Students’ Perceptions of Collaborative Playwriting Projects Undertaken at a High School in Japan

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Abstract
This paper explores the activity of collaborative playwriting for theatre performance as a mode of language learning within a task-based framework. It describes a quasi-experimental study in which a pair of similar but distinct playwriting theatre tasks was implemented in a first-year English oral communication course at a senior high school in Japan. This paper briefly discusses the background, rationale and design of the playwriting tasks. It then reviews relevant data obtained from post-task student feedback questionnaires. Despite the evident lack of theatrical experience amongst the student participants, their feedback was markedly positive. In addition, a number of students reported improvements in various areas of their language abilities. They also recognised the opportunities for learning that both the devising process and the performance outcomes afforded them.

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Introduction - Theatre in Additional Language Education

While the idea of using theatre in either additional language or foreign language education (collectively referred to as “second language” or “L2” in this paper) is certainly not a new idea, there has been a considerable increase in attention from L2 teachers and researchers in recent decades towards various forms of imaginative role-play as viable L2 learning activities (Belliveau & Kim, 2013; Stinson & Winston, 2011; Mages 2008). In some cases, this activity is even conceptualised as a legitimate, alternative pedagogical approach in its own right, such as in the case of “educational drama” (Wagner, 1998) or “process drama” (Kao & O’Neill, 1998; Piazzoli, 2010 & 2011). For the purposes of this paper, I will be discussing theatre using the term “theatre” to indicate the processes and practices at the heart of this study. I acknowledge that other studies use the term theatre interchangeably with drama. Much of my approach draws from my previous undergraduate background in theatre and the subsequent years that I worked in regional and community theatre in the United States. Therefore, I choose to use the term theatre throughout this paper.

To begin, we can first consider a holistic view. Smith (1984) imagines the entire process of making theatre as a palpable means to learning another language. In his approach, he considers all areas of theatre production, including both design and box office. With such a production, he posits the following benefits:

- fosters greater engagement and motivation;
- provides exposure to diverse L2 input, facilitating discourse awareness;
- assists self-awareness of habits and inhibitions;
- facilitates development of greater control over language production and language comprehension faculties;
- fosters interpersonal relationships and communication skills, coupled with increases in the skills of observation, empathy and coping strategies;
- provides a safe environment for experimentation.

(adapted from Smith, 1984, pp. 1-22)
A large scale theatre production, one that is similar to what Smith describes in that it involves both extensive rehearsals and a public performance which features various stage design elements, was adopted by both Ryan-Scheutz and Colangelo (2004) and Raquell (2011). The former study dealt with a full workshop production offered to students of Italian at an American university. The latter study investigated a full production of an English language musical by a volunteer group of university students and teachers in Hong Kong. Both studies involved an extended period of rehearsal (ten weeks and seven months respectively) and both analysed data collected from student interviews (with the former also making use of unofficial pre- and post-tests). From both of these studies, broadly speaking, there was improvement, either observed or self-reported, over a number of skill areas (speaking, reading comprehension, writing, structural knowledge) and an overall positive reaction to the experience of theatre. Students across both studies recognised the unique opportunities for speaking practice that the process of theatre afforded, and in the case of Raquell’s study, one student even indicated that this type of experience was deliberately sought out, as her regular language courses offered little comparable opportunity to practice the language.

The two theatre studies discussed above represent full-scale productions and one could assume that such a high demand on resources, especially time requirements, along with a lack of expertise in the varied areas of production that conventionally accompany a performance (e.g. scenic and lighting design), might dissuade most educators from attempting a full theatrical production with their own classes. While students would likely benefit from experiencing a true process that culminates in a performance on a stage and includes some combination of scenery, lighting, sound, costumes, and props (all of which typically enhance conventional modern theatre praxis), they are not strictly necessary for a theatrical performance. Indeed, eschewing most of them, if not all, could greatly ease the burden on resources and make theatre production much more feasible to undertake.

