

The Role of Student's Imagination in Amplifying the Ability to Memorize Foreign Language

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Abstract.

The influence of technology together with social media is developing rapidly in Japan and with an already low English fluency level the children's ability to learn English is depleting - the children cannot associate the learned language with everyday life. Past research has presented a lot of evidence stating that the involvement of Drama elements has the potential to let children develop a more extrovert language use ability and also create a real life context that they can relate to. This research aims to find ways how to make this method even more engaging for children by teaching children how to apply themselves more via preparation, greetings, rhythm and most importantly in this research: self-generated curriculum.

To test the hypothesis that expressions chosen by oneself in their native language and then taught in a foreign language are easier to memorize than when they are chosen by a third person, a previously taught role-play framework and a verbal testing was used. The results affirmed that ownership of curriculum directly affects the motivation and connects the pupil to well-imagined situations that allows memorizing language to become easier and with more sophisticated result language.

These findings suggest that the future of foreign language education can be facilitated very much by combining both teacher centered and student centered methods. An important point to keep in mind is that usual problems encountered in creative methodology can be tackled effectively by teaching children group mentality through greetings and pace controlling tools - the fusion of them is of paramount importance in the future.

Keywords: Drama, Education, Role-play, Greetings, Rhythm

1. Introduction

There have been many factors which change how humans learn and perform during their years of childhood like climate change and cultural evolution. One is the great increase of technology use with the beginning of the 21st century - the attention span has become very short due to the intensity the new portable devices like tablets, phones, games, computers and most importantly social media offer us. It is said that children who are exposed to so called excessive screen time have their attention span, language and cognitive development impaired (Carson & Janssen, 2012). Other studies shows that children aged 4-6 who are exposed to screen time

more often have lower emotional understanding ability (Skalická et al., 2019), expressive speech delay due to face to face interaction absence. (Livingstone & Franklin, 2018) In light of today's pandemic and the collapse of a routine study style and the periodic halt of real life education there has been a significant damage to the level of attention and motivation that children accumulate in their everyday education path. In Japanese classrooms, especially the ones specializing in English education, the lessons are being concentrated on entertainment elements like games and songs, which often are very appealing to children. Unfortunately they are not enough when it comes to development of practical English use, listening and comprehension. Somewhere between 2 and 8 percent of Japanese population consider themselves a fluent English speaker (Oricon, 2014). However, it is also important to mention that the differences in Western and Japanese communication and customs are very distinct - the latter have derived from an introvert cultural character, which definitely makes it difficult to relate to the extrovert language and customs.

The aforementioned special context has made the process specifically difficult due to natural lack of interest in the language in a country with little ethnic diversity. The expertise in English classroom shows that the problem arises in the way how the rhythm of the lesson is not consciously perceived, taught and learned by both the teacher and the pupils. This leads to moments where the attention span is spent due to inefficient sequence of actions and no more new information can be productively absorbed and used by the students. It is important to state the fact that not only the teacher to student command rhythm is to be considered, but also the use of cues manifested in the voice and movement of the participants within a lesson may bring benefits to the process. Rhythm and use of body, however, are just the preparatory factors for the taught material to be fully absorbed - the component that holds the two of these is the application of the used language to real life situations. Unfortunately, schools tend to focus only on text books and tests, and that does not allow the child to imagine the target language as his or her reality. In this paper we apply the combination of the aforementioned elements as preparatory measures for the pupils to become more focused, willing to participate in given activities and gain confidence. The main part of the study conducted focuses on situations where children learn expressions through self generated theatrical situations via the techniques of role-play and improvisation, which are performed in pairs using a basic layout of previously learned English conversation and grammar. The questions to be put forth about the described situations are the following: does the ability to be well organized, disciplined and being in a rhythmical setting contribute to a fruitful, creative process of learning a foreign language through Drama in which pupils have creatively full ownership? Does a pupil's decision on what kind of expression or vocabulary he or she will learn affect the ability to remember the learned material?

1.1 Literature Review

Drama in teaching foreign languages has been used and explored for a long time and there are great amounts of information on the merits and the different settings and test audiences that it has been used on.

