

Articles

## The Development and Content of Drama Classes at Setsunan University

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### *Abstract*

This article describes the introduction of Drama and Presentation classes in a new English curriculum at Setsunan University. The article discusses the rationale for introducing these types of classes, what part they played in the curriculum, and how they were organized. The issues covered include general considerations on how such classes can be conducted; problems that teachers may encounter in the classroom and how to overcome them; textbooks and other teaching materials; and classroom activities. These issues are discussed in detail. The activities include short dramas or dialogues, poetry reading, and simulated news broadcasts. In the conclusion we discuss the teacher's and students' reaction to the classes.

## ***Introduction***

Recently Presentation and Drama classes have become more common in English curricula in Japan. The Faculty of Foreign Studies at Setsunan University in Osaka started a totally new English curriculum in 2004. The focus of the new curriculum was on improving the students' communication skills. The new curriculum included Drama and Presentation classes for first and second-year students. Another feature of the new curriculum was an expansion of the number and type of courses taught in English by both native and non-native speaker English teachers. In this paper I will describe some of the experiences of introducing these types of classes, focusing on the Drama classes. The paper will describe the development of the Drama classes and point out how the skills developed in Drama classes are overlapping with, and complementary to, the skills needed for Presentation. Some of the procedures used in developing these classes and the activities used in the classes will be discussed.

## **Using Drama in the Classroom**

### ***General Considerations***

The presentation and drama classes are offered as elective classes for students who chose English as their main foreign language. Most students chose to take both classes. The classes were streamed and each class had about thirty students. The classes consisted of two semesters with a different teacher for each semester.

One aim of the Presentation and Drama classes is to raise the students' self-confidence in speaking aloud and showing them that even with limited language knowledge they can speak effectively if they develop their skills in communication.

The most obvious way to practice presentation or public speaking is to give a speech. Most students will have had some experience at this in their native language education and most probably in their EFL classes as well. However, there are many other activities that can give students practice in public speaking besides traditional speeches. This was one reason that the Drama classes were added to the curriculum. The title of the class was, "Drama," but the content of the class was really English through drama.

The classes had prewritten common course objectives, but each teacher could choose their own textbooks or material. One advantage of the system of switching teachers after the first semester was that it relieved some of the pressure on the teachers

to develop a whole year's worth of original teaching material. Activities or techniques that were successful could be repeated the following semester. At the end of each semester the teachers filled out a brief form telling what kind of material they had used in their classes. These forms will be circulated to the teachers who have 2nd year Drama and Presentation classes in the following year so they will have an idea of what kinds of material their students have used previously.

Of course, many teachers in the English classes have used plays, skits, or similar activities in the classroom. But they usually had little or no practical experience in drama and had never taught a class based entirely on drama. First, it was necessary to make clear to the teachers, and later some students, that the Drama classes were not the study of drama itself, but English through drama. It was also the first time that most of the teachers had taught courses based exclusively on Presentation or Drama. Some teachers were concerned about finding appropriate teaching material or textbooks.

### ***Problems and Solutions***

This section discusses some of the basic elements necessary for a successful drama class, some problems teachers may encounter and some suggested solutions, and finally some activities that have been successfully used in university classes. Many of the activities described here could be used in either Drama or Presentation classes to improve student's public speaking or presentation skills.

Two problems teachers may be worried about in Drama or Presentation classes are non-participation and the students' lack of confidence in their spoken-English ability. Non-participation is usually due to uncertainty and fear of disapproval. Keeping the focus on clear and simple activities helps most students overcome their uncertainty and gives them the confidence to join in fully. In her book, *Theater Games for the Classroom*, Spolin emphasizes the importance of a central focus or problem that all the students can concentrate on. Emphasizing the group nature of drama can help them overcome fear of disapproval.

Lack of confidence in spoken English, or perceived lack of ability is sometimes seen as a problem that may block creativity. However, if the class content and activities are structured carefully these problems can be overcome. All students should be able to participate if the focus is clear and appropriate for their level. The teacher and the students should have realistic goals, for example most students are not good at improvisation, particularly at the beginning of a course, and would find the experience overwhelming. Basic warm-up activities can also be used to build the students' confidence. The activities chosen depend very much on the dynamics in the classroom

and the goals the teacher and students have.

The non-judgmental nature of drama classes is also very important. The students should understand that there is no necessarily right or wrong way to do the material. There are just different ways to interpret it.

### ***Using Drama to Improve Presentation Skills***

Drama and Presentation classes might seem to concentrate on different kinds of skills but in many ways they can be complementary. The group activities or activities in drama classes can be used to improve presentation skills in individual speeches. Teachers who teach public speaking or presentation often mention problems such as a lack of eye contact, a tendency to speak in monotone, and speaking without pausing for punctuation or emphasis.

For students who are uncomfortable speaking individually before an audience, group activities, such as those in a drama class, are a way for them to become more relaxed about speaking or performing in front of an audience. When coaching students in the delivery of lines in a drama, teachers can address the problems mentioned above from another direction. Instead of teaching eye contact or pausing at the end of a sentence as an individual technique (which sometimes results in a mechanical response), these points can be worked into the context of a larger group lesson. In large classes, group activities may be a more efficient use of time—speeches by 35 students can be very time consuming and after a while they all begin to sound the same.

