Performative Subjectivity in an English Discussion Course
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the implementation of a performative classroom activity (Audition) in an English Discussion Class (EDC) course at Rikkyo University in Japan. The activity draws on principles related to subjectivity, language play, and emotional attachment to the target language. The theoretical approach is informed by poststructuralist notions of performativity. As part of a target language presentation, students were encouraged to perform a dramatic roleplay of textbook dialogue in a different character as if they were attending an Audition. Reactions to the activity were positive and suggest that longer-term studies should be conducted. The activity was able to highlight that performativity is an important aspect of education in the twenty-first century.

INTRODUCTION

For the last decade, the English Discussion Class (EDC), a compulsory and interdisciplinary first-year course at Rikkyo University in Japan, has pursued its aim to "develop students who have the ability to discuss contemporary topics with peers using English" (Hurling, 2012, p. 1-2). This aim has been pursued though a unified curriculum followed by all teachers. Classes are currently 100 minutes long and are held weekly for 14 weeks in both the spring and fall semesters. Students are divided into four levels based on TOEIC listening and reading scores, with seven to nine members in each class. Every week, students are assigned homework reading based on the upcoming topic (Fearn-Wannan, Kita, Sturges, & Young, 2019). Classes begin with a quiz to test reading comprehension. Next, students participate in an adapted (3-2-1) version of Maurice's (1983) 4-3-2 fluency activity that is also connected to the topic. In regular lessons, Fluency is followed by the Presentation stage, where new target language is introduced. This is followed by the Practice stage and two extended discussions (D1 and D2). D1 is 12 minutes, and D2 is 16 minutes. Before D1 and D2, students have further target-language practice and prepare content through pair work with a student who will join a different discussion group. Discussion groups consist of between three to five students. Teachers monitor each discussion with minimal interruption in D1 and none in D2. At the end of each discussion, teachers provide feedback related to interesting content and appropriate use of target language. Assessment is based on attendance, quiz scores, target language use, and participation.

Ellis (2014) recommends that one of the most important principles all teachers should take into account is "the subjective aspect to learning a new language," (p. 42). He explains that this principle can enable students to "engage in language play and to form an emotional identification with the target language" (Ellis, 2014, p. 42). He goes on to recommend the introduction of activities that involve creative writing and literary appreciation (Ellis, 2014). While the EDC's unified curriculum makes it difficult to introduce such activities, it is possible to foster language play and inspire an emotional connection with the target language by drawing more explicit attention to the performative nature of discussions. This paper presents the introduction of such a classroom activity (Audition). The paper progresses in four parts. Firstly, theoretical considerations and advantages and disadvantages of the approach are discussed. This is followed by a brief explanation and then a detailed description of the activity. Next, possible variations of the activity are outlined. Finally, the conclusion offers reflections on how students responded to the activity, outlines some possible limitations, adds possible ways of addressing these, and explores how to more systematically assess the activity's effectiveness in the future.

DISCUSSION

"The twenty-first century is the century of the performative"—by this, Colebrook (2018, p. xi) means that nowadays social actions and speech acts are as much performative as they are functional. In this section, theoretical considerations and approaches for bringing EDC classes in line with the twenty-first century pedagogical concept of the performative are discussed.

In relation to subjectivity, a starting point for moving English language teaching into the twenty-first century is Judith Butler's theories of performativity (1988, 1990, 2004). Butler's groundbreaking work on gender, sex, and sexuality has been instrumental in dismantling normative binary assumptions across the humanities and social sciences but has had less of an impact on English language teaching (Lujić, 2018). Butler's theories include a combination of poststructuralist (Derrida, 1977; Foucault, 1976) and speech-act theory (Austen, 1962; Searle, 1969), that reads "reality" and therefore subjectivity as largely constructed though repetition of conventions and ideologies. Butler (1988) sees the social agent "as an *object* rather than the subject of constitutive acts" (p. 519). This constructivist perspective applies to both L1 and L2 contexts. While students may perform different roles in different language contexts and situations, L1 and L2 subjectivities are both social constructions without an original. This is an important refocusing of theoretical considerations because there is a tendency in English language teaching to posit a binary between L1 subjectivity as the real (Lacan, 1981) and L2 subjectivity as a copy (Baudrillard, 1994). However, both subjectivities are "constituted through a regulated process of repetitions, and thus agency is located within the possibility of variation on that repetition" (McIlvenny, 2002, p. 116). Because most students have probably perfected their L1 subjectivities to a greater extent than their L2 subjectivities, the EDC course potentially offers a unique opportunity in which to experiment with novel L2 perspectives through performative teaching.