1.1.1 Fluency Over Accuracy

An author named Stenfanie Giebert, PhD in her study has created a great insight of various methods summarizing the merits of using drama for teaching a foreign language to

university students. The author cites previous studies indicating the idea that process-oriented teaching style is arguably more liberating for the pupils as fluency is prioritized over accuracy - this approach exposes the student to a setting where there is less pressure to perform flawlessly (Culham, 2002). This is especially relevant to children who have a smaller intuitive understanding of the specific foreign language due to their native language having little similarity to the language being taught - for example, English language in Japan.

Giebert, however, accurately mentions the potential problem in the fact that the merits of the method are clear, yet not all the teachers would be ready using drama as their main teaching tool for their class due to lack of training and therefore a potential inability to perform examples situations in front of the students. The article contemplates a possibility of a specific training for teachers on how to get adapted to the method (Giebert, 2014).

1.1.2 Multi-dimensional Merits Within Drama

Another research very valuable for discussion is one by Nasser Alasmari and Amal Alshae'el published in the International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies of January 2020, in which two groups of 20 sixth grade female students participated. The control group was studying English in a conventional teacher centered way using a textbook and the experimental group was practicing English using conventional methods of Drama. The methods to assess the results achieved specifically was a test taken before and after the processes of learning English in an 8 week span. The research monitored the experimental group which learned English by using 3 sketches designed by the researchers from the textbooks of the students (Alasmari and Alshae'el, 2020). The results give clear evidence that the students who were in the experimental group had considerably high results in their tests after the 8 week span than the control group ($M= 10.1$ and 18.4 with the latter score favoring the experimental group $p=0.002$) (Alasmari and Alshae'el, 2020). The research paper did a great job describing and citing researchers on the techniques of Drama and their relations to merits and as importantly to demerits within them. The merits lie in specific techniques in the multi-dimensional base that Drama based tools such as role play and simulation provide to strengthen the development and stimulation of language learning (Koyluoglu, N., 2010). Miming is another such technique as it employs para-linguistic communication, which makes it easier for the learners to communicate and also makes the process more humorous and therefore enjoyable.

1.1.3 “Model, Action, Talk” Method

The humour present within gestures and movement in mentioned by Koyluoglu makes children more relaxed and interested - this also overlays with the characteristics present in a method developed by the founder of the IIEEC Teacher Training Center, Ritsuko Nakata, who happens also to be the author of the best-selling ESL book for children in Japan called “*Let's Go*”. The method is called the MAT method and it stands for Model, Action, Talk. The method is built on the connection between target language, gestures, pair-work practice of new vocabulary which eventually leads to the student's independent ability to use the target language together with question forms (Nakata, 2013).

In the context of a teacher who is an ESL (English as Second Language) teacher in Japan, most will have encountered the “*Let's Go*”, which is also derived from the MAT

method. Even though the book is a source of well constructed lessons with grammar, vocabulary and written and recorded dialogues, it is somewhat insufficient to let the children fantasize real life contexts. This means that this kind of method would greatly benefit from a reinforcement of the Drama techniques mentioned before. It is also important to state the idea of interacting a gesture together with target language is a valuable idea to adapt for Drama techniques like pantomime.

1.1.4 Challenges Encountered in Previous Research

The research of Alasmari and Alshae'el published in January 2020 in the *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, mentioned some very substantial points of challenge despite their success - one is that during the presentation of the Drama scenes that the children had made, their peers appeared to be noisy and difficult to control due to excitement and creative atmosphere, which may induce doubts for a potential user to use this method in situations of more difficult groups of students. Here are some direct quotes in order to keep the problem personally phrased by the researchers:

".. issue noted by the observer was disengagement and non-involvement in the learning process on the part of some learners."

"This again may be due primarily to the teacher's lack of classroom control and also to learners' perceptions of this kind of activity, especially in cases where it did not appeal to their own preferences and needs. It may also be attributable to some students taking a dominant role over most of the responsibilities, leaving no room for less dominant peers to get involved." (Alasmari and Alshae'el, 2020)

While keeping in mind these problems, other research discussing the role of greetings in a classroom talks about the benefits these greetings bring to a group of students. The benefits described directly interact with the challenges of discipline, respect and productivity that a more creative lesson plan can impose.

