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Tell me a Story: Oral Interpretation in the English Classroom

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Abstract

Oral Interpretation (OI) is a special kind of storytelling performance that is between reading aloud and theatre. This paper defines OI, then explains why OI is a good activity for EFL classes, next outlines the steps to teaching OI, and finally explains how to do an OI festival.

1. Introduction

“Once upon a time there lived a lonely giant . . .”

So starts another evening of reading stories to not-so-sleepy children. Children delight in the interesting names of storybook people (Rumpelstiltskin, Pippi Longstocking) and places (the Emerald City of Oz, Narnia), and the odd characters (Willy Wonka, Eeyore). They nod with familiarity at the repetitions that appear in many stories (“for he was a bear of Very Little Brain”). They shiver with delight at the scary parts (“I ‘do’ believe in spooks. I ‘do’ believe in spooks. I do. I do I do!”). Finally, they sigh with satisfaction at the words,

“They lived happily ever after.”

Little do they know that they are learning language, culture, and life. This phenomenon is not only exhibited by young children—high school and university students also respond to the allure of storytelling. They like to listen to stories, and when given the chance, some training and encouragement, come to like telling stories. One way to include all these modes of storytelling in a high school or university English program is through the use of Oral Interpretation (OI), sometimes called dramatic reading, interpretive reading, or readers theatre. This paper first defines oral interpretation, then establishes the theoretical and pedagogical bases of OI, next

examines some of the supporting research, then describes the situation of one institution that has OI as an integral part of its curriculum, next relates the process of doing an OI project in the class, and finally relates how one institution runs an OI festival.

2. Definition of OI

OI, or “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)

Unlike drama, the oral interpreters face the audience and interact with it instead of each other. Also unlike drama, oral interpreters usually hold their script. The final differences between drama and OI are that OI does not require a set, props, costumes, make-up, or lights.

3. Theoretical and Pedagogical Background to the Use of OI

The ultimate theoretical/pedagogical source of OI is John Dewey (1933). His “learning by doing” is the basis for all such performance-based class activities such as speech, drama, debate, and OI. Why should EFL teachers consider using OI? There are four reasons. Each of these points is explained in detail below:

3.1 OI has a strong theoretical base for good language learning.

According to John Oller and his episode hypothesis, “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). In his recommendations for EFL materials development, Oller (1983a, pp. 12-16) suggested that texts that have the episodic structure that stories have would better facilitate second language acquisition. Episodic texts, essentially stories, Oller claims, are easier to understand and retain. Since OI usually uses a story or poem, it is episodic in structure, making it a good method for teaching and learning languages.

3.2 OI meets the criteria for good task design.

OI meets the criteria for good task design. Ellis (2003, pp. 276-278) presents eight principles with which tasks should be designed. OI corresponds well with these criteria, as can be seen in Table 1:

Table 1. OI Meets Ellis's Criteria of Good Task Design

Ellis's Criteria	OI's Characteristic
1. <i>Appropriate level of difficulty</i>	When choosing the OI text to perform, this is one factor to consider.
2. <i>Clear goals</i>	The clear goal of OI for students is to create a good performance.
3. <i>Appropriate orientation (motivation)</i>	Since students choose the performance piece, their motivation is high.
4. <i>Active role</i>	OI demands participation from each member.
5. <i>Risk-taking</i>	Performing with and in front of peers on stage is a big risk for students.
6. <i>Focus on meaning</i>	One principle of OI is students must know the meaning of all the words.
7. <i>Opportunities to focus on form</i>	Determining the "how" of presenting a piece focuses students' attention on form.
8. <i>Self-evaluation</i>	Video recording of practice and performance is much easier now for the purpose of self-evaluation.

As can be seen, OI clearly meets the criteria of a good EFL activity.

3.3 OI meets the criteria for good project design in PBL.

OI also meets the criteria for a good project for Project-Based Learning (PBL). PBL is a student-centered teaching approach, which uses projects extensively in the classroom. Each project poses a challenge to engage students in a process of discovery of knowledge and skills that culminates in a tangible product of their discovery process. Ford and Kluge (2015) coined the phrase "Creative PBL" to encompass such projects as OI or film-making.

