

Magic Works: Cooperative Learning Through Performing Plays

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Seo, Eun-Mi. 1998. **Magic Works: Cooperative Learning Through Performing Plays.** *Linguistics*, 6-1, 311-327. There are many methods to improve students' foreign language skills. One of the best methods is to use movie or play scripts. They reflect real life situations. Students can experience vivid expressions in foreign language in movie or play scripts. This paper is a case study of English major students in English conversation classes. To perform one short play, each student has to cooperate well with peers. By preparing for these plays, students realize the importance of cooperative work. It is a humanistic approach because each student has to care and share his ideas. with other students Magic works in foreign language learning when it is meaningful to students. (Howon University)

1. Introduction

As Shakespeare said in his play, *As You Like It*, life is a play and people are actors and actresses. Learning a foreign language is a part of our life in this global society. In a sense, learning a foreign language is like portraying someone else's character in another language. To portray someone else's character well, students strive to give some command of English which includes correct pronunciation, knowledge of English grammar and communicative competence. In learning foreign languages, students produce **never ending** stories until they are satisfied with their own language proficiency. In the learning process, students learn about other culture and **differences** between western and Korean.

The learners experience fulfillment in the learning process. It is a worthwhile process because learning foreign language helps our intellectual development.

There are lots of methods to improve students' foreign language skills. One of the best methods is to use movie or play scripts. They reflect real life situations. Students can experience vivid expressions in a foreign language in movie or play scripts. This paper is a kind of case study of English major students in English conversation class. To perform one short play, each student had to cooperate with peers. By preparing for this process, students realized the importance of cooperative work. It is one of the humanistic approaches because each student has to share ideas.

Drama has a positive effect on second language learning. The various activities allow students to explore their inner resources. They use their own experiences to build credible action. As a result, each student may be able to improve his or her ability to produce the target language, lower anxiety, acquire many of the nonverbal nuances of the languages, and improve the ability to work cooperatively in group situations (Richard-Amato, 1996). It is an excellent method to learn by.

2. Theoretical Background

In this research, the following theories are very important as theoretical backgrounds. Each theory supports the ideas of this paper. I am going to review one by one.

2.1. Humanistic education

The foreign language classroom has been described as too controlled and too parroting in Korea. Teachers, especially, are considered as drill sergeants. Teachers dominate the classroom all the time in the

traditional teaching methods. A more humanistic and affective methods are being created to promote students foreign language skills. With these methods, students are encouraged to have self-esteem rather than self-consciousness. They can also experience personal growth and self-fulfillment through this method. Self confidence and positive thinking help students to improve foreign language skill. According to Moskowitz (1978), humanistic education recognizes that it is legitimate to study oneself. The content relates to the feelings, experiences, memories, hopes, aspirations, values, needs and fantasies of students. It tries to integrate the subject matter and personal growth dimensions into the curriculum. Moskowitz also says that teachers can and do make a difference in the lives of their students. When teachers work with students closely through personal contact, teachers and students can gain valuable things. Students will be highly motivated if Korean teachers give more concern to them.

2.2. Cooperative (Collaborative) Learning

Cooperative learning is a very ideal environment for students learning foreign languages. We can not live alone in this society. There is one famous Korean proverb; "Two heads are better than one head." We learn how to cooperate to make harmony with other people as we grow older. Crisome & Salim (1997) mentioned that students in Malaysian postsecondary institutions benefit from collaborative learning activities. Kagan (1985, quoted by Prapphal, 1993) describes the cooperative learning system as consisting of team building, management techniques, and rewards based on a complex system of points. There are five basic types of cooperative learning.

1) Peer tutoring

Teammates teach other to carry out given tasks. Students will learn that two heads are better than one. Pair work is an additional kind of

peer tutoring. Students may feel comfortable to ask help from their peers rather than teachers.

2) Jigsaw

In a jigsaw activity, each member of a group is given a piece of information and must share their information with the others in the group to complete a task. Jigsaw reading is called a strip tease. It is a kind of puzzle in which pieces of text are cut up and scrambled. The objectives of group of students is to restore the pieces to their proper order to make sense of the text. Jigsaw reading is an interesting and highly interactive classroom activity. It can help to integrate the skills of communication and reading in a more holistic manner (Berkeley-Wykes, 1993). Through this task, students can develop discourse competence which is one of the communicative competencies. This type of competence concerns mastery of how to combine grammatical forms and meaning to achieve a unified spoken or written text in different genres. Some teachers often use this activity to help students' language proficiency. It is communicative activity in the sense that students enjoy real communication by interacting with their peers.