1.1.5 Potential of Greetings in Problem Solving

A study in 2007 by R Allan Allday and Kerri Pakurar published in the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* states that greetings performed by the students raise the mean baseline on-task productivity from 45% to 72% during the intervention phase. Another research conducted by University at Buffalo-SUNY published in October 2020 states that greetings which are performed not on a single occasion but a more lengthy period is a part of the so called Dialogic pedagogy - a reciprocal, collective and supportive set of practices that bring about their purpose and accumulation after a considerable amount of time. It is stated that individualized greetings lead to the benefits of having sense of community, socio-emotional development and a sense that one is always being heard. The involvement of a greeting is therefore essential in any lesson and especially in Drama based learning one as it would not

only fortify the benefits of the method but could also potentially help teachers bridge a conventional English lesson with a more creative one, letting the benefits of both fuse into results.

2. Methodology of the Experiment

While there has been an invaluable history of extensive research and convincing results related to Drama in language learning, there seems to exist a wide gap of differences between Drama and conventional foreign language teaching that hinder the opportunity to incorporate one style of teaching into the other. In the very different world of professional acting a certain level of discipline is required in order to achieve results in the creative sphere. Even though Drama in foreign language study is a very different field, it can benefit greatly from this work ethic philosophy. With this idea in mind, the research starts out as a preparatory description for groups to be trained with a specific agenda of greetings, rhythm and queues to make them organized enough to avoid chaotic situations amid the creative tasks.

With preparation keeping its' emphasis our research focuses on exploring the potency of the following hypothesis: children are able to memorize expressions in English more easily when they have chosen the expressions they want to learn independently and spontaneously. They do so by having been told the theme of the role play and by being asked to brainstorm an expression in their native language, memorize the translation of it done by the teacher and then perform it using role-play and pantomime techniques in front of their peers.

The hypothesis has convincingly confirmed to be true by the results of the experiment and therefore, we can conclude that the children who are performing in the same scene do remember better the expression that they had come up with than the expression brainstormed and used by the partner of their activity. This gives a basis to assume that in proper discipline and level of engagement the ownership of study material creation gives pupils a higher ability to memorize more complicated language than on a normal drill-translate-answer language agenda.

In order to conduct this research there is a detailed agenda advised on how to prepare a class for an experiment in which brainstorming, role-play and miming takes place in. This is to be done as a reference to previous researches struggling with noisy environment and behavioral chaos. The first two steps are preparatory whereas the third one is the main point of focus in this research. The steps are the following:

1) preparation by a technique of a specific greeting system involving speech and gestures (to create a sense of community and mutual assistance),

2) preparation by teaching a technique of physical and vocal queues used before the beginnings of creative activities (in order to keep the efficiency of necessary actions at maximum and the amount of unnecessary ones at lowest) and

3) a creative task of incorporating role-play and action suggesting grammar form by using an action suggesting based grammar dialogue, in which children play a crucial role at deciding the study material;

2.1 Greeting and Queue System as Preparation For Experiment

- As soon as the kids are inside the classroom the teacher gives a friendly command a fairly slow, but cheerful count down: “Make a circle please. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1”.
- When the circle is round, the teacher proceeds with greetings. If not yet, the pupils are told to try their best again with the task, therefore encouraging certain accuracy in all their coming activities: “This is not a circle yet, here are 5 more seconds for you try again. Do your best!”

These 2 commands and actions should be trained as a queue for smaller children to a point where eventually the corresponding actions from children are performed in a reflex like manner (up until grade 5), because it will greatly reduce the potential of children emerging into chaos and too much playfulness between activities. This system has been adapted from a private school in Western Japan, Kyushu. These commands, however, perhaps slightly counter-intuitively, yet very importantly should be vocalized with a certain tone of challenge and playfulness so that the children maintain a sense of joy and do not feel oppressed. The lesson in this particular research is organized as one in movement, without desks and chairs, however this method can also be adapted for situations to tidy desks, lesson materials on top of them and chairs. An example would be the following: “Get ready. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1”

- In the greetings section, the teacher does the following actions:

1) Enters the circle (or in case of a conventional desk-chair classroom setting: stands in front of the class)

2) Greets the children with a: “Good morning/afternoon/evening, everyone” in a bright and energetic voice tone, while using a greeting hand gesture.

