

神戸市外国語大学 学術情報リポジトリ

Act it Out: From Drama to Literature

メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2015-12-22 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: Shiobara, Frances メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://kobe-cufs.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/2005

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Act it Out: From Drama to Literature

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1. Introduction

The use of literature used to be one of the main ways to teach language. Traditional styles of grammar translation, would involve students reading very difficult literary texts, and then translating these famous classics into their native language. There were a number of problems with this style of teaching, not least, that many students just could not reach a level at which they understood the text at anything other than a surface level (Van, 2009). Students would simply translate each word individually rather than understanding the underlying themes and implications in the text. Because of this, in recent years the use of literature in language classrooms has been thought to be unnecessary. Literature might be taught to some students, but those would be mainly English literature majors, who had already reached a high level of English, as Kodama (2012) explains, literature classes tend to be lecture based focusing on elite students in higher-level classes. Thus separating it from language teaching and the regular English classes of a university. As Crystal (1998) says, “The study of language and the study of literature have been artificially separated for far too long” (p.13). Crystal (1999) goes on to say that literature is an excellent source of language as there is a common structural relationship between what happens in everyday language and what happens in literature.

As reading is one of the most pleasurable activities for adults and children in their native language, there must be some way that this pleasure can be incorporated into the language classroom to make language learning more pleasurable. As Van (2009) notes, “Literature can have many benefits in the language classroom, students can form strong connections with plots and themes, and literature has the power to make students express their own opinions and meanings that resonate with them.” Literature also lends itself very well to student-centered activities, such as group work and drama. In this paper I would like to give some of the benefits of using literature in the language classroom, and more importantly how to make this enjoyable for students as well as encouraging them to get a deep understanding of the text rather than a purely surface level translation of the words.

In an elective English literature class, the students were asked to write down what they enjoyed reading in their first language. I wanted to get an idea of how much they read and what type of texts were popular with young people in Japan today. As this was an elective class that had been clearly identified as a literature class, I was expecting students who enjoyed reading in their first language, and would like to improve their reading skills in English. To my surprise, out of a total of about 70 students who had chosen my class, less than 5 stated that they had read a novel in Japanese in the past year. This is similar to the findings of Takagaki (2002), who asked his students “What type of books do you like to read?” 51% left the question unanswered, indicating that only about half of his students read books. When I asked what they did read, they started to tell me that they enjoyed reading the blog of their favorite shop, and they liked reading websites about music and fashion. I then realized that I had an extra problem; not only were the students unmotivated to read English literature; they were not even motivated to read literature in their native language.

I am not anti-technology in any way, but the thought that less than 10% of young people read novels was worrying for me. My colleague told me that there was nothing wrong with this; reading blogs is legitimate reading. The big difference between a blog (and even a web site) and literature is the amount of time and effort that has been put into the writing. Novelists spend years writing and rewriting. They think about every word, the choice of verb tense, as well as the voice that they are projecting. There is nuance incorporated. You can read a piece of good literature numerous times and still find new meaning each time you come back to it. I wanted to open my students’ eyes to this, and at the same time teach them English, which was after all what I was paid to do. How could I make classes interesting and relevant to students’ lives?

2. Choosing the Text

To start with I thought that fairly modern literature would be better. It is hard for students to relate to historical characters especially when it is set in a foreign culture, of which they may have no knowledge. The essence of enjoying literature is to find out how it affects you, and to think about how you feel about the characters. In order to do this, students need to read in depth, to explore the themes and to think deeply about the characters in the story. Students also need to be able to relate to the characters on some level (Van, 2009). From this perspective modern literature is preferable to classical literature. As Collie and Slater (1996) write in their guide to using literature in the classroom, many students feel that novels are too difficult, long and boring. One of their

students even said, “I don’t like novels, I want to learn to speak English, not just read it” (p. 1).

It is often said that in Japan students spend too much time reading and writing and not enough time is spent speaking. I wanted to develop both reading and speaking skills, as well as using the stories as a springboard to discussion. I decided to choose a set of very short stories by Paul Stewart (1998). Each story is only about 6 pages. These could hopefully hold the attention of students accustomed to very short texts, and short stories reach their climax much more quickly than a novel.

