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Oral Interpretation : Telling Stories with Our Whole Body

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Oral Interpretation: Telling Stories with Our Whole Body

David KLUGE

1. Introduction

The performers enter and the audience applauds politely. The performance begins and the audience smiles and sometimes chuckles. As the performance moves to the second part, the smiles disappear, to be replaced by looks of serious concentration, sometimes shouts of agreement, and sometimes fists thrust into the air. The show ends and the performers bow to warm applause. As the performers exit the stage, their faces are flushed with success.

Was this a much-rehearsed performance of professional actors dressed in lavish costumes performing on a gorgeous set in a well-appointed theater? No. It was a group of teachers and students dressed in their everyday clothes. There was no set, no props, no costumes, no lighting, and no theater building—in fact, it was performed in a university cafeteria with the audience standing while eating and drinking at a banquet of a language teaching conference at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies in May of 2015.

The only expense for the performance was for copying the script and for construction paper folded in half to serve as the cover for the script. The rehearsal time was a little over an hour. The ten performers attended a 90-minute presentation/workshop at the language conference on oral interpretation (OI). The majority of them, eight, were teachers, mostly foreign, with a Japanese and a Chinese student. Only two of the group had experience with drama and only one of the two had experience with OI, yet they all felt confident enough to give a 10-minute performance in English to a large group of language teachers—their peers, and in the case of student performers,

their superiors—using non-verbal, paralinguistic, and verbal means to dramatically communicate their messages. How was this accomplished? An explanation of the process of creating the performance is the focus of this paper. The paper first defines OI, then shows the OI process through a description of what the group described above did, and finally discusses the implications of OI use in language classes.

1.1 Definition of OI

OI, “the oralization of literature” (Campbell, 1967, p. 9), is defined as follows:

Oral Interpretation is the expression and sharing of literature with an audience. The function of the interpreter is to establish oneself as a liaison between the author who created the literature and the audience, which responds to it. The goal of the interpreter should be influenced by the author's intention, which can be discovered by investigation into the author's background, viewpoint and the time and conditions under which the selection was written. (THSSDL, 2011)

It can be a solo activity or a group activity. OI is "the art of communicating to an audience a work of literary art in its intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic entirety" using voice, body, and movement (Lee & Gura, 2005, p. 4). OI differs from theatre in that OI performers usually hold their script in hand, usually face the audience and not each other, and usually interact with the audience and not with other performers. OI also differs from theatre in that it usually does not involve a set, costumes, or props. The description uses “usually” because there are many variations of OI, some of which are closer to theater than others in the use of set, interaction of performers, and dramatic lighting and music.

1.2 Description of OI

In brief, to do OI, a group chooses a piece of literature to be performed. They then make a script by deciding which person or group of persons will say which words or lines. Together they discuss the meaning of the selected piece, both the meaning of words or phrases, and the messages of the piece they must communicate. The group reads the piece aloud, each person reading the parts assigned to him, her, or them to get a feel for the piece and how to pronounce and perform it. After reading aloud, they practice how to best interpret the piece using their voice, body, and movement to communicate their message. The group rehearses by doing the piece over and over,

going over parts of the piece as well as the whole piece until they feel comfortable and satisfied. Finally, the group performs the piece. After the performance, there is often a time of reflection on the process of creation and the performance. The role of the teacher varies with the abilities of the students and the educational philosophy of the teacher. However, allowing the students freedom to take part in making decisions increases the benefits of OI.

1.3 Educational Bases of OI

The question may be asked: In language classes, why use OI, which seems to be a roundabout way to work on pronunciation and intonation? There are many reasons, but three are especially strong: the addition of creativity to the lessons, the language-learning efficacy of telling stories, and the effective use of repetition.

1.3.1 The Need for Creativity in Language Teaching

Feher (2007a, 2007b) wrote clearly about the role of creativity in language teaching. She answers the question of why creativity is important in the language classroom (2007a):

1. Language use is a creative act.
2. Compensation strategies, what learners need to do when they find they do not have the exact language they need, require creative thinking.
3. For some people, being creative is their most effective mode of learning.
4. Many people become more motivated when they are asked or required to be creative.
5. Creativity increases self-esteem.
6. Creative work requires increased language communication in order to plan the work.
7. Creative work adds a rich dimension to the classroom.
8. Creative thinking is important in real life.

