% of the answers. They were reassured that this was for the teacher's private research and would not constitute part of their grade (20 minutes).

Each student was given a copy of the script and the class was split into groups of five or six. There are five speaking characters in the script plus one narrator. Character personalities were explained, and then groups undertook their first dry run read-through of the script with limited input from the teacher (20 minutes).

Homework to read over their scripts and to clarify the meaning of words they may be unsure of was assigned. They were also asked to start a journal explaining briefly how they felt about this PAL activity.

Week 2

Students were put into new groups and asked to take on a character role in the script different from the one they had in the previous week. As they read through the script, the teacher was much more involved in explaining pronunciation, exclamations, gestures emphasizing particular words, and explaining meaning and jokes. While all groups managed at least one complete run through of the script, some groups were able to read through the script twice (30 minutes).

Week 3

Five participants were chosen to act out the skit on stage. Props included a makeshift megaphone, a lunch bag, and pencils and paper under each student's chair.

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As one group performed the drama on stage, the rest of the class followed the skit in their scripts and made notes as the teacher enthusiastically directed the action (30 minutes).

Week 4

Participants were asked to write a journal reflecting on their experience and feelings surrounding this skit activity thus far (10 minutes). They were then placed in new groups again and asked to perform the skits with gestures and props, emphasizing pronunciation, intonation, and engaging with the script to the best of their ability as had been demonstrated on stage the previous week (80 minutes). Once again, the teacher moved between groups and was very active in directing the group performances. For homework, students were told in their groups to choose characters and learn their lines for a final stage performance in week 5.

Week 5

Each group performed the skit on stage with props and sound effects. One student with a video camera filmed bits for later analysis. The audience of peers wrote comments about each group's staging of the skit. The class discussed particular things they thought were good, and which aspects needed improvement (90 minutes).

For homework each student was asked to write an original ending for the unfinished script, and to complete their journal with notes on their feelings about the learning activity now that it had ended.

Findings

Student journals

Students wrote a brief journal entry before, during, and after the 6-week task. In Table 5 below are a few examples of the enthusiastic responses. Each row, from left to right,

represents one student, providing a clear insight into how their feelings of confidence and enjoyment progressed.

Table 5

Generally Positive Responses from Student Journals

Student	Before	During	After
1	I feel shame in public. It is difficult for me to speak English.	I feel a little fun. If we practice the drama more, we can success it.	I was very nerves but I enjoyed drama. I want to study English more.
2	I was so anxiety.	I have anxietied yet, but I want to enjoy.	Some friends in my group helped me what made me relax. I enjoyed very much. I want to do this activity again.
3	I am so nervous!	I'm a little bit nervous but fun because I can talk with many students.	It was fun! I enjoyed it. My favourite part was after Mr. Karaoke read his poem, all students stood up and clapped their hands.
4	I can't read smoothly this text. So I thought that I will do my best to read smoothly it.	I gradually could read smoothly and understand this text. However, I can't pronounce each word clearly.	I could gain my confidence in my English than before. I thought I want to do a comedy drama again.
5	It is difficult for me to express their characters.	I was very nervous to play my role. Cause he don't have characteristic compared to others.	Before the class I can communicate in English well. However, I'm not good at to hear the English. So, I get depressed.

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6	I was very interested in the skit which character we act, what the character's identity.	I feel little difficult for using own identity. I can enjoy acting.	This activity was very interesting. I will do it again. I want to act another character.
7	I think it looks difficult.	I think motion is difficult and I was a little nervous when I skit.	I think I couldn't speak too loudly. This is because I was nervous when I was it. But I enjoyed it.
8	I felt difficult that timing of sentence. I was so nervous. I have to need practice rizum and accent of sentence.	I tried to perform like to be character. I want to practice body language more in skit.	I enjoyed playing with member. Firstly, I was many mistakes but I tried to practice many times with members then it was a good experience.
9	I was just reading. I couldn't understand the story characters. I felt it's very difficult for me to act.	Fun.	I'll try to do other skits again. I understand to act as my decided character. It is easy for us to hear when we talk out clearly voice. Not only say words but to move in skit.
10	I thought difficult this activity.	We could the activity smoothly and quickly. However, I couldn't gesture.	I understand well that sentences. If I do the activity next, I have to make loud voice and use a lot of hand gesture.