3) Waits for the pupils to reply. In case this is one of the first 3 lessons, the teacher teaches the children how to greet the teacher by “Good morning/afternoon/evening, Mr./Mrs. ...” combined with a specific gesture (usually a hand gesture). Afterwards the teacher lets the children repeat after him or her as many times as necessary in order for the children to be able to say this greeting with confidence in unison.

4) After the beginning part of the greeting the teacher proceeds with the same previous 2 steps of teaching a command and response with a gesture and in order to teach the children a further conversation.

An example greeting sequence:

T: “Good morning, everyone!”

S: “Good morning, Mr. Zarins!”

T: “How are you today?”

S: “I’m fine, thank you! How are you?”

T: “I’m fine too, thanks! Let’s study English!”

S: “Yes, let’s study English Drama!”

A good addition for the greetings is asking the children how they are doing today and then letting them creatively respond with their own gestures, intonation and the appropriate expressions in the foreign language to let them feel a sense of being heard. Therefore the above sequence can be modified, in for example, every second lesson with

“How are you, [student’s name]?”

- Another point to make the classroom organized in terms of behavior and yet to give the sense of being able to be heard at any time is allowing to speak at any time of the lesson under the condition that a hand is being raised before doing so as seen in [Figure 1];
- Before every activity physical start signal (queue) must be performed by the class so that they can become aware with their bodies that the activity has started. This can be achieved by a particular clap combination performed before every activity - this considerably raises the awareness of children that it is time to focus and that something important is going to happen. This technique is adapted from professional theatre schooling in Latvia at the Latvian Academy of Culture derived from the Russian theatre doctrine. The clap is used to simulate a curtain on stage, when actors are practicing a scene or an element of performance off stage.



Figure 1: Raising a hand, a simple and effective way to avoid lesson disruption



Figure 2: The children are more attentive towards others if they do a special clap before an activity

2.1 The Sequence of Actions Conducted Withing the Experiment:

1) At the beginning of the experiment the kids are able to perform and clearly understand the meaning of the following dialogue:

A: "Hello!"

B: "Hello!"

A: "How are you today?"

B: "I'm fine thank you! How are you?"

A: "I'm fine too thanks! Let's [a verb of choice]"

B: "Yes, let's [A's chosen verb]"

2) **The group divides into pairs** (in one case into three people)

3) **The teacher writes down the theme of the lesson** on the board. The theme should be one that is easy to think associative thoughts for. For example: "I'm busy";

4) **The participants practice the dialogue with the added elements of the theme;**

5) **The participants brainstorm an expression** based on the given theme in their native language. After they are done, the **expression is asked by the students to be translated** and taught in English by the teacher to them and their pair. **The teacher adjusts the translation according to the level of the class/student.** They are normally given 7 - 10 minutes for this task;

6) **The participants perform their scene with elements of pantomime;**

7) **The participants present their used expressions and also translate them in front of the audience, they are assisted by the teacher in case they had forgotten the English use, pronunciation or meaning.**

[The information in bold indicates points of importance]

The themes used in the experiment were the following: "Challenge"; "I'm busy"; "It's scary"; "I'm tired"; "It's hard". The themes have a problem element within them in order to make thinking original expression ideas a more suggestive and creative process and these situations are important for the children to learn how to improve their well-being in a foreign language, which is one of the main essences in. In total there were 4 lessons spent on the role play practice together with the expressions chosen by the kids, every lesson the children were asked to remember the expressions from the previous week. The themes were influenced by the simple expressions that one would use when asked: "How are you?" as this question is very practical and often used. Another source of inspiration were seasonal actualities like Halloween (this in particular led to the theme "It's scary") and Christmas, which initially became a standalone

theme on its' own, but was canceled as the students were mostly coming up with words that they already knew in English. These themes were proposed in order to be see if a little bit more abstract themes would change the ability to brainstorm a conversation and an expression. The latter themes, even though interesting for the kids, seemed a little impractical as they take considerably more time to come up with a phrases that wouldn't be too challenging and also too easy.