3) Cooperative projects

The members of a group work together to complete a group project. Performing plays is a good example of cooperative group work. According to Toffler (1980), instead of grading students purely on individual performance, a part of each student's grade could be made dependent on the performance of the class as a whole or some team within it. This would give early and overt support to the idea that each of us has responsibility for others. With a bit of encouragement, imaginative educators could come away with many other better ways to promote a sense of community.

Recent approaches to language learning and teaching stress the importance of cooperation among learners as a motivating factor. Such

approaches focus not only on interpersonal relationships, but also on the involvement and development of the individual. In project work, students are motivated because the project is theirs. They themselves decide what they will do and how they will do it. This activity is more student-centered rather than teacher-directed. Fried-Booth (1990) suggests that a full-scale project which involves three stages.

(a) Classroom planning

The students discuss the content and scope of their project and predict their specific language needs in collaboration with the teacher. Ideas are also discussed for projected interviews, visits, and for ways of gathering necessary material such as pamphlets, brochures and illustrations. It takes time to decide the suitable project topics. However, once students have plans, they can proceed the next steps.

Howon University students had to make precise plans to perform one short play. They discussed several times to brainstorm better ideas from their group mates.

(b) Carrying out the project

The students now move out of the classroom to perform whatever tasks they have planned, e. g. conducting interviews, making recordings, gathering printed and visual material. It is important to remember that at this stage they will be using all four skills—reading, writing, speaking and listening. In this process, students realize how important the cooperative work is. They can learn a lot by making several trials and errors.

Howon University students made various props and scripts to perform 15 minute play.

(c) Reviewing and monitoring product

This includes discussions and feedback sessions, both during and after the project. Teacher gives advice and comments. Participants

analyze their group work and monitor their performances.

In project work, the students become responsible for their own learning. They select and devise their project, with the teacher acting as co-ordinator and facilitator or consultant. Based on their analysis, students can improve project.

4) Cooperative individualized projects

Students work alone on a particular assignment or project, but evaluations of their individual progress contribute to a group grade. In this sense, each member is responsible for the group project.

Individual student may feel how important s/he is in the group work since the group project cannot be completed without each member's effort.

5) Cooperative interaction

Each student is graded individually although completion of the task requires a cooperative effort. Each student has different ability in performing work and the grade should be given depending on individual performance.

Prapphal (1993) concludes cooperative learning seems to be a promising humanistic approach which encourages student participation in English class. It helps promote positive attitudes towards English and peer teaching, as well as teaching students to work together and developing their cognitive abilities. According to Moskowitz (1978), cooperative learning helps develop a feeling of cohesiveness and caring that far exceeds what is already there and helps foster a climate of caring and sharing. When students feel comfortable working with their peers, they have interest in learning English. Teachers do not need force them to study.

According to Nunan (1992), collaborative learning entails students working together to achieve common learning goals. It contrasts with competitive learning. Kohonen (1992) suggests that collaborative

(cooperative) learning or experiential learning can be based on the following arguments:

- (a) It facilitates personal growth.
- (b) It helps learners adapt to social change.
- (c) It takes account of differences in learning ability.
- (d) It responds to learner needs and practical pedagogical considerations.

Kononen compares the traditional and experiential (collaborative) models of education. We can see clearly the differences between traditional and experiential education in the following table. For example, learning is transmission of knowledge in the traditional model. On the other hand, learning is transformation of knowledge in the experiential model. In the traditional model, learners are relatively passive recipient of information. However, students are more active in learning in the experiential model. Teachers are considered as facilitator rather than a director. The conspicuous difference between traditional model and experiential model is that product oriented and process oriented. In the experiential model, process is more important than product. Teachers can observe how students improve language while they are preparing for the project.

In my own research, I could notice how my students were progressing while they were preparing for the performance. Even the students who had limited English proficiency showed progress in English.

Table 1. Traditional and Experiential Models of Education

Dimension	Traditional model: behaviorism	Experiential model: constructivism
1. View of learning	Transmission of knowledge	Transformation of knowledge
2. Power relation	Emphasis on teacher's authority	Teacher as a learner among learners
3. Teacher's role	Providing mainly frontal instruction: professionalism as individual autonomy	Facilitating learning (largely in small groups): collaborative professionalism
4. Learner's role	Relatively passive recipient of information: mainly individual work	Active presentation, largely in cooperative small groups
5. View of knowledge	Presented as certain: application, problem-solving	Construction of personal knowledge: identification of problems
6. View of curriculum	Static: hierarchical grading of subject matter, predefined contents	Dynamic: looser organization of subject matter, including open parts and integration
7. Learning experience	Knowledge of facts, concepts and skills: focus on content and product	Emphasis on process: learning skills, self-inquiry, social and communication skills
8. Control of process	Mainly teacher-structured learning	Emphasis on learner: self-directed learning
9. Motivation	Mainly extrinsic	Mainly intrinsic
10. Evaluation	Product-oriented: achievement testing: criterion-referencing (& norm-referencing)	Process-oriented: reflection on process, self-assessment: criterion-referencing