Peer assessments

Students were asked to assess the final stage performances of their peers. Table 6 contains a selection of these insightful comments (the “*Teacher’s voice*” refers to the character of the teacher in the script).

Table 6

Insightful Comments from Peer Assessments of the Final Stage Performances

<i>Eye contact was good. Movement was very good and using music. Teacher's voice was big and clear. Pronunciation was great.</i>
<i>Everybody gesture is good! Everybody can be eye contact. Mr Karaoke's singing is nice.</i>
<i>Like the way they express their character. Her cowboy thigh slap is so good.</i>
<i>Eye contact is very good! Voice tone is nice. Pronunciation, accent and pose is good.</i>
<i>Each members practice very hard and move and eye contact is increase.</i>
<i>Good gesture. Everyone good pronunciation but not all gesture when they say "mmmmmm".</i>
<i>They could good pronunciation. It was easy to hear.</i>
<i>Twilight Zone music is very good! Nice!!</i>
<i>Mr Karoke is very good rhythm but it's a little quiet everyone.</i>
<i>Everyone reads scripts fluently without any trouble, though kinda lack the required emotion. I think they should've been more in-character.</i>

Creative writing

Participants were asked to write an ending to the unfinished script for homework. Both groups contained students with varying English levels, so each person was asked to complete this task to the best of their ability, with no minimum or maximum word limit being set. Participants wrote an average of 34 words. However, this ranged from two students writing five words and two students writing one-page endings. Below are two examples of the students' writing:

Student A (24 words)

Teacher: Thank you Mr. Donut. Everyone could write nice poetry.

Today class is finished. See you next week!

All student: See you Mr. Sir, Tifficut, sir.

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Student B (35 words)

Teacher: OK, I want to hear more but the time is over. See you next week.
Mr. Chair: Excuse me. When is the next class?
Teacher: Next week.
Mr. Chair: Next week. OK, thanks.
Teacher: See you next week.
All students: See you. Bye.

Student C (44 words)

Teacher: It's time to finish this class. Please can you clean the whiteboard (points to Mr. Donut).
Mr. Donut: Alright (stands up). I'll turn off the lights too.
All students: Thank you, Mr. Sir Tifficut, Sir.
Mr. Ree : What is the next class sir?
Mr. Karaoke: English class.
Mr. Chair: Go bananas! (Students are all happy).

Student D (95 words)

Teacher: Oh my gosh, I almost forgot to see my mother in hospital, but bus has already gone...I can make it (cry).
All students: Don't cry teacher! We can help you sir!
Teacher: Thank you but how?
Mr. Ree: It's me! I can move things everywhere with my mysterious power! So you wanna see your mom?
Teacher: Yes, send me where she is!
Mr. Ree : Alright! (Mysterious sounds come). (Teacher disappeared)
Other students: Excellent! Wow! You made it! Where did you send her?
Mr. Ree : I send her where her mother is.
Other students: What... where?

Mr. Ree : Beyond the world... nether world!
(Twilight zone sound) for 30 second. END

Discussion

Qualitative analysis

Student journals

All students completed the journals and were found to be open to discussing their views on the activity. Participants' engagement in writing journals, peer assessment, and writing an original ending to the skit was overall very impressive and revealing, especially when considering the wide range in English ability of the participants:

- (i) There was a common progression in the journals for nearly all the students from anxiety to enjoyment, ending with a boost in confidence.
- (ii) Students clearly appreciated the fact that this task is achieved both individually and in a group. They talked about helping each other to achieve their final stage performance goal.
- (iii) Reading the script every week helped students to understand the content and their roles within the task.
- (iv) Participants expressed their understanding of the characters' individuality as written in the skit. Some said they found this helpful in escaping their own identity and talking with a different voice.
- (v) Many students commented on their understanding of the importance of gestures.
- (vi) A tiny percentage of students felt the task was too difficult but they all eventually concluded that the activity was enjoyable.