The observed group consisted of 20 students - they are first graders in a Japanese private school. The experiment was conducted during their English class as part of their extra curricular activity. The children were tasked to memorize not only to remember their expressions, but also the ones of their friends as a way to develop a null hypothesis that the amounts of expressions generated by a third person (translated and adapted to English by the teacher) will be remembered at the same rate as the ones generated by themselves (translated and adapted to English by the teacher). The red color indicates the expressions made by other participants and the blue color indicates self-generated expressions. The symbol “+” stands for success in remembering (slight grammar mistakes were acceptable) , whereas “-” stands for failure to remember. **When the children were asking for their original idea to be translated and taught to them and their friend, their pair was always reminded that they need to do their best to memorize both - the expressions of their own and their friend's.** The experiment was measured by verbal test, voice recordings and hand written commentaries in case of mistakes.

3. Results

15/20 people remember their expressions, while 8/20 people remember the expressions thought by their pair. The expressions are the following. The results are divided in the same way the students where paired during the role play (for example, A and B; C and D; and so on)

A - Let's dig potatoes; + Here they are -

B - Let's dig potatoes; - Here they are -

C - Let's build a house; + Finished -

D - Let's build a house; - Finished +

E - Haunted house is scary;+ Let's open the door; +

F - Haunted house is scary;- Let's open the door+

G - Let's skateboard in the park;+ It's here -

H - Let's skateboard in the park; - It's here;+

I - Scary things;+ In the tent+

J - Scary things;- In the tent+

K - A scary book;+ Let's borrow+

L - A scary book;- Let's borrow;-

M - Let's do monkey bars;+ It's hard -

N - Let's do monkey bars-; It's hard+

O - Sakura is pretty;+ That's great -

P - Sakura is pretty;+ That's great -

Q - Work is busy+; Hospital is busy -

R - Work is busy-; Hospital is busy+

S - Let's study+, Let's cook+; Tomorrow I move-

T - Let's study+, Let's cook-; Tomorrow I move-

U - Let's study+, Let's cook+; Tomorrow I move-

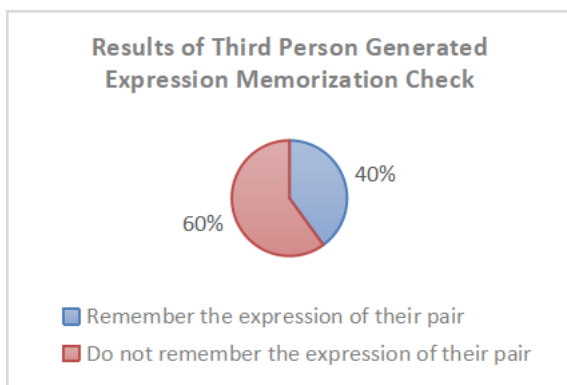


Figure 3: n=20; M=0.4; SD=0.599; t=3.933; p=0.0002;

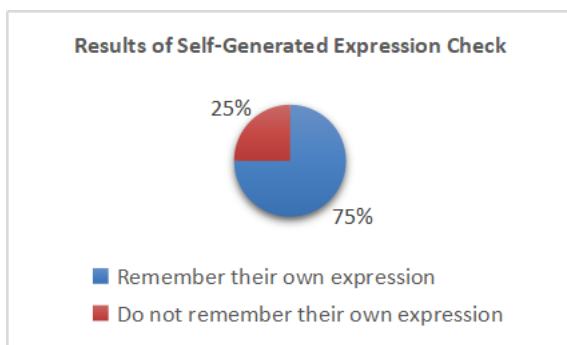


Figure 4: n=20; M=0.75; SD=0.44; t=3.933; p=0.0002;

The results are convincingly suggesting that the learning process has been fruitful for the children as only 2 students out of 20 could not remember any expressions by the time their knowledge was assessed. Even though both of the expressions within a pair were taught to both participants equally, it is evident that an expression that was self generated had a much larger positive impact on memorization process. The kids were given the freedom to decide what and if they used a gesture with the expression that they thought of, and as a result most of their role-plays were miming based, yet the expression itself did not have a direct gesture connected to it. With 75% remembering their gesture and only 40% (standard deviation=0.599 $p=0.0002$) remembering the gesture of thought by their pair, we can conclude that suggested hypothesis is true (standard deviation=0.44 $p=0.0002$). From the expressions that children came up with, a certain sense of sophistication and originality is present in their expressions. The children were asking for their expressions to be translated with a certain curiosity about how it will sound in English.