Fearn-Wannan (2019) is correct to point out that the EDC course "does not typically encourage a large amount of personalisation, and has instead been intentionally designed that way in order to align with the course aims and assist students in achieving those aims" (p. 105). However, while such a unified curriculum offers limited flexibility, the possibility of variation in repetition in the performative sense is itself a subversive kind of play. Activities that encourage this subversive kind of play can help facilitate emotional engagement with the target language because they are more closely aligned with the lived experience of contemporary society. In addition, forms of play can help develop holistic communicative competence in the discussion context: the EDC curriculum effectively introduces, practices, and assesses the attainment of discrete functional skills; however, fewer opportunities are made available for explicitly developing concepts of the performative. Moreover, as alluded to earlier, functional skills are no longer entirely relevant markers of competence, and "one might go further and refer to these actions as *performance* precisely because rather than being governed by function, life is overwhelmingly a milieu of display, play, and simulation" (Grosz, 2008, as cited in Colebrook, 2018, p. xi). Furthermore, activities that highlight the playful and performative aspects of language learning can increase emotional identification by subverting self-conscious transfer between L1 and L2 subjectivities because "the field of *performing* collapses the subject/object paradigm required from representational and hermeneutic-based theoretical underpinnings" (Bryon, 2017, p.17).

Having outlined some theoretical underpinnings, the advantages and disadvantages of a performative approach to new language teaching are now considered. As with any approach, there are benefits and drawbacks of promoting performance in L2 classrooms. Belliveau and Kim's (2013) literature review concluded that "more systematic, long-term research studies are needed to deepen our understanding of the impact of using drama in L2 classrooms on a range of aspects of teaching and learning" (p. 7). Kovacs (2014) has since presented some of the benefits as

enabling students to "integrate the newly acquired knowledge through actively seeking new and creative solutions, addressing different problems, exploring alternatives" (p. 391). More recent studies in L1 higher-education settings have shown that performative teaching can help develop a deeper understanding and longer-term retention, increased creativity and better learning outcomes, more emotional attachment to studies, and a decreased dropout rate (Jogschies, Schewe, & Stöver-Blahak, 2018). Conversely, studies such as those undertaken by Hart (2019) have shown that the EDC course can prove challenging for students who identify with or perform through subjectivities that could be categorized as introverted. Consequently, it would be reasonable to be concerned about "introverts' discomfort with performance, and student anxieties about potential language breakdowns or errors and loss of face" (Weber, 2019, p. 138). Shiozawa and Donnery (2017), however, conclude that performing drama in an L2 context is potentially effective for overcoming shyness and promoting leadership because it allows students to tread playfully on either side of those subjectivity gaps. If presented sensitively and in good humor, it can empower students to experiment between different levels of L1 and L2 subjectivity in English. As Weber (2019) concludes, "participants may move in and out of a particular footing, play with it, and perhaps even use one level of reality to comment on or critique the other" (p. 140).

In describing the Audition activity below, this paper makes no claims to address all of the potential issues surrounding a performative approach to L2 teaching in the current context of the EDC course at Rikkyo University. Such an ambition would be outside the scope of this paper's main aim. It does, however, seek to contribute to the discourse surrounding the push to offer students a more creative and performative twentieth-first century learning experience.