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Peer assessment

Students made perceptive comments on their peer's performances focusing on aspects of communication such as eye contact, gesture, pronunciation, volume, and clarity of voice. This is an indication that they realize communication is multifaceted.

Creative writing

In both the student journals and peer-assessments all students made an effort to write, regardless of their grammar and spelling limitations. The creative writing task of composing an ending to the script was a particular challenge. Despite the average word count of 34 being quite small, the vast majority of participants made an effort to use dialogue, character, and action. Giving the students a minimum word count, or asking them to write a one-page ending, would have increased the average output but not necessarily the quality.

Overall, the creative writing activity showed an understanding of the text as students were able to pick up the story and follow it on to a satisfactory conclusion. Students also displayed engagement with the different character roles within the script. Most students gave voice to more than two characters in their endings. In addition, they included gesture notes in their writing which further demonstrates their acknowledgement of its importance in communication. In itself, this activity was a productive and valuable writing exercise allowing students to engage with characters and a living text. This task also revealed two students with a longstanding interest in drama, one of which gave me copies of their own scripts to use in class at a later date.

Teacher observations

It was the first time the teacher had used a five-week drama project and watching the students' reactions and enjoyment means that the activity will be incorporated into further classes. The

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participants were fully engaged with the activity and attendance over the five weeks notably remained at 100%.

- (i) Students soon became relaxed and familiar with the script. They fell into their roles quickly, using appropriate intonation and gestures.
- (ii) In week 3, some students were seen to be directing other students having learnt specific intonation, timing, and gesture requirements from the previous week's direction.
- (iii) Students fully engaged with and enjoyed the singing character, Mr. Karaoke, and picked up on the repeated phonemes joke coming from the teacher character.
- (iv) There was a lot of laughing, enjoyment, and mutual applause.
- (v) A number of the usually quiet students used their characters to speak with volume and confidence.

Video

As mentioned, the teacher plays a very important and active role throughout this task. Therefore, it is easy for them to miss exactly how the students are reacting and performing, and what is needed by way of instruction. The video provides a clear record of students fully engaged in the activity, reading from their scripts, and using the correct gestures and intonation that were learnt in the process. In particular, the video showed students coaching each other and giving support within their groups. Editing of the video was left up to the student who took the film. While the quality was good, it would have been improved had some specific content of student rehearsals and final performances been included.

Conclusion

All three of the intended outcomes were achieved:

- (i) Students reported positive reactions to this learning activity.
- (ii) The teacher clearly observed students positive engagement with the drama.
- (iii) Students did express a desire to undertake another PAL activity.

Using this particular PAL activity requires a lot of the teacher to facilitate the learning process. A thorough understanding of the nuances of the script, in particular the jokes, is essential to engage students and maximize their enjoyment of the process. This may be an obstacle for Japanese teachers not confident in their English ability. It is to be hoped that this article will inspire others to use skits in their EFL classrooms, and guide further studies into more evaluations of PAL.

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Appendix A

Skit Script

An Unexpected Ending

Classroom. Students quietly studying. Mr. Karaoke breaks his pencil.

Mr. Karaoke Can I borrow your pencil.

Mr. Donut Of course Mr. Karaoke. Here you are. You can keep it,... I have 3 more.

Mr. Karaoke Thank you very much.

Mr. Ree Excuse me, does anyone know the capital of Colombia?

Mr. Donut The capital of Colombia is Bogota. B.O.G.O.T.A.

Mr. Ree Thank you very much.

Continue silently working. Big banging footsteps approach.

Mr. Donut Quick. The new teacher is coming.