### ***Teaching Materials***

Material commonly used in the drama classes at Setsunan commonly includes play scripts from a variety of sources and movie scenes. Among the textbooks widely used in Setsunan Drama classes are, *Start Taxi* and *Pop Stars*. These two textbooks were written by an experience drama teacher especially for classroom use in Japan. The books consist of one play that is divided into short scenes that can each be studied in one lesson. The lines in the scenes are also short and contain appropriate language for the students so they can usually be memorized by students in one lesson. The books also include a variety of warm-up exercises, along with suggestions for how to use the exercises with different scenes and tips on staging the scenes.

Movie scenes also offer a very adaptable source of material. The scenes themselves can be easily be shortened or lengthened according to time constraints or the

number of students. Scenes with two or three characters are easier to stage. Limiting the number of characters in a scene makes the logistics of performing simpler and makes it easier for the audience to follow the action and dialogue. Another advantage to a movie scene is that the teacher can show the scene on video to the students. This gives the students an idea of the actions and verbal expression they can put into their performance. It can also save the teacher time in explaining plot and action. The movie lines tend to be short compared with the lines in many plays—even those written for specially ESL. The shorter lines allow students more opportunities to practice verbal expression. Working with shorter lines can be useful in addressing specific problems in students' delivery of speech such as monotone and lack of pauses.

### *Classroom Activities*

There are many other classroom activities besides simply reading the plays or movie scenes. Here are some other drama classroom activities that can enhance students' abilities to communicate and speak effectively.

#### Physical Activities:

When we have a conversation, or act, there are three essential elements we use to make the message clear: body, voice and mind. In drama classes the focus is usually placed on the first two parts, the body and voice. Our bodies provide the physical message that is realized through our actions, gestures, facial expressions and voice. Often students are absorbed in the words on the paper rather than how they are said and the way messages can be conveyed through body language and voice. To try and focus the students' energies on the physical aspect of a message some useful activities are:

1. The students mime situations and others guess what they are trying to say. This activity can be made as easy or as difficult as required by changing the situation.
2. Students work from a given dialogue and create their own gestures to go with it.
3. Students work with the gestures only and create the dialogue to go with it.
4. Watch videos and note how the gestures/action convey meaning e.g., Mr. Bean
5. Storyboards – from a dialogue students draw the action scene by scene.
6. Tableaux – students create 'freeze frames' based on a dialogue, and take photographs. This promotes a lot of discussion on what the central message of a dialogue or scene is.

### Vocal Activities:

Some activities to focus on the part our voice plays in conveying a message are:

1. Students learn the dialogue from the teacher through repetition. Here the teacher provides the model for how the dialogue is said.
2. Students try to give each other messages just saying 'mmm'.
3. Students are given a sentence such as 'It's raining', then they are given different situations and therefore different meanings for each sentence and they think about how the sentences are said, for example mother to child, farmer to wife or man in the desert.

Some examples of related, but slightly different, speaking activities that have been used in drama classrooms are a comic dialogue and poetry recitation.

The material for comic dialogue used in this activity was a highly edited version of a well known comic routine entitled, "Who's on First" by Abbot and Costello, a famous American comic team from the 1930s and 40s. The dialogue was edited to a suitable length for students, a little less than two pages. The topic of the routine is baseball, which the students are familiar with. The duo format can be explained by comparing it to Japan's popular *manzai* comic teams. A dialogue of this type enables the students to practice a wide variety of stress and intonation patterns as well as develop a feel for the timing of verbal exchanges and rhythm of language.

Another way to practice the expression in language is to read poetry aloud. Shorter poems that have a clear rhythm and rhyme scheme work best. Two good examples are *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, by Robert Frost and *Loveliest of Trees*, by A. E. Housman. Both have four-line stanzas and clear rhyme schemes. When using the poems in class the following method was found to work well. The first step is a brief explanation of poems' rhyme schemes and the stanza structure. Then the students arrange their seats to sit in a circle. This way they can read facing each other but it is less formal than standing at the front of the classroom. Then the students take turns reading aloud. In their first turn, they read just one stanza; next they read two stanzas, and finally the whole poem. This type of exercise can be used to illustrate types of verbal expression that may help students learn to avoid the monotone that many fall into when they are reading formal speeches. An example is the use of pauses for dramatic emphasis. Many students tend to read through punctuation marks, including periods, without even a slight pause. Studying how the lines scan can also show the students how they can find clues to pronunciation and accents in written English.

Another group activity is for students to present a news broadcast. This can be done in groups of three with students presenting news, weather and sports topics. The students can write their own imaginary stories or adapt current stories in the news. This exercise can show the students different kinds of language usage and expression than those found in the previous exercises which focus more on dramatic presentation. The students learn how to coordinate their stories and use transition phrases when shifting from one report to another.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has tried to show how Drama and Presentation classes can be an important part of an English curriculum. One aim of the activities is to help the students improve their ability to communicate in spoken English. Another is to provide students with learning experiences in which there is not necessarily one right answer. In classes where questions of grammar or spelling are the focus there is, usually, one correct answer. In a class focusing on presentation or drama, however, students may face situations where there are multiple ways to stress words or sentences, or different ways to present information. The students then have to learn the most suitable option for the situation.

It described some possible textbooks, classroom material, and classroom activities in some detail because when the Drama and Presentation classes were introduced at Setsunan there was some concern among teachers about how to handle them.

While there was some hesitation about taking on these types of classes for the first time, after the first semester most teachers felt the classes had gone much better than they expected. They also agreed that the classes were a refreshing change from the usual conversation classes that most of them had been teaching.

## **References**

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