My next challenge was how to persuade the students to read in depth. In Japan so much of the education is rote learning, preparing students to pass exams. The exam questions tend to be focused on surface level comprehension. These questions can be answered by a grammar translation style of teaching, but do not necessitate any depth of knowledge. I feel that this was why students did not want to read novels, because they were not relating it to themselves. Consequently I focused on the themes of the texts, but not understanding every word. In this way I hoped that students would be able to follow the class as long as they understood the main idea of the stories. I decided to use drama as a way for students to relate to the stories.

3. Incorporating drama in the literature class

When I started to incorporate drama in my literature classes I did not consider myself to be a ‘drama teacher’ and have no background in the visual arts. As Royka (2002) states, “Many teachers are reluctant to use ‘drama’ activities in the classroom.” She lists four main reasons:

1. ‘I am not a drama expert’
2. ‘I wouldn’t want to risk looking silly in front of a class of students’
3. ‘Drama is just playing and is not a serious study method for learning English.’
4. ‘I don’t have time to prepare the lesson from the student book and come up with some drama games too.’

All of these feelings were somewhat true for me; however once I began teaching I realized how little input was needed from the teacher for students to engage with the activities. As far as having time to prepare the activities, in the first place it took some time to think of the activities, but I feel all the activities could be easily adapted to any literature texts, thus diminishing demands on a teacher’s time. I set the class up on two-week cycles, the first week students were reading the story and discussing various issues that came up in the story. In the second week we would do some sort of dramatic

interpretation of the story. Although reading and discussing themes in the story was valuable, I sometimes felt that it was a struggle to get students to make any effort to relate to the story. When students were asked to do a drama activity in the second week, suddenly they started to read the story again, and started asking each other, about the characters. “How old is this person?” “Why did this person say that?” “How does this person feel?” Inadvertently I had made the students read the stories more carefully and interact with the text. They needed to understand the stories and use their imagination in order to perform the various dramatic activities.

3.1 Effect of drama on learning

Many people see drama as a fun activity in itself, or as the final goal in literature, but not necessary as a learning tool to aid understanding of the literature. What I discovered was that through drama, students are encouraged to engage more deeply with the text for a purposeful reason. Drama was an aid to comprehension, not the goal.

4. Activities

I introduced four main activities; i) mime, ii) puppet show, iii) adlib, iv) role-play and then finally brought them all together for a short student written skit.

4.1 Mime

At first glance it might appear that not much language learning would take place through mime. However, I found that on the contrary, this was one of the activities when the students needed to read carefully and use their imaginations most.

I started by asking students to guess their partners' feeling by purely facial expressions. We then moved on to simple actions in the manner of people of different ages, such as children, teenagers, and old people. The final step was to imagine how the characters from the story would do simple actions, such as walking across the room and sitting down. The students suddenly started to read their books in detail, to find out about the characters. They had in fact become so engrossed in the activity that they had forgotten that they were studying.

Handout for Mime Activity

1. Take turns to make these faces. Guess how your partner is feeling.



Afraid



Sad



Angry



Shocked



Tired



Happy

2. Stand up, sit down or walk across the room. Pretend you are different ages. The rest of the group should guess how old you are:
 - i.e. A child
 - A university student
 - A middle-aged housewife
 - A businessman
 - An old person
3. Stand up, sit down or walk across the room in the manner of a character from the story. The rest of the groups should guess who you are.
4. Mime the final scene of the story. Each member of the group should be a different character.

4.2 Puppet Show

By separating body language and voice, students were allowed to focus on only one aspect of output. This was great intonation practice, as well as literature practice. The first stage was for students to read very simple sentences using different emotions. Their partners would guess the emotion. The next stage was for the students to read out very short dialogs from the story using their voice to show emotion. In the second stage students went back to read the story more carefully. They initially had to understand who was saying which lines, and then they hypothesized what the characters were feeling in order to have the correct intonation. Finally they acted out the dialog using puppets, removing the necessity for body language, and allowing them to focus on showing emotion through their voice.

4.3 Making Puppets

When students started making the puppets they read the whole story very

carefully trying to find out what the characters looked like, what they were wearing and any other inferences, which could help them to draw a picture of the character. Initially I had wondered whether drawing, coloring and cutting out were really university level activities, but in retrospect this was one of the classes where the most learning took place. Making puppets could be done for homework, however the students really benefitted from having the teacher as a resource.

Handout for Puppet Activity

1. Take turns to read these sentences. Guess how your partner is feeling.

"I've got something to tell you. "

"Where have you been?"

"Can I talk to you?"