2.3. Meaningful Learning

Ausubal mentioned 'meaningful learning' for the first time. Meaningful learning is opposed to rote learning. In rote learning, information is isolated piece by piece and students have little chance of creating long term retention. Brown (1994) summarizes that meaningful learning will lead toward better long-term retention than rote learning. Brown suggests some classroom implication of the principles of meaningful learning.

1) Capitalize on the power of meaningful learning by appealing to students' interests, academic goals, and career goals.

2) Whenever a new topic or concept is introduced, attempt to anchor it in students' existing knowledge and background so that it gets associated with something they already know.

3) Avoid the pitfalls of rote learning:

- (a) too much grammar explanation
- (b) too many abstract principles and theories
- (c) too much drilling and/or memorization
- (d) activities whose purposes are not clear
- (e) activities that do not contribute to accomplish the goals of the lesson or unit or course
- (f) techniques that are so mechanical or tricky that students gets centered on mechanics instead of the language or meaning

2.4. Background Knowledge: Schema Theory

The main theory underlying this study is the schema theory. It accounts for reading comprehension in L1 and L2 but which becomes even more relevant where reading in L2 is considered. This theory accounts for why students of English as a foreign language experience considerable difficulty in comprehending English texts when reading them for the first time. It is because not only do these texts usually

contain unfamiliar vocabulary, they may also contain unfamiliar concepts and cultural allusions that make comprehension difficult (Carrell, 1984). If the reader is faced with a highly unfamiliar content, particularly materials with many culturally loaded concepts, s/he will have difficulty in understanding the meaning because s/he lacks the appropriate background. The ability to grasp the logical organization of a text is firmly rooted in one's prior knowledge of the world.

Schema may be viewed as the organization of a subject's past experiences that directly influence current perception. This includes pre-existing knowledge structures, stored hierarchically in the brain. It can also be defined as the cognitive constructions that allow for the organization of information in long-term memory which provides a basis for prediction (Widdowson, 1985).

The concept of schema underscores that the more we know before we read, the more we learn when we read (Durkins, 1981). Reading is now viewed not merely as an ability to decode words but as the ability to extract meaning, both explicit and implicit from the written text (Adams & Collins, 1985).

Human language processors, including writers and readers are claimed to possess two types of schema: content schema and formal schema. Content schema is the background knowledge about the content area of a text, e. g., a text about washing clothes, celebrating New Year's Eve in Hawaii, building a canoe, the economy of Mexico, the history of Canada, problems of nuclear breeder reactors (Carrell, 1983). Content schema includes knowledge in the content area or area of specialization in the text and cultural background knowledge or social context. Reading materials differ in the content area knowledge and cultural background knowledge which they require the reader. The other type of schema is background knowledge about the formal, theoretical organizational structures of different kinds of texts.

3. Experiment

3.1. Subject

The subjects were the sophomore English majors, at Howon University, Kunsan, Korea. In an English Conversation class of the fall semester of 1996, one of the course requirements was to perform plays. The students' English proficiency was relatively low even though they were English majors. Their level could be described as low intermediate. All class members participated. They were divided into six groups. All of them did not have any experience in performing plays. In each group, there were four or six members. I allowed students to choose their own group members to work together. It is more effective when students work with close friends.

3.2. Process

Six fairy tales were chosen. Students already knew the stories because they had read them in Korean when they were children. The six fairy tales were chosen in *Stories for Bedtime* with beautiful illustrations.

The titles and the characters are shown in the following table.

Drama or play is an integral part of storytelling and role playing. It is an activity with roles, plots, and dialogues that are written down in play form to be memorized and acted out on the stage or read aloud (Richard-Arnato, 1996).

I distributed the story itself and each group had to rewrite the script. The content was well known and it was written in English for children. In the beginning, the students did not know how to make script and they consulted me several times. I encouraged them to try out.