Creativity certainly appears to be valuable in the language classroom. Feher (2007b) and Passuello (2012) both refer to Oech's list of the four main roles in creative thinking: the Explorer, the Artist, the Judge, and the Warrior:

- **The Explorer** goes out and collects materials and information from a variety of sources.

- **The Artist** takes the materials and information and turns it into new ideas.
- **The Judge** evaluates the new ideas and decides what to do.
- **The Warrior** takes the idea and puts it into action.

Feher (2007a, 2007b), Oech (2008), and Passuelo (2012) give practical advice on how to promote creativity in the language classroom. OI provides opportunities for the participants to take on the various creative thinking roles while making the performance and show creativity in the performance itself.

1.3.2 Oller's Episode Hypothesis

The episode hypothesis states “texts (oral or written forms of discourse) which are more episodically organized can be stored and recalled more easily than less episodically organized material” (Oller, 1983b, p. 44). Oller (1983a, pp. 12-16) claimed that texts that have an episodic structure are easier to understand and remember. Basically, the episode hypothesis claims that stories are excellent resources for language classroom use. Since OI usually uses a story or poem, and is episodic in structure, it is a good method for teaching and learning language.

1.3.3 The Effective Use of Repetition

The axiom “practice makes perfect” is the basis of the discredited audio-lingual method (ALM). ALM-style practice drills have been discredited because of their lack of meaning and motivation value; humorously put, “drills are boring.” Yet as Richards and Rogers (2014, p. 73) state, it still exists today in many places. This is certainly true in Japan. Why is this so, even among teachers who espouse communicative language teaching (CLT)? Perhaps it is tolerated because the axiom “practice makes perfect” is viewed intuitively as being correct and good sense, if only it could be improved. How should it be improved? Larsen-Freeman (2012, p. 195) gives valuable hints when she states:

I argue that we should not think of repetition as exact replication, but rather we should think of it as iteration that generates variation. Thus, what results from iteration is a mutable state. Iteration is one way that we create options in how to make meaning, position ourselves in the world as we want, understand the differences which we encounter in others, and adapt to a changing context.

Although she is referring mainly to repeating after a model utterance, her observations that repetition should be “iteration that generates variation” and that iteration “is one way that we create options in how to make meaning” have great relevance to OI. In order to create a good performance, OI participants have to say their lines over and over in rehearsals.

However, it is not just simple repetition; OI participants change the nuances of the utterance to match the volume, tone, and mood of the lines of other people in the performance, so it is dynamic repetition in that it changes until the performer finds an appropriate style for the performance. In addition, it is meaningful repetition in that the performers must know the meaning of the words they say, and the performers see a reason for repetition—to improve the group performance.

2. The Process of OI

2.1 The Idealized Process

The definition of OI in the previous section contained a brief description of the process of OI, but to give a clearer idea, in a step-by-step way, the following list, from the handout at the presentation/workshop, is given below:

STEP 1: Selection of material

Select a piece of literature (poem, song lyric, short story, speech, essay, novel, news story, biography, etc.) to be performed, considering the number of performers, performers’ interests, language proficiency, and maturity level of performers and audience.

STEP 2: Script making

Get the material scripted for OI (Who reads what?)

STEP 3: Interpretation

Understand both implicit and explicit messages of the text

*Explicit: What do the words mean?

*Implicit: What does the piece mean (Theme)?

STEP 4: Reading aloud

Learn prosodic features such as pronunciation, intonation, rhythm, pitch, rapidity, style, and loudness that can match the interpretation.

STEP 5: Staging

To convey the message to the audience, learn how to better employ paralinguistic aspects of English: facial expression, posture, gestures, movement, GROUPING.

STEP 6: Practice/ Rehearsal

Make arrangements so that everyone involved can get together for practice and cooperate with group members.

STEP 7: Performance

Learn how to overcome stage fright (physical—take a deep breath before going on stage, emotional—be prepared by practicing).

2.2 The Realized Process

The same steps are repeated below, but include descriptions of what actually happened in the workshop. Note: The workshop was prefaced by a short presentation on the principles and steps of OI (see Appendix for the complete handout).

STEP 1: Selection of material

The material, comprised of two different pieces, one poem by Shel Silverstein titled “I Cannot Go To School Today,” and a slightly abridged version of the speech by Malala Yousafzai given at the United Nations Youth Takeover day, was selected by the author, given the title “Juxtaposition,” and distributed to the workshop participants. (See Figures 1-4 below.)

At this point, the author announced that the workshop participants were scheduled to perform at the conference banquet. The reaction of the participants was not enthusiastic. As a matter of fact, one person said, “No way!

STEP 2: Script making

The participants went through the script and together decided which individual/group would say the lines, and which parts would be cut. (See the handwritten names on Figures 1-4 to see how they divided the parts.)

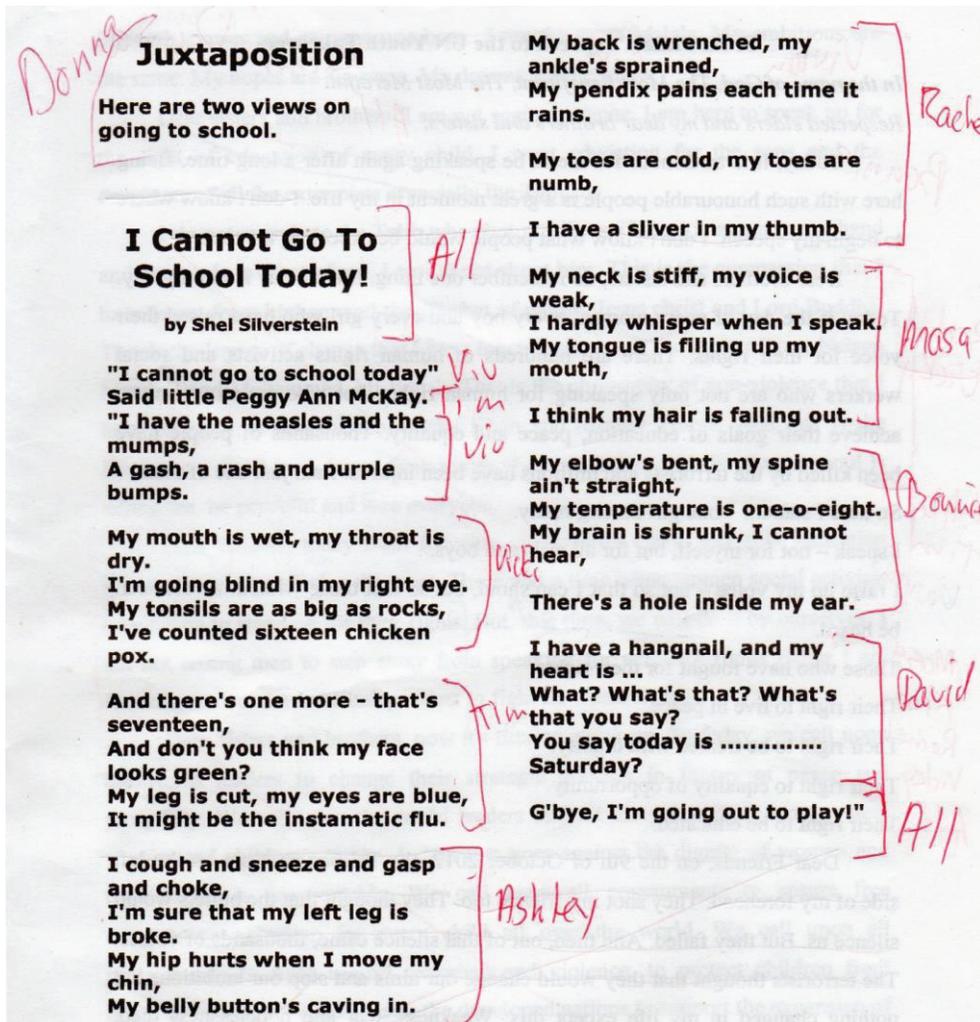


Figure 1. "I Cannot Go to School Today" by Shel Silverstein, Conference Handout with Notes

Some participants volunteered for parts they liked, some of the more reserved participants were assigned parts by the group. One person, who had previous OI experience took command much of the time, but in a gentle way. Other participants volunteered people they thought would be good for the lines. In addition, the group

made decisions about which lines or parts to cut based on things that seemed to be unnecessary for an audience to know. (See the handwritten lines on Figures 2-4 to see how which parts were cut.

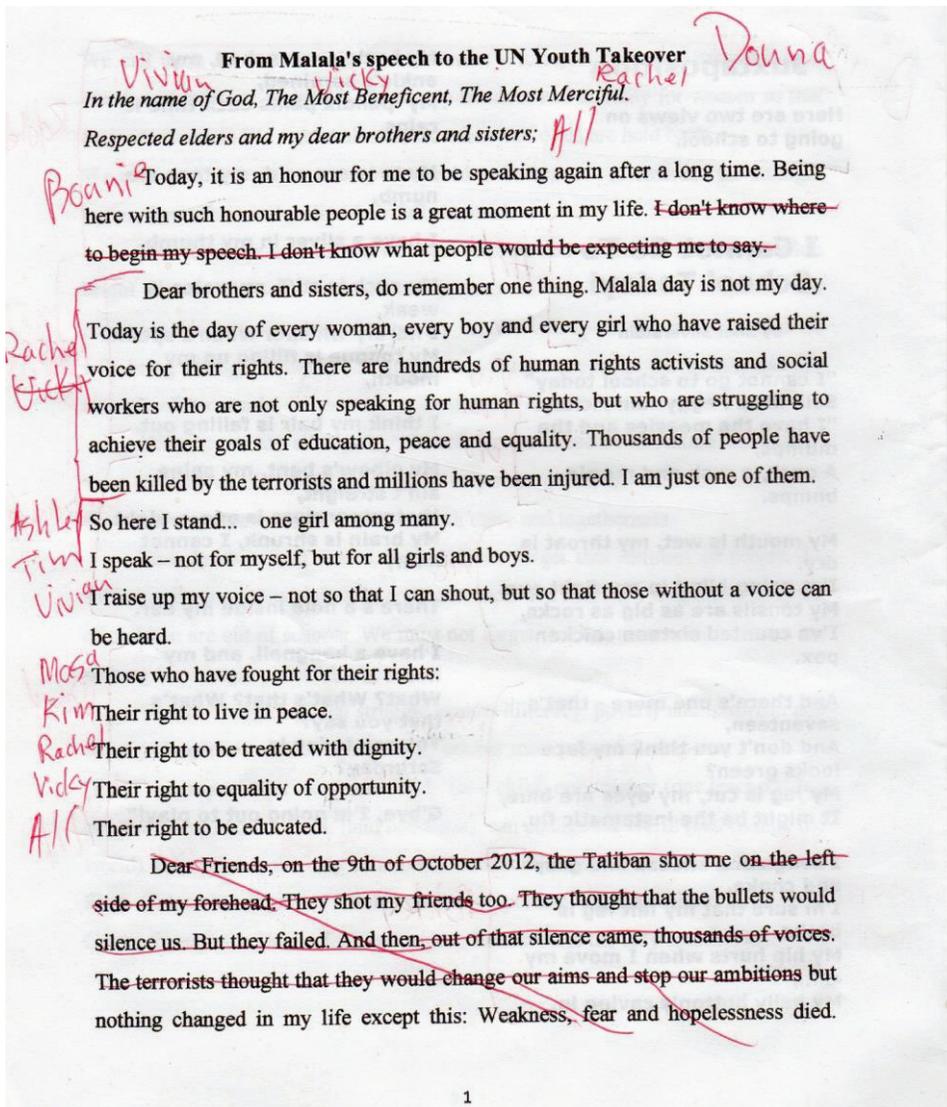


Figure 2 “From Malala’s Speech to the UN Youth Takeover” by Malala Yousafzai, p. 1, Conference Handout with Notes

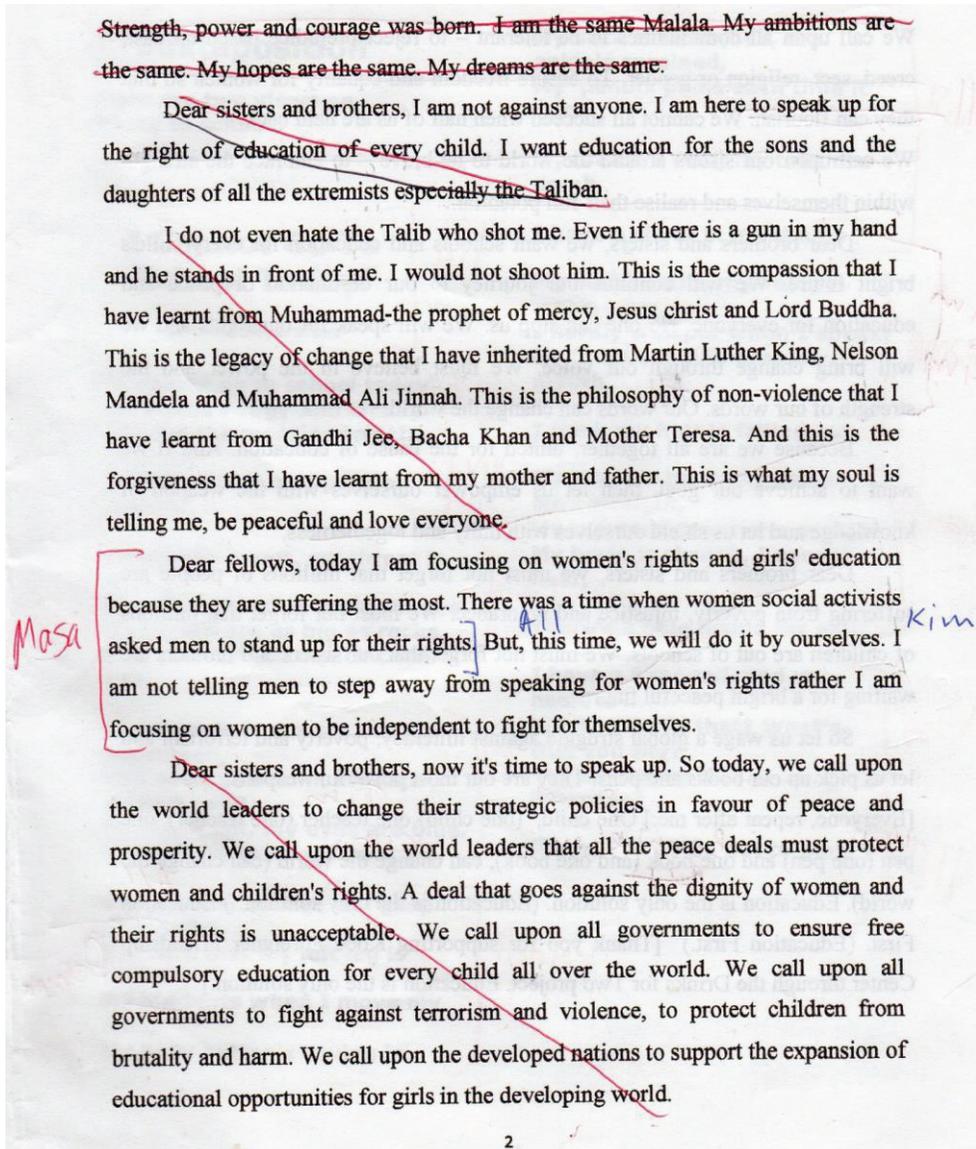


Figure 3 “From Malala’s Speech to the UN Youth Takeover” by Malala Yousafzai, p. 2, Conference Handout with Notes

Figure 1 involved no cuts as it was a short poem.) Although the author shortened the Malala speech, he left much that could have been cut in order for the workshop participants to decide what they wanted to cut. The handwritten notes in Figures 2-4 show how extensive the cuts were, but do not show the interesting changing interaction of the participants in making the cutting decisions.

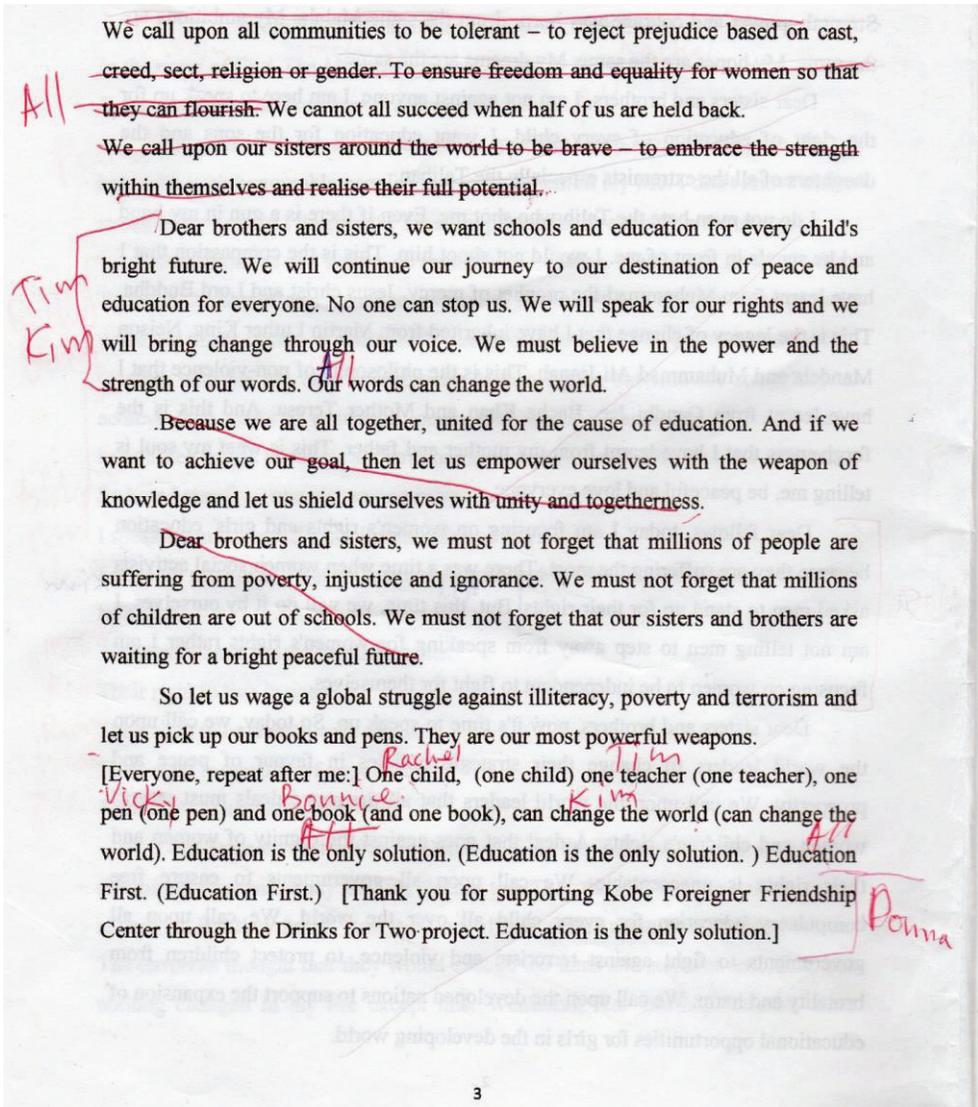


Figure 4. “From Malala’s Speech to the UN Youth Takeover” by Malala Yousafzai, p. 3, Conference Handout with Notes

Of course, cutting lines and parts early on in the piece required cutting parts later on that were related to previous cuts. Participants started slowly with this step, but after a while seemed to get into a smooth working rhythm through the creation of consensus and quickly finished this task.

STEP 3: Interpretation

The participants discussed words or phrases they did not understand and

what messages they wanted to communicate to the audience. Additional cuts were made at this time based on decisions on what messages were to be emphasized. Parts that were not related to the messages were discussed on whether they should be cut or not.

STEP 4: Reading aloud

The participants read aloud the entire piece from beginning to end, each person reading his, her, or their lines while seated. They then read it again, helping each other with the pronunciation and intonation. They also did some more cutting based on hearing what the piece sounded like read aloud, catching things to cut that they missed before.

STEP 5: Staging

The group then stood up and worked on staging; that is, how they would enter and exit the stage, where they would stand, when and where to move, and worked on their facial expression, posture, and gestures. At the end of this stage, the director, (the author of the paper and the person conducting the workshop) gave advice on how to improve their ideas, mostly on how to tighten up the performance by cutting out unnecessary pauses, suggested changes on how to move, and gave other advice to improve what the performance looked like from the audience's point of view. Participants became more enthusiastic and gave advice to each other, often giving encouraging words and words of praise after a particularly good interpretation.

STEP 6: Practice/ Rehearsal/ Reflection

The group practiced until the time was almost up. Although they felt satisfied with what they had done in the hour or so of the workshop, they also felt a little uneasy because as with all performances, the performers want just a little more time to rehearse. Because everyone was busy at the conference, it was difficult to find another time to practice.

In the last few minutes of the workshop there was a short time for reflection on the process. All participants enjoyed the experience, with many looking exhilarated. Some were amazed at how much they had accomplished in such a short time. Some

of the teachers said they now recognized the value of OI.

STEP 7: Performance/ Performance Reflection

During the entertainment part of the banquet the performers gathered in front of the room and first walked the raised platform that would serve as their stage. They made some changes in movement based on the available space. The performers had the jitters before the performance, but settled down and gave a good performance. The audience smiled and chuckled at the first part, "I Cannot Go To School Today." During the interpretation of Malala's speech, some in the audience spontaneously shouted out in agreement or pumped their fist in the air to show approval. These were signs that the performers had made good interpretive decisions. After the performance, the audience applauded with genuine appreciation, and the performers hugged each other and patted each other on the back, satisfied and proud of what they had done. Most were strangers before the workshop and performance, but had become fused into a single unit through the OI experience, brief though it was.

There was no time for a formal reflection of the performance, as would usually be done in a class, but two things are worth noting. One is after the performance, the Chinese student came up to the author and shook his hand, tears streaming from her eyes, and saying that she had never experienced such a lesson and was very grateful for the chance. The other was an email from the participant who responded, "No way!" when told that they would be performing the piece that same evening: "It was an awesome workshop preparing for the presentation and even more fun to perform the Oral Interpretation in public.

The process sets your inner child free, wakes your critical thinker up, and lets your revolutionary punk rapper go happy-crazy." The use of words and phrases such as "awesome," "fun," and "happy-crazy" point to the motivational power of OI. The comment about critical thinkers underscores the valuable cognitive benefits of OI. The entire comment shows how exposure to OI can change attitudes toward the use of such performance activities such as OI.

3. Discussion and Conclusions

It was interesting to note several things about the workshop and performance:

1. **Creative Thinking Roles:** The members of the group naturally took on the roles described by Oech (2008). In many cases, one person would assume a role that would soon be assumed by another person. One person did not usually maintain their role for the length of the workshop, but only for a short time. At first the students were reluctant to take on any of the roles, but after getting more caught up in the activity, they became bolder, and looked gratified when their creative suggestions were adopted.
2. **Comparisons to Classes:** People reading this article might question whether a group of language teachers would act as a normal class. The answer is no and yes. On the no side, the group's knowledge of English vocabulary, pronunciation, and intonation was superior to all but the most advanced classes of students. However, on the yes side the turn taking of creative roles is the same, as well as the mounting energy as creative ideas come forth faster and faster.

One point that is different and is in favor of classes is students are often quicker to come up with different ways of planning choreography, or how the group, small groups, and individuals can move on stage. This is especially true of groups where some students have dance experience. Both student and teacher groups are alike in their enjoyment of the process of creation and in their satisfaction when the performance is over, as well as showing a similar feeling of group unity building throughout the process, culminating after the performance.

3. **Creativity:** The gradual increase in the flow of creative ideas indicates that creative thinking is not the default state of people's minds and so must be stimulated by activities such as OI.
4. **Meaningful, Interesting Practice of Utterances:** OI, through its goal of a successful final performance, makes practice both meaningful and interesting—makes the axiom “practice makes perfect” more true.

In conclusion, the rising excitement levels indicating increasing motivation, the interesting and meaningful practice of language, the increasing of creativity, the emergence of a group cohesion in such a short period, and the pride of accomplishment at the end of the workshop and the end of the performance are clear indications that OI has a place in English lessons in Japan.

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Appendix: Conference OI Presentation/Workshop Handout

Oral Interpretation: Telling Stories with Your Whole Body

David Kluge, Nanzan University

Overview 概要

I.	Introduction	イントロダクション
II.	Selection of Piece	作品選び
III.	Study of Piece	作品研究
IV.	Voice	声
V.	Posture	姿勢、役作り
VI.	Gestures	ジェスチャー
VII.	Movement	動き
VIII.	Pace	ペース
IX.	Use the Stage	ステージ全体を使う
X.	Levels	隊形
XI.	Groups	グループの種類
XII.	Ensemble	グループの調和
XIII.	Review	レビュー

I. Introduction イン트로ダクション

DEFINITION: Oral Interpretation is reading aloud dramatically, using your voice, face, body, gestures and movement.

定義：オーラルインタープリテーションとは声、顔の表情、身体、ジェスチャー、動きとともにドラマチックに音読すること

Improves English 英語力の向上

Improves motivation (fun) モチベーションを上げる

Improves confidence 自信をつける

Improves group unity チームの調和の向上

Concentrate on these Basics 基本を大切に

II. Selection of Piece 作品選び

Choose from your English textbook something that is:

英語の教科書から次のようなものを選んでみましょう

Humorous ユーモラスなもの

Dramatic ドラマチックなもの

Appropriate for a Group

グループでの発表に適したもの

Appropriate for YOUR Group

そのグループに適したもの

III. Study of Piece 作品研究

Know the meaning of Words

作品中の語の意味を知る

Know the Theme

作品のテーマを理解する

IV. Voice Variety 声

Volume 声の大きさ

Speed 速さ

Tone 声のトーン

Style 声の滑らかさ、荒さ

V. Posture 姿勢、役作り

Show character 役を表現する

Show emotion 感情を表現する

VI. Gestures ジェスチャー

Big 大きく

Necessary 必要に応じて

VII. Movement 動き

Necessary 必要に応じて

Sharp はっきりと

Smooth なめらかに

VIII. Pace ペース

No gaps ペースが途切れないように

IX. Use the stage ステージ全体を使う

Whole stage ステージ全体を使う

X. Levels 隊形

Front/Back 前の列、後ろの列

Right/Left

Up/Down 段差をつける

XI. Groups グループの種類

Solo ソロ

Duet ペア

Small Groups 小さいグループに分ける

Half グループを半分に分ける

Whole グループ全体で

Think AKB48! AKB48 のように！

XII. Ensemble グループの調和

Like a choir 指揮者のいる合唱のように

Together 同じタイミングで同じ動き

Sharp ずれることなく、一緒に

Think AKB48! AKB48 のように！

Steps for Oral Interpretation

STEP 1: Selection of material

Select a piece of literature (poem, song lyric, short story, speech, essay, novel, news story, biography, etc.) to be performed, considering the number of performers, performers' interests, language proficiency, & maturity level of performers and audience

STEP 2: Script making

Get the material scripted for RT (Who reads what?)

STEP 3: Interpretation

Understand both implicit and explicit messages of the text

*Explicit: What do the words mean?

*Implicit: What does the piece mean (Theme)?

STEP 4: Reading aloud

Learn prosodic features such as pronunciation, intonation, rhythm, pitch, rapidity, style, and loudness that can match the interpretation.

STEP 5: Staging

To convey the message to the audience, learn how to better employ paralinguistic aspects of English: facial expression, posture, gestures, movement, GROUPING

STEP 6: Practice/ Rehearsal

Make arrangements so that everyone involved can get together for practice and cooperate with group members

STEP 7: Performance

Learn how to overcome stage fright (physical—take a deep breath before going on stage, emotional—be prepared by practicing).

Oral Interpretation:

Telling Stories with Our Whole Body

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Abstract

Oral interpretation (OI), or “the oralization of literature” (Campbell, 1967, p. 9), is a way for an individual or group to dramatically tell a story by taking a piece of literature, studying it, and then reading it dramatically for an audience. The main differences between OI and drama or theater are that OI performers usually face and interact with the audience and not usually with other performers on stage, are able to hold the script in hand, and usually does not require set, props, costumes, lighting, or sound, making it a good choice for language classes from a financial and time perspective. The bases of OI (creativity research, episode hypothesis, and the value of meaningful repeating of English) also make it a good choice of activities. This paper first describes OI, then, demonstrates the process of OI through the documenting of a workshop and performance at a language conference at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies in 2015.

Keywords: Oral interpretation, ELT methodology, storytelling, episode hypothesis, creativity