4. Discussion

The expressions are very unconventional in comparison to what the Japanese school system is teaching to children. Of course, they occasionally are taught vocabulary and expressions that they will be naturally interested in during school lessons, however, the level of interest and enthusiasm is unparalleled when it comes to original expressions. The behavior of students was mostly consistent with children being very interested in the created works of their friends. The ability of 75% of the participant to memorize the expressions of their own and to be able to use it in a grammatical framework learned in a conventional English lesson is a valuable point to maintain as the fusion of grammar and creativity is very necessary for the aged Japanese education system. The translation of expressions for each student individually is a great way to adapt an individual approach to each student and it could be amplified with assistance of another teacher within a lesson.

There are considerable limitations to this experiment, however, as there were only 20 participants in total. For a more convincing analysis it may require to generate the same experiment on at least 2 absolutely unrelated groups in order to have a control group that would not be involved with thinking their own expressions. Another important factor was that the children were occasionally making grammar mistakes (word order, plurals, assisting verbs), yet they were able to memorize the core element of the expression and were trying their best to be as fluent as possible indicating that just like as one of the authors had stated - it is more of a process oriented method (Culham, C. 2002). The translation of expressions was also quite a difficult task to manage, as keeping the same difficulty level was of great importance, yet it is still to be determined subjectively by the teacher. This can be effectively managed with another teacher in the process to keep efficiency and objectivity at high level, however it is somewhat of a disadvantage when it comes to measuring research data precisely.

Another important factor for the change in performance was the time at which the lesson was started - on one specific occasion the class started at 5:30 PM and at that time the ability to memorize and to remember expressions dropped drastically - first graders are simply too tired to be able to function properly at this time. Majority of the lessons were done at 3:00 PM and that definitely prove to be an optimal time in terms of the ability to concentrate. The experiment has brought several points of advantage which can be explored more deeply in further research and and practically adjusted with another teacher to amplify the level of efficacy.

5. Conclusion

A pupil's decision on what kind of expression or vocabulary he or she will learn is of high importance to strengthen the ability to memorize the learned foreign language material. The effects of 1st grade Japanese children learning self-suggested foreign language expressions by using theatrical situations in the techniques of role-play and improvisation are evident as the memorized expressions had a certain sophistication within them. It is important to remember that in the particular study process a basic layout of previously learned English conversation with grammar and a reviewed combination of preparatory measures were used for the pupils to become more focused and willing to participate in the given activities. More research, hopefully derived from this one, is necessary in order to understand the exact role of these preparation measures and to test the method on larger test group together with an unrelated control group. Still it seems that revised teaching methods consisting of both teacher and student centered methods are of great importance due to the fact that the level of fluency in English in Japan is extremely low and the ability to learn by once well-established methods is questioned by ever-evolving technology. The potential challenges for teachers related to language teaching through Drama are shyness and the inability to communicate ideas clearly to students. Even though it is puzzling and off-putting to deal with problems that are not directly related to a typical teaching agenda they can be avoided by using such teaching guide books as "Teaching Drama" by publishers like *Beat by Beat Press* and most importantly by keeping the creative tasks as simple and as manageable as possible. The other crucial factor for better results in class control is in teaching the classroom how to organize itself by greetings and queues as it generates a healthy sense of responsibility and community. The research has offered an insight to the potential of combining a teacher centered English class with a creative participant centered process in order to allow the children to envision a real life situation of the learned target language by not only being able to relate but also by being directly involved to the creation of the learning material. The future of effective language education potentially lies in the combination of proper discipline, level of engagement and the ownership in co-creating the target language as that enables the active use of imagination which effectively combats the lack of attention and the aging "one-size fits all" approach that is hindering the lingual progress of the future generations.

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