Table 2. The Titles and the Characters used in the Experiment

Title	Characters
Sleeping Beauty	princess, prince, witch
Snow White	Snow white, queen, magic mirror, dwarfs
Thumbelina	Thumbelina, mother, father, witch, toad, field mouse
Cinderella	Cinderella, stepsister, stepmother, godmother, prince
Beauty and Beast	Bell, beast, father, Gaston, witch
Goldilocks and Three Bears	Goldilocks, tiny little bear, middle sized bear, great big bear

At first, students had to submit the script of the stories and I proofread them. It was cooperative work. Their expressions were not grammatically correct but understandable. I gave them one month to practice without guiding them. The first performance was done in the classroom. Most of them were very nervous because they had never experienced performing. They did not do well. Several problems arose. The first problem was students' incorrect pronunciation. I corrected some of these problems. Even though I emphasized in other classes, students did not realize its importance. Students should realize the importance of clear pronunciation since their major is English. Performing plays was a great experience to them. They followed my instructions very well. The other problem was that they expressed uneasiness by touching their hair and clearing their throats. I emphasized quitting these nervous reactions. After more than one week of preparation, in the second performance, the students invited some faculty members and other students to watch. This time performance was held in the school auditorium to make it a more formal performance. Each group's performance took approximately 15 minutes.

3.3. Video taping

Each performance was video taped. Students were very conscious themselves of their performance when they were video taped. However, they seemed to enjoy videotaping like children. It was done to reflect students' performance. Students were able to monitor their performance by watching videos. Video taping was an excellent device to motivate students.

3.4. Analysis of the performance by students

After the performance, everybody watched the video tapes and judged the first and second time performance. Of course, the second performance was much better. The students were asked to write the following questions in reviewing their performances. It was a reflection period of the students.

1) Did you enjoy performing your play?

All of them enjoyed performing the plays. One student said that she felt she was going back to kindergarten times while she was practicing with her peers. It was really meaningful learning experience for all of the students. As long as they have fun in language learning, it is very meaningful for students. Ausubel's theory on meaningful learning was proved in this activity.

2) What were the interesting experiences while you were preparing for the play?

Team work was the most fulfilling experience for them. Students found this out when they worked together with their classmates. This activity proved how important project work and cooperative learning is. They spent a lot of time preparing for the project outside classes. Their effort and energy were not in vain.

3) Analysis of your role

Each student analyzed his/her roles. Some of them were not satisfied with their roles. The primary reason was that they did not have enough time to practice their roles.

4) What did you learn while you were performing the play?

Cooperative learning was the best lesson of this activity. Students learned that when they worked together, they could get better results.

5) Which group is the best one? Why?

Snow White was the best one. Everyone agreed on that. They had excellent props and their play was wonderful. They even prepared suitable music to make their play more interesting. Students made several mistakes that made the audiences laugh.

6) Who was the best actress? Why?

Everybody agreed that Eun-Young was the best actresses as evil queen and witch role. She expressed her roles well and portrayed well what she wanted to express. Even though she had several roles because of the limited numbers of players, her effort was commendable. She had several roles in *Snow White* such as the Queen, Magic Mirror and the Witch. In each role, she tried to portray each character to her utmost ability.

7) Who is the best actor? Why?

Jae-Kwang was the beast in the *Beauty and the Beast*. He had an excellent voice and clear pronunciation. The mask and costume he wore were very effective to portray "Beast".

8) Write your own reaction to the six plays.

Students were able to write their own reactions since they watched the plays through the videotapes again. They were able to compare the

weak and strong points of each group. Watching videotapes was an excellent tool to review students' performance. Some students wanted to keep videotape as a precious memory.

9) What are your recommendations to perform better plays in the future?

Students did not have enough time to prepare for their performance. They also expressed the lacks of members available to each group. Each student had to act out several characters with their final product.

10) Compare your first performance to the second performance.

Most students seemed to be most satisfied with their second performance rather than the first performance even though they did not feel enough satisfaction. This shows that more practice and experience can contribute to effective foreign language learning. Practice makes perfect.

11) What are the weaknesses and strengths of your group?

Students were able to monitor their performance through watching the videotapes. They tried to find out their weaknesses and strengths by watching each other's play. Most of them said that they could see more weaknesses than strengths. They mentioned that they could make better plays next time since they found out their weaknesses. This performance challenged them a lot in several ways. It was very valuable experience for all the students.

Students felt confidence because they used English as a medium of communication in their group project.

4. Conclusion

Magic works in language learning when it is meaningful to students. Learning a foreign language is a painstaking process for every student.

However, students can also enjoy cooperative activities while they are studying foreign language. Students learn better in student-oriented classes rather than teacher-directed classes. It is important for students to have confidence even though their language proficiency is not good enough. The biggest problem of students is the lack of confidence. If teachers try to create more comfortable and learnable environment, students may have good experiences in learning foreign languages. When we see the possibilities of improving students' language proficiency, we will have bright future. Let's show the bright side of learning a foreign language to students who are suffering from limited language proficiency.

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