As an example of such a pared-down approach, Carson (2012) ran a study that looked at two groups of university students enrolled in a pre-sessional module within an English as a
second language (ESL) course in Ireland. These students wrote, rehearsed and performed plays in English and these performances omitted all but costumes and props, making them comparatively free of technical elements (e.g. light cues, placing and shifting scenery, and so on). At the same time, it also reduced the preparation time to only five hours in total over five days. The focus of this shorter production schedule, then, was on story and script generation. Both groups were given the freedom to decide the content of their plays: they could be wholly original works or stage adaptations of existing stories. Ultimately, one group performed an adaptation while the other performed an original story, albeit one that was loosely based on an existing source. Carson’s research focus was on autonomous learning and how an alternative approach utilising drama (theatre) could still satisfy her English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course’s objectives. As a consequence, data collection was somewhat limited. However, from Carson’s discussion of student interview data, it is clear that her students’ self-reported gains in language skills echoed the purported benefits found in the Italian play production workshop study discussed above. Additionally, it was clear from her discussion that participants were quite engaged with the task and appreciated the novel context for language practice that it afforded them.

The current study uses the three studies mentioned above as a starting point for further inquiry and is part of a larger research project (Reid, 2015) that analysed data from student interaction, task outcomes, and post-task student feedback. The current study seeks to investigate the last data set, that of post-task feedback, to better understand how students perceive theatre activity when it is implemented into a normal high school English oral communication course. Key to the implementation of these tasks is that their procedures and design are, as much as is feasible, unaltered from conventional theatre practice (a practice that entails a progress from rehearsal to public performance). That is to say, while scaffolding of the activity might be necessary to assist learners with orientation to the demands of theatre, the tasks are not altered to explicitly scaffold any particular linguistic gaps.

The current study is distinct from the three studies discussed above in two basic ways. First, the other studies all involved voluntary participants while the current study looks at a pair of
tasks that were a required part of a compulsory English Oral Communication course. Second, the current study involves younger learners attending high school, rather than university students as in the other studies.

With the above distinctions noted, the current study does share several key similarities with Carson’s (2012) study. Most notably, both studies involve groups collaboratively devising original play-scripts, and both studies also position theatre within a task-based learning and teaching (TBLT) approach. The primary differences between the two studies are: (a) in the current study, students do not have a choice between original composition or adaptation - they undertake two iterations of the task, doing an original play and an adapted play as separate projects; (b) the current study takes place in an English as a foreign language (EFL) context, rather than an English as a second (or additional) language (ESL) setting; (c) the current study involves high school students (ages 15-16) with low language ability rather than more capable university student participants; and, finally, (d) the current study eschewed all production design elements, including costumes and props (which were present in Carson’s study).

**Theatre as Task-based Learning**

TBLT is an approach to language teaching that has developed out of the communicative language teaching movement (CLT) in recent decades. TBLT maintains CLT’s focus on meaning through communicative activities and outcomes and centers learner attention on the undertaking and completion of tasks that emulate the contexts and language use that students are likely to encounter in the real world (Skehan, 1998; Ellis, 2003 & 2013; Samuda & Bygate, 2008).

The motivation to implement theatre activities within a task-based approach stems from the ways in which theatre could potentially meet all of the requirements for a task (in the TBLT sense). While different researchers have offered various definitions for the notion of “task”, Ellis (2003) discerns six essential criteria of what a “task” consists:
• it is meaning-focused;
• real-world language use;
• communicative outcome;
• engages cognitive processes;
• involves any of the 4-skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing);
• is a work-plan (e.g. denotes procedures and materials to be used).

A primary focus on meaning, coupled with authentic reproduction of real-world language use (as much as is possible), are arguably two of the most well-known characteristics of a TBLT approach. In tandem with those, a communicative outcome is essential to the lifeblood of a task, as it establishes an objective for participants beyond simple use of target language features. This outcome also provides teachers with a means of assessment (i.e. task performance) and ensures that the students are not treating the task merely as a language drill. In terms of task design, devising a play for performance meets all of the critical criteria listed above. To work through that list: (a) the nature of theatrical performance itself is meaning-focused and thus the entire process maintains a primary focus on meaning while affording student opportunities to focus on form as the need arises; (b) the scripts that the participants create will, in theory, allow them to approximate real-world language use and the content of the stories will also, in theory, provide authentic (interactive/communicative) contexts for that language use; (c) the final performance for an audience is a clearly defined communicative outcome; (d) the collaborative, creative process that unfolds will involve all manner of cognitive processes for content and script creation, and group interaction and task-mediation will also make use of them as well; (e) this process, and its outcome, will ultimately engage all of the 4-skills, particularly listening, speaking and writing; and, (f) the process of devising a play-script lays out a definitive work-plan (e.g. first plan and devise the story, then rehearse and revise it, and finally perform it for an audience). With these six criteria met, collaborative playwriting can function as a task with minimal alteration to the design of its process (i.e. its procedural demands). Identifying this theatre task as TBLT allows it to be positioned within a well-established theoretical framework.
Design and Method

This section explains the design of the collaborative playwriting projects and their implementation within a senior high school oral communication course in Japan, and describes the methods of analysis used in the current study.