"My friend got a job"

"My teacher quit teaching at our school."

"Did you finish your homework?"



Afraid



Sad



Angry



Shocked



Tired



Happy

2. Practice reading from the story of Lucky Luke (Stewart, 1998) using the character's emotion.

Jimmy Yes? (wearily)

Customer Errm I...

Jimmy Are you from the press?

Because if you are, you can clear off now.

Customer I just want a haircut.

Jimmy You do? Take a seat.

I'm sorry I—I've been having a few problems with reporters.

3. Analyze the script
 - a. Use two different color pens. Highlight the words that the customer says with one color and the words that Jimmy says with another.
 - b. Make a note of what type of emotion would be used with each sentence.

- c. Make a cardboard puppet of your character. Practice reading the dialog with your partner, using the puppets and putting emotion into your voice.



Figure 1. Example of student-made puppets

4.4 Adlib

Students were asked to imagine a part of the story retold by a different character than the narrator of the story. In this way they were given complete freedom in which words and gestures they might use. This made them analyze how two different characters might view the same event. In the story we read, the narrator was one of the characters, I asked the students to tell one of the scenes from the point of view of another character. In this way the students studied the prejudice of the characters and thought about the relationships between characters. This was especially true in the story I chose, as the narrator was a British man teaching English to a middle-aged Japanese couple. The British teacher displayed numerous stereotypes of Japanese people in his narration. Due to the cultural context the students loved describing the way the British teacher behaved in their own words.

4.5 Role play

The students acted out a scene that may have happened in the story, but was not explicitly described. By imagining a scene that obviously took place, but was not fully described in the story, the students had to imagine what the characters were thinking and what the characters might say. This made the students review the way that characters spoke as well as how the characters might react to situations.

4.6 Writing your own skit

Merely by asking students to make a script out of a story forced the students to understand who said what. By then asking them to annotate the script with feelings and emotions the students were further encouraged to read the story more carefully. Finally I asked the students to add scenes that may have taken place in the story, but were not explicitly written. The students were very keen to change the ending or add their own ending. I wanted to bring the whole course together and each group performed their short skit for the other students. This was hilarious, and a high point to end the semester. Anyone who adheres to the stereotype of Japanese students being shy should use drama and role-play in their classes. I have always found that students love stepping into a different role.

Instructions:

Choose a part of the story and make a script.

1. Which lines are spoken?
2. Who said which line?
3. How do the characters feel?
4. What type of actions do the characters do?

5. Student Evaluations

As the course progressed, my colleagues started telling me that they had met students, who were really enjoying my 'Drama Course'. There is nothing wrong with a drama course and I have wonderful friends who have taught drama, but I thought that I was teaching literature. I came to accept that whatever the students thought they were learning I had achieved my goals. The depth of understanding coming out in student reading reaction papers was far superior to classes when no drama activities had been included.

These are some student comments in response to the final question on the course evaluation:

'What did you enjoy most about this course?'

"You should make more acting with students."

"Drama activities are very fun for me."

"Playing role made me think very deeply this story and feeling these roles. I want to have drama activities more. These activities are interesting for me. In other classes we cannot do that."

“I like the drama with paper.” (I think that this refers to using your voice to show emotion.)

“All the stories were interesting, because of various characters.”

There were of course far more responses, most of them just stated, “I liked drama.” I could be disappointed that no students commented on the international nature of the stories I had chosen, or the how the themes were applicable to their own lives, however I was really happy that a large group of non-English majors had read a selection of non-graded short stories and enjoyed the course.

6. Conclusion

Through incorporating drama activities in a literature class the students can be encouraged to engage with the text at a deeper level than purely asking comprehension or discussion questions. Additionally students tend to read and reread the story in more depth if they are given a dramatic activity to perform, students are also motivated by doing activities which they were not asked to do previously in English classes. The evaluations of the course all included comments about how much fun it was to do drama activities. As Levy (2014) states, “Drama promotes class bonding: in drama classes there is usually a great deal of camaraderie.”

In this course drama was viewed as a tool to aid understanding of literature and as a way to encourage students to interact with literature, rather than a goal in its own right. In this way drama can be used in literature classes by teachers who do not consider themselves to be ‘drama teachers.’ Firstly the classes are made more enjoyable, and more importantly students are encouraged to discover meaning themselves, and to interact with the literature at a deeper level, without being led by the teacher.

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