PBL provides many benefits for EFL classes. Thomas (2000) summarized research on the general benefits of PBL: it is related to significant test score

improvement on standardized academic achievement exams, increased ability to solve problems, increased ability to understand the content of subject matter, improved understanding of the skills and strategies introduced in the project, and “perceived changes in group problem solving, work habits, and other PBL process behaviors.”

Beckett (2006) cited research showing PBL benefits specific to second language learning: it provides rich opportunities for comprehensible input and output, it improves critical thinking and problem solving skills, as well as improves higher order thinking skills.

For Japanese language learners, research shows that PBL allows Japanese students to experience intercultural experiences without leaving Japan, or in preparation for leaving Japan (Maekawa, 2009 in Apple et al., 2015; Falout, Fukada, Murphey & Fukuda, 2013).

Ford and Kluge (2015) looked at various definitions of PBL and projects in PBL and distilled a set of PBL characteristics. OI, as it is practiced in the institution that Ford and Kluge teach at, meets the 12 characteristics, as seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Analysis of OI as PBL (Ford & Kluge, 2015)

Variable Aspects of PBL	How OI Fits as PBL
1. Essentialness: Students must feel that the project is important.	Students realize how important the prosodic elements of language are in communication, and know that OI teaches these important elements.
2. Centrality: The project should be an important part of the curriculum.	OI is central to the identity of the institution and the curriculum. It is taught and practiced in one unit each of the four semesters of their junior college life.
3. Goal Relevance: Students must see the goal as important to reach their goal.	All students must perform their OI on stage in front of the entire student body in what is known as the English Performance Festival (EPF). They have all seen a live performance or DVD recording of OI, so they know that others have done the task, and have done well in the amount of time provided.

4. Motivation: Students must feel motivated to do the project.	The driving question for each OI project is, “What is the most creative and interesting way to communicate the words and feelings of this literary piece?”
5. Engagement: Each student must have something important to do to complete the project.	Students all participate in the rehearsal and performance.
6. Creativity: There must be a chance for students to try something creative and innovative.	The students look for creative ways to interpret the piece they selected.
7. Ownership: The students must have a large role in the selecting of the project and running of the project so that they feel it is their project.	Students, choose the piece, discuss it with student group leaders, decide how to perform the piece, run the rehearsals, and run the performance.
8. Collaboration: The project must be constructed to promote collaboration and cooperation to complete it.	The project requires, they must collaboration throughout the process.
9. Production: The project must culminate in an end product.	The class performs their interpretation of the piece in front of the entire student body, faculty, and staff of the college.
10. Reflection: The project should include opportunities for students to reflect on what they are doing.	Each rehearsal is video recorded and students look at their video, critique it, and discuss how to improve for the next rehearsal. The performance is video recorded and students must assess themselves and then evaluate themselves, making note of how to improve for the next EPF.
11. Application: Students must see an application of skills acquired in the project to activities outside of the project.	Students apply what they learn to the next rehearsal and the next performance in other classes.
12. Challenge: Students must see a challenge and be challenged by the project.	Very few students have previously performed on stage in front of a large audience, so it is a challenge for everybody to do so.

OI clearly works well as a PBL project, especially a Creative PBL project.

3.4 OI increases reading fluency.

In current reading theory, reading fluency is made up of “accurate reading of connected text at a conversational rate with appropriate prosody (expression)” (Hudson, 2006, p. 1). In OI, students study a piece to understand it, which makes for an “accurate teaching of connected text” (Hudson, 2006, p. 1). The goal for a performance is for students to interpret the piece at a “conversational rate.” OI is extremely effective in teaching the third element of reading fluency, prosody, which is the rhythm, stress, and intonation of speech, since prosody is an important element of performance.

The fit between the definition of reading fluency and the method of OI is one of the two reasons Hudson (2006) recommends it as an activity. In addition, Hudson (2006, p. 10) cites a variety of studies reporting increased motivation, reading achievement, and reading fluency with readers’ theatre (RT), a form of OI. Willcutt (n.d.) looked at research that supported Readers Theater’s reading fluency efficacy through repeated reading.

Willcutt provided additional research supporting the efficacy of RT and OI on reading fluency. In a review of the Readers Theater and reading fluency research, she cited the work of LaBerge and Samuels (1974) and Samuels (1979) that concluded that repeated reading, the activity that is basic to OI, builds fluency. OI clearly is an important tool in the EFL teacher’s toolbox.