Boys stand up, bang desks, and throw paper.

Teacher OK boys. Shush. Shh. Please be quiet! Please be quiet!

(megaphone) BOYS !!! (silence) Please be.... Quiet. Good. Thank you.

Mr. Chair Thank you sir.

Teacher Thank me?! Why.

Mr. Chair It was very noisy and now it is very quiet.

Teacher You're welcome, erm?

Mr. Karaoke His name is Mr. Chair

Mr. Chair Chair, sir. Marr Chair, sir (stands up).

Teacher First name.... Marr,... as in?

Mr. Ree As in Marr, sir.

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- Mr. Chair** Mark... Anthony... Robert... Rocket... Red-robot... Rebecca... Relaxing Chair, sir.
- Mr. Ree** And he is Mr. Karaoke because every time he talks, he sings.
- Mr. Karaoke** I cannot help it.
- Teacher** OK. OK... please sit down on your chair over there, Mr. Chair. Thank you.
OK, I am your new teacher, Mr. Tifficut.
- All students** Tifficut?
- Teacher** Yes, I know Tifficut is a little difficult..... So you can just call me..... sir. Is that OK?
- All students** OK. Mr. sir Tifficut sir.
- Mr. Ree** (Stands up) My name is Mr. Ree. But I don't know why?.... Are we going on a trip today, Mr. sir Tifficut?
- Teacher** I don't know. Please sit down.
- Mr. Donut** Yes we are sir, look..... we have all brought our packed lunches. What do you have, Mr. Karaoke?
- Mr. Karaoke** I have some nice cheese, I have some green peas, I have tea and kimchee, and I have custard.
- Mr. Chair** I have jam, ham, spam, lamb on a nan bread..... And custard. How about you, Mr. Ree?
- Mr. Ree** I have something very strange. Mmmmm. (Reaches in bag. Bicycle horn sound). I don't know what it is?
- Mr. Donut** I have a barnarnar, sultarnar, chard, lard, and a carton arv yargart.....
- Teacher** What is your name.
- Mr. Donut** Mr. Donut..... And custard.
- Teacher** Your name is Mr. Donut and custard!!?

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- All students** No. Just Donut.
- Teacher** I see... The first lesson today is poetry. Please get out your poetry homework.
- Mr. Chair** Can I read first please, Mr. sir Tifficut, sir?
- Teacher** OK Chair, stand up there. Voice, nice and clee-air.
- Mr. Chair** Time.... By Marr Chair.... November 21st..... 2012..... quarter past nine.....
in the morning.
- Teacher** OK, please begin.
- Mr. Chair** That's it, sir. I've finished.
- Teacher** OK. Very good. Does anyone else have a poem? (Mr. Karaoke puts his hand up). Mr. Karaoke.
- Mr. Karaoke** (Stands up. Tuning fork) Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to me, happy birthday to somebody else, that makes three happy.
(All quickly stand up and applaud, then sit down).
- Teacher** Wonderful, Mr. Karaoke.
- Mr. Karaoke** Thank you very much.
- Teacher** Mr. Ree, would you like to read your poem?
- Mr. Ree** I put it on your desk recently sir, but it has disappeared (Twilight Zone music).
- Teacher** Well, it's not here now.... That's very mysterious. It's a mystery, Mr. Ree.
(everybody rubs their chins: mmm)
- Mr. Donut** Can I read my poem, sir?
- Teacher** Please do, Mr. Donut.
- Mr. Donut** Donuts... by Mr. Donut.... Aged 12.... November 21st.... 2012.....
8:57AM....In the winter time..... about 10 degrees....
- Teacher** OK, OK. Please begin .

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Mr. Donut Aherm..... Donuts are round, donuts are circles, donuts are brown, but never purple. Donuts are donuts, they ain't (cowboy thigh slap) nothing else, and if I were a donut, I'd eat me for my health.

The play is unfinished but has a time limit so must end here. Students decide ending.