This research project was designed to answer the following research question:

How do students perceive the experience of carrying out and completing a collaborative playwriting task and what, if any, are the differences in the perceptions between two distinct variations of this task, adaptation versus original work?

The answer to this research question should be of concern to teachers who implement or have considered implementing theatre-based activity in their classrooms. While a teacher might deem a given task’s work plan to meet certain pedagogical objectives, it is important to discern whether students perceive the task to be as it is intended. That is to say, while a theatre task might be designed (or selected) to reinforce learners’ skills in reading comprehension, for example, students might actually perceive the task to be focused on a skill such as memorisation or pronunciation instead. Therefore, collecting data of student perceptions provides valuable information on how a task’s character is transformed when actually undertaken by learners.

Site

The current research project took place at a private high school in Japan. I conducted this research as part of my duties for the regular school year. These duties included serving as the primary instructor for all first-year English Oral Communication (OC) classes, which along with a reading and grammar course (English I), were compulsory for all first-year students. I was assisted by one of the two co-teachers in each class, and these same co-teachers concurrently taught their respective sections of the English I class during each week.
In Japan, students are assigned to a “homeroom” class for basic administrative purposes. At the host site, while students were assigned to homerooms irrespective of academic standing, they were streamed by ability in their individual courses. The OC class was a notable exception to this practice, as students were not streamed but rather took this course together with their homeroom classmates.

Participants

Like most Japanese students starting high school, the participants had studied English as a compulsory subject in junior high school for three years. Additionally, most of them had studied English at elementary schools (which offered supplemental English lessons in the curriculum) or at a private language school or “cram” school prior to, and often throughout, attending junior high school. These first-year students were boys and girls aged fifteen to sixteen years of age, with ethnic Japanese (who were also native speakers of Japanese) constituting a substantial majority of the population (over 95%). Out of the seven first-year homerooms at the host institution that took my OC course, four were chosen at random for participation in the study and out of the 154 students thus selected, 150 offered their informed consent. It should be stated clearly here that this consent regarded only the inclusion of student data for analysis in the current study. Participation in the activities themselves was compulsory for the course. For those who opted out of the study, any data that directly identified them was removed from analysis. As students in the course, they still took part in the projects during the designated lessons.

As mentioned above, I was assisted by one of the two native Japanese teachers in each class. However, neither one of them were directly involved in research design, data collection, or data analysis. As a team, we approached the theatre projects in the same manner as all of the other lessons’ content in the OC course. We made sure that the projects did not divert from the procedures common for the rest of the course work. To aid in this, student feedback was made a regular part of lesson procedures early in the course, and four short activities involving role-play and skit creation were piloted prior to the start of the main projects.
Collaborative Playwriting Projects

The collaborative playwriting tasks implemented in the current study were inspired by the practice of “devised theatre” (Oddie, 1994), a process of theatre that is strictly performer-driven (to the greatest extent possible). While a process such as what Oddie describes can be a substantial time commitment, the institutional constraints under which my project was conducted led to a streamlined process that I distilled into a simple three-step sequence: (a) fifty minutes for story and script creation; (b) fifty minutes for rehearsal and script refining; and (c) fifty minutes for performances.

Each group of six to seven students worked on their plays for 25 minutes (half of a lesson period), once a week, for the first four weeks, and then performed their plays during the fifth week. To satisfy other curricular demands of the host institution, there was a ten-week gap between the two projects.

As mentioned in the research question, the current study used two distinct versions of a collaborative playwriting task: an original play and an adapted play. Each group attempted one version of the task in the fall, and then after a period of ten weeks, attempted the other variation of the task in the winter. This, in both projects, two of the classes undertook the original play while the other two classes undertook the adapted play. For the remainder of this paper, these two attempts of the task will be referred to as “Project One” (for the fall) and “Project Two” (for the winter). The basic description of both projects is as follows:

**Original play:** Each group selects one of three basic themes (taken from their textbook units): travel, shopping and leisure, or school life. They then compose an original play of 3-5 minutes in duration based upon this theme.