PROCEDURE

This Audition performance activity was successfully introduced to several classes during the Presentation stage of EDC Lesson 7 of the Fall semester 2019. The 10-minute Presentation stage is an important part of regular EDC lessons because it is the first time that students are exposed to new target language. Common approaches include Test-Teach-Test, Deep End, and Guided Discovery. After outlining the materials and preparation for an Audition performance activity, this section offers a brief explanation of why, followed by a detailed description of how, an Audition performance activity could be utilized in the Presentation stage of Lesson 7 of the EDC course.

Other than the EDC textbook, no materials are needed. The only particular preparation required outside of regular planning is familiarization with the lesson's Model Dialogue and formulation of several follow-up questions to ask the students once the Presentation has finished. All Model Dialogues in the textbook feature four characters using Discussion Skills phrases when discussing the first question from the Practice section on the opposite page. Previous Discussion Skills are also included in the dialogue to show students how to possibly combine them with any new Discussion Skill. The Model Dialogue also contains features that encourage equal participation and personalization. Each character takes approximately equal speaking turns in the dialogue, and they occasionally refer to each other by name. Previous studies (Curran, 2019) have highlighted a general tendency for students to take longer speaking turns than necessary. Focusing more explicitly on the turn taking exemplified in the textbook should raise students' awareness of the collaborative aspects of having a discussion. Finally, short, straightforward follow-up questions at the end of the Presentation should confirm students' awareness of how and why the Discussion Skill is used as defined in the textbook's "Remember!" section.

Lesson 7 was chosen as an Audition pilot because it is the middle of the 14-week EDC course, the topic and skill suit the context, and the activity relates to the following week's topic. Firstly, introducing this activity in Lesson 7, halfway through the course, is intended to ensure students are relatively comfortable with each other and solidly aware of the course objectives and

assessment requirements. Students are therefore hopefully more willing to experiment and take risks. In addition, having an Audition is an appropriate context in which to present the topic and skill because it is directly related to both. The topic of Lesson 7 is media: the influence of famous people and the effects of media. The Discussion Skill is Sources of Information. The topic relates to the Discussion Skill because nowadays, for better or worse, media and influential people are increasingly relied upon as sources of information. Questioning or holding these sources to account is an important skill to use in any discussion. Furthermore, holding an Audition during Lesson 7 allows students to "be" a different person like a celebrity. The activity also introduces concepts that can be explored in the coming weeks. The activity's performative aspects feed directly into the next lesson's topic: personal identity and gender roles in Japan.

Before students open their textbooks or see the Model Dialogue, the teacher gives a new name to each student based on the characters in the textbook. In order of speaking, the characters in Lesson 7's Model Dialogue are Jun, Eri, Ryo, and Aki. Students will be familiar with these names because they appear throughout the textbook. Although Model Dialogues are mostly gender neutral—characters rarely index gender through talk in action—traditionally in Japan, Jun and Ryo are masculine names, while Eri and Aki are feminine. The students will be aware of the gender marking but may have widely different conceptions of how much "the accomplishment of male or female gender is most often bound up with heteronormativity" (McIlvenny, 2002, p. 127). So as to playfully subvert expectations and focus on performativity, the teacher could attribute a differently gendered name than the students' identified one. The students will probably wonder why they have been given these names anyway: *Has the teacher forgotten my name? Forgotten who I am?* It is unnecessary to explain why students have been given new names as it will become apparent when they see the dialogue and realize they are about to perform. In classes with an uneven gender distribution, or if it is felt that switching may cause embarrassment, students should still be encouraged to perform in character, using a different voice than their own for example, even if it is the same gender with which they identify in "real" life. In either sense, performing in character highlights the normative marking of identity and subjectivity, and it encourages students to develop an emotional attachment through playful use of the target language.