4. One Use of Oral Interpretation: Nanzan Junior College

The following sections describe how one institution, Nanzan Junior College, incorporates oral interpretation in its English curriculum. Nanzan Junior College has had a long history of using OI. It started in 1981 (Asano, Kluge & Kumai, 2012) through the efforts of Makoto Omi and Yoshiko Tanaka, two teachers at Nanzan Junior College. In the years since 1981 the school has sponsored an annual OI contest for high schools in October (this year the 21st contest) and two Oral Interpretation Festivals (OIF) a year for its students, as well as giving OI workshops around the region.

The OIF, at first an extra-curricular activity, and then a co-curricular activity in 2011, became a curricular event in 2012. One of the required English classes is called Presentation in English 1-4. Presentation in English 1-2 is for first year students and Presentation in English 3-4 is for second year students. Each of the courses has seven sections, about 20 students in each section, making 14 sections of about 300 students. The courses meet once a week for 90 minutes. One unit in each semester of each course is devoted for preparation for the new curricular festival, renamed the English

Performance Festival (EPF). One festival is held in the spring semester in late June, and one in the autumn semester in early December. Each course section has five minutes to perform on stage, making for a 90-minute EPF.

Two groups of people are involved in the EPF, one group is comprised of the classes of students and teachers of the courses, and the other group by the teachers, support staff, and a few students who work on running the EPF. Each group's activities and responsibilities are described in the following sections so that any other group can hold something equivalent to an EPF.

Group 1: Teachers and Students in Presentation in English Classes

The first group made up of teachers and students of the Presentation in English classes go through three stages, described in detail in Table 3: Stage 1 made up of First Steps: Preparation; Stage 2 made up of Middle Steps: Rehearsal; and Stage 3 made up of Final Steps: Polishing, Performance, and Reflection.

For the students, Stage 1 is an ambiguous time when they can barely see what the road is like or where it will lead.

Stage 2 for the students is a busy time, starting slowly but ending up with a feeling that there was not enough time to do what they want because they finally see both the road and the destination, but fear it is too late to get to the destination in time.

Stage 3 is the busiest stage, with students rushing to get things done, and finally deciding if the trip was worth the effort. In most cases the answer is yes, it was worth it. For students, the most valuable part is the performance in Stage 3.

For teachers, the most important part is Stage 2, where students build group cohesion, leaders step forward, sometimes some unlikely students become leaders (a pleasant surprise), and students collaborate and create.

Table 3. The Three Stages of the OI Project

STAGE 1	STAGE 2	STAGE 3
First Steps: Preparation	Middle Steps: Rehearsal	Final Steps: Polishing, Performance, & Reflection
1: Teacher describes the OI project and its goals (in class).	1: Teacher gives basics of OI to students.	1: Students decide how to enter the stage space, do the final bow, and exit the stage.

2: Students think of a piece (as homework).	2: Teacher shows previous OI performances and other video clips that will inform them on what is expected and possible.	2: Students discuss/decide whether costumes, props, music are necessary.
3: Students select a piece (in class).	3: Students discuss the meaning of the piece.	3: Students discuss/decide how to dress, what kind of props, music, and other performance details.
4: A student distributes the script digitally (as homework).	4: Students discuss ways to interpret the piece.	4: Students rehearse with music, props, and costumes, if any.
5: Students read the script (as homework).	5: Students divide the class into performing sub-groups.	5: Teacher helps students polish the performance.
6: Students think of ways to interpret the piece (as homework).	6: Students assign parts of the piece to each sub-group.	6: Students rehearse on stage.
	7: Sub-groups select a leader.	7: Students meet out of class for final rehearsals.
	8: Students choose one or two overall leaders.	8: Students perform.
	9: Each sub-group practices by themselves.	9: Students watch the video of their performance is video recorded.
	10: Sub-groups puts the parts together each class.	10: Students do self assessment and self evaluation for the group and the individual.
	11: Students video themselves in sub-groups and as a class, using their mobile phones.	11: Students discuss what to do to improve for the next EPF.
	12: Students watch the video.	
	13: Students discuss how to improve the performance.	

	14: Teacher observes, answers questions, and occasionally gives advice.	
	15. Students also arrange to meet outside of class to rehearse.	