**Adapted play:** Each group selects a story (from another medium) that they are all familiar with. They then compose a theatrical adaptation of that story of 3-5 minutes in duration.
For both types of play, the following rules were established during the explanation of the projects on the first day:

- Each student needed to have a speaking role in the story (although a balance of speaking time between group members was not explicitly demanded).
- The script had to be written in English; allowances were made for certain Japanese terms that had no practical English equivalents, such as *kibidango* (a kind of soft rice ball treat).
- How students proceeded through the project was primarily the responsibility of the group. In practice, this meant that identifying milestones, planning out the work, and assigning duties for each member were all for the students themselves to decide as a group.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The procedures for data collection were as follows: at the conclusion of performances on the last day of each project, students filled out feedback questionnaires. It should be noted that the decision to keep the questionnaire voluntary was done at the institution's request, ostensibly to avoid student confusion regarding the scope and manner of their task assessment. The content of the first and second versions of the questionnaire differed as the desired focus of inquiry shifted slightly between projects. The questions from each survey are shown below:

**Project One - feedback questionnaires (n= 141)**

1. Did you find this project enjoyable? (1[not enjoyable]- 5[enjoyable])
2. How difficult was this project to complete? (1[not difficult] - 5[difficult])
3. What parts were difficult to complete?
4. How well did your group work together? (1[not well] - 5[well])
5. What were the strong points and weak points for your group?
6. You worked with your group for four class periods to create and rehearse your story. Please write your reflection about the project.
Project Two - feedback questionnaires (n = 142)

1. Did you find this project enjoyable? (1 [not enjoyable] - 5 [enjoyable])
2. Compared to the first project, how difficult was the project to complete? (1 [easier] - 5 [more difficult])
3. How helpful was the experience from the first project in completing this second project? (1 [not helpful] - 5 [helpful])
4. How well did your group work together? (1 [not well] - 5 [well])
5. What were the strong points and weak points for your group?
6. You worked with your group for four class periods to create and rehearse your story. Please write your reflection about the project. Be sure to discuss English learning in your reflection.

To begin analysis, I translated the students’ responses from Japanese into English with the assistance of two Japanese native-speakers hired as research assistants to ensure the accuracy of these translations.

Salient themes within the data were allowed to emerge through analysis. Once these themes were identified, student feedback was coded by these themes and re-analysed via a synthesis of similar responses into coded categories. All participants were given pseudonyms. As this particular analysis was not strictly intended to follow a typical case study design, more robust ethnographic data about each individual participant was not collected.

Findings

A full discussion of students’ responses is beyond the scope of this paper. What follows in this section are, first, general observations gleaned from the first five questions in each survey, and then, second, a discussion of the most salient themes that emerged from the open response question from both surveys.
General Observations

Analysis of the first five questions (ranking and short response) in each post-task feedback questionnaire enabled the following findings:

**Difficulty and enjoyment.** A sizable majority of students (78% for Project One, 65% for Project Two) enjoyed both projects, giving them a score of either “4” or “5” on a five point scale. This general enthusiasm for the tasks was in spite of a reported difficulty: 82% of students found Project One difficult (with 38% for “4” and 44% for “5”), while 76% percent found Project Two of equal or greater difficulty (with 34% for “3”, 32% for “4” and 10% “5”). In both projects, the original play was considered the more difficult task: by 10% more students in Project One and by 30% more in Project Two.

**Collaboration.** The opportunity to collaborate with classmates was a positive feature of the projects. When asked how well the group worked together (question 4, both questionnaires), 73% of students reported positively (a score of “4” or “5”) for Project One, while in Project Two this number grew to 81%.

**Group strong points.** In regard to collaboration, students most frequently mentioned cooperation, the sharing ideas and the enjoyment of working together as strong points for their groups. Across both projects, 19% of the responses mentioned “able to cooperate; able to work well”, 14% mentioned “able to share opinions, ideas”, and 14% mentioned “had fun, able to enjoy working together”. Matters of composition and, by association, language use, were less frequently mentioned. As group strong points, 7% of students mentioned “created an interesting story” and 10