Students practice the reading in groups without knowing they are going to perform in front of the whole class. If there is an uneven number of students, an active member should be given two roles. While students practice in separate groups, the teacher praises those who perform in character and encourages others to do the same. The teacher also sets up the 'stage' by arranging four chairs in a straight line or semicircle in front of the whiteboard and facing the class. Once the students have finished practicing their performance, the first group is selected for the Audition. The teacher calls one student from each group by their character name and they do rock, paper, scissors. The winning student's team is then guided to the stage. No explanation should be necessary. Pointing at the empty chairs should be sufficient. In order to further establish the context, however, the teacher should play the role of director, marking this semiotically through miming a movie camera and a cutting board. An alternative way to choose the first group is to select the one that performed the reading with demonstratively more confidence and enthusiasm. If there are fewer than four students in a group, the student with an extra role should be encouraged to change chair when performing as a different character. Although students are not expected to have memorized their lines in this short time, and they can bring their textbooks to the Audition, higher level groups could be encouraged to perform without a script. At this point, the second group may think they are not going to perform. There is no need to explain. They should be encouraged to act as audience members and to watch and evaluate the performance.

The director gets the Audition underway by saying "take one" and miming the use of a cutting board and camera. The groups are not expected to deliver award-winning performances. It

is not an acting lesson. Hesitant delivery at the start is expected and can highlight performativity. Moreover, during the first character's (Jun) speaking turn, the director should halt the performance by yelling and miming "cut" and acting disappointed. This should further lighten the mood and relax the students into performing. After their performance, the first group is congratulated. As the first group exits the stage, the director mimes a phone call and says they will be contacted if they have been successful. Finally, the audience give their assessment and are asked if they can do any better. The activity is repeated until each group has performed. At the end of the Presentation, the teacher asks follow-up questions to confirm students' awareness of how and why the Discussion Skill is used as defined in the textbook's "Remember!" section.

VARIATIONS

Several variations of the Audition activity are possible. As mentioned above, one way the activity can be adapted for higher-ability classes is to encourage memorization or improvisation. The Model Dialogue can also be adapted or used as an initial gap-fill for the students to generate their own relevant content and examples while maintaining the characters and target language. Student-to-student interaction can be encouraged if students are presented with a cut-up of their dialogue and then work collaboratively to arrange it into what they agree is a suitable script. They can then perform the Audition with only their lines. One benefit of this variation is that it encourages students to listen actively to others, and therefore gain a deeper understanding of turn taking units, and how the target language functions, because they cannot see the entire dialogue. Adventurous teachers may also bring appropriate realia as props and costumes for themselves and students. Finally, the different roles through which the students perform can be extended into other stages of the lesson. It is entirely possible that students could perform a whole discussion in character.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented the theoretical background, possible advantages and disadvantages, and the how and why of introducing an Audition activity in Lesson 7 of the current EDC course at Rikkyo University in Japan. Variations have also been considered. On reflection, students reacted positively to the activity. It animated the general atmosphere of classes and added a greater awareness of turn taking and risk taking in full-length discussions. Students seemed more attuned to creative and performative aspects of communication. Some students who were initially reluctant to perform in character eventually followed others to do so. As mentioned above, one limitation of the activity may be that students would feel uncomfortable or self-conscious performing as a different character. Conversely, overconfident students could perform inappropriately or in a disruptive manner. These limitations would best be addressed by teachers being sensitive to class dynamics. Having said that, the activity was only introduced to classes where a more positive reaction was expected, and therefore none of the possible limitations mentioned were actualized. However, the positive effects were also only assessed through informal observation. On final reflection, this short study achieved its aim of introducing a classroom activity that echoed Ellis's (2014) principle of considering subjectivity, language play, and emotional attachment to the target language. In future, it would be beneficial to conduct a longer-term study reinforced with more formal methods of data collection, such as those involving audio-visual technology, with student input and reflection, alongside cross-referential control-group analysis. The encouraging initial response from students confirms performativity in classrooms is an essential approach to teaching English language across disciplinary boundaries (Colebrook, 2018) in the twenty-first century.

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