Group 2: Teachers, Staff, and a Few Students

The teachers tasked to run the EPF, the support staff, and a few students work to put the EPF program together. They do so in three stages, as can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4. The Three Stages of Running the OI Project

STAGE 1	STAGE 2	STAGE 3
First Steps: Preparation	Middle Steps: Rehearsal	Final Steps: Polishing, Performance, & Reflection
1: The chair of the committee of teachers responsible for the running of the EPF asks the support staff to reserve the auditorium for the tech rehearsal, and dress rehearsal/performance (2 full days one week apart).	1: One teacher asks his/her Presentation in English class/es for volunteers to be MCs (usually 4, two for the first half and two for the second half of the program, two first year students and two second year students.	1: MCs practice reading the script in front of the teacher doing the actions and reading dramatically and with authority.
2: The committee of teachers responsible for the running of the EPF meet and divide the tasks of making the program, distributing the program to teachers, selecting and training of the MCs and writing the MCs' script, running the rehearsals	2: One teacher creates the program in consultation with the Presentation in English teachers.	2: MCs practice reading the script in front of the teacher doing the actions, reading dramatically with authority, and with the sound and lighting cues.

on the stage, and the taking of video and still photos.		
3: The teacher responsible for making the program sends a memo to the Presentation in English teachers asking them to email the title of the piece to the entire group of teachers and a digital copy of the script to the teacher responsible.	3: The program is distributed to the Presentation in English teachers.	3: One week before the performance one teacher with a representative of each class that requires tech runs the technical rehearsal with the sound, lighting, and AV requested by the classes.
4: The teacher responsible sends all the scripts to all the Presentation in English and Reading in English teachers to distribute to their students so they can study what other classes are doing and understand what they are doing.	4: Presentation in English teachers share the program with their classes to see if there are problems with the order.	4: One teacher runs the dress rehearsals on the day of the performance.
5: Students read all the pieces.	5: The teacher creates the final program.	5: One teacher creates the PowerPoint slideshow with each of the presentations on each slide.
	6: One teacher distributes the program to other teachers in the department that do not teach Presentation in English classes.	6: Before the performance one teacher does a dress rehearsal with the MCs.
	7: One teacher creates the MC script based on a	7: Before the performance the support staff prepares

	model.	and sets the two video cameras on tripods.
	8: The teacher distributes the MC script to the MCs and divides them into two teams, one second-year student with one first year student.	8: During the performance one teacher runs the lights, sound, PowerPoint, and AV. One teacher takes still photos. The support staff run the two video cameras.
	9: MCs practice reading the script in front of the teacher.	9: During the performance, the MCs run the program.
	10: MCs practice reading the script in front of the teacher, but doing the actions of using the microphone, standing, and sitting down at the appropriate times.	10: After the performance, one teacher is responsible for organizing the students in cleaning up the auditorium.
		11: The support staff creates a DVD of the EPF, burns a DVD for each teacher, and distributes the DVDs.
		12: The committee and support staff discuss how the EPF went, and what to improve next time.
		13: One teacher treats the MCs to cake and tea in the classroom at lunchtime to thank them for their hard work, and to ask them what they thought of the experience.

Stage 1 is made up of the preparatory steps that are necessary before the main work can be started: dividing the tasks among the teachers tasked to run the EPF, and collecting and distributing the titles and scripts of the pieces to be performed.

Stage 2 is getting everything ready for the performance stage: finding the MCs, creating the final order of the EPF program and distributing it to all teachers, including those teachers in the department that do not teach Presentation in English classes, and practicing the MC script.

Stage 3 is the last minute things that are necessary for a smooth-running program: a technical rehearsal, a dress rehearsal for classes and MCs, and setting up the AV equipment. Also included in this stage is the wrap-up after the EPF.

4.1 The teaching details

After reading the above sections, teachers can understand why they might want to do OI and how to run an OI festival, but there is still one thing that should worry them: what to teach about how to do OI. The next section will go through some of the things that can be taught. In the first class of this unit of Presentation in English class, the teacher teaches the principles of oral interpretation described below.

First comes *Selection of the Piece*. In the case of Nanzan Junior College, the piece selected comes from the Reading in English textbook. There are certain qualities that make for a good piece. Choose from the English textbook something that is humorous, heartwarming, and/or dramatic, as these qualities catch the attention and interest of the audience. In addition, the piece should be appropriate for a group; that is, the piece should easily be divided into parts so that a large group can perform it. The piece should be appropriate for the particular group; that is, it should be at the appropriate linguistic level, maturity level, and interest level for the particular students in the class. Perhaps the best way to ensure this is to give the students a large say in selection of the piece.

Next comes *Study of the Piece*. Students should know the meaning of the words in the piece. This is one case where students should at the end of this study understand the meaning of all of the words. Students should also know the theme of the piece—the message the author wants to communicate.

The next thing to teach is *Voice Variety*. Students should learn that they can create variety by changing the volume (whisper to loud), speed (slow to fast), tone (low to high), and style (smooth to staccato) of their voices.

Posture is an important thing to teach. In addition to the basic posture of standing

up straight with feet shoulder-width apart, weight balanced equally on each foot, back straight and head looking forward, arms to the side, posture can be used to tell a story. The posture can indicate age (old, young, etc.), social position (high class, low class, etc.), and basic character (noble, evil, good, etc.). Posture can also indicate the emotion of the character (happy, sad, excited, contemplative, etc.).

Gestures are very important, but they need to be bigger than normal, and should be used like a spice—use gestures only when necessary and when they accentuate the meaning that is being conveyed.

Movement, moving from one place to another on the stage, like gestures, should be used like a spice—used only when necessary and when it accentuates the meaning being conveyed. In addition, the movement should be sharp, with a clear beginning and end, and smooth so that it looks natural.

One essential element of a good OI performance is Pace. Often students like to add a pause of a second or more between speakers. These pauses, in addition to adding to the length of the piece, can also cause the piece to drag.

Using the stage is an important element of a performance. It does not matter if there is a real stage or just the front of a classroom, good stage use is important. First, the performance should use the whole stage. Here are some basic hints on how to do this. There are three dimensions to look at left/right, front/back, and up/down. Students tend to bunch together in the middle of the stage. Instead, they should be encouraged to use the whole stage, from left to right. In addition, students tend to move toward the front of the stage, closer to the audience. They should be encouraged to use the back of the stage, away from the audience, the front of the stage, and the parts of the stage in between. Finally, some often students all students stand up to do their performance. They should be encouraged to stand on stage, lie down on the stage, kneel on the stage, sit on the stage, sit on chairs, or stand on chairs. Finally, students should be encouraged to use a variety of positions all throughout the stage to create an interesting stage picture.

Students often all look out at the audience. One way to create focus is to have all performers face away from the audience and only the performers speaking turn toward the audience.

Often students think all students should speak the whole piece together in unison, or it should be performed as a series of solos. Students should be reminded that a variety of groupings is more interesting: solos, duets, small groups, half of the class, and the whole class. They should consider the staging of large popular groups like AKB48.

Of all the principles of OI, perhaps ensemble is the most difficult to teach, but the easiest for students to understand after they have successfully achieved good ensemble work. Perhaps the best way to describe ensemble is to liken it to what good choirs, marching bands, or dance troupes do. They need to start and stop together, move together sharply and smoothly. Again, encourage the students to study the ensemble work of AKB48.

5. Stories Students Tell

Now that the principles of OI have been explained, it is time for students to tell stories through OI. What kinds of stories do students choose to tell? The author's class has told stories like "The Nightmare Before Christmas" and "Little Red Riding Hood" (Carolyn Graham version). They have performed poetry and song lyrics like "This Girl is On Fire," "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing," "We Are the World," and "Do They Know It's Christmas Time at All?" They have also performed original pieces. It does not take a theatre person to teach OI. What is necessary is experience in watching stage performances, TV, movies, and music videos. The rest will come with more experience.

6. Conclusion

For the teacher, the value of the EPF is a more cohesive class, renewed enthusiasm and motivation for learning English, and the joy that comes from getting a chance to teach English in a non-standard way. For the students, the value of the EPF comes in the satisfaction of a job well done, closer ties with classmates, greater confidence in performing in front of a large group of students. For the school, the value of the department is the reputation gained through teaching English in a non-standard, exciting way.

Although the performance of OI has many educational benefits, the process of preparing for and reflecting afterwards has shown to provide the most benefit. The act of telling a story for others has proven irresistible for most students. Perhaps some do not see the value before their first experience, but what is important is that after the first English Performance Festival, all students get hooked on it, and vow to do better next time, and there are plenty of opportunities to do so as they have four opportunities to participate in the festival in their two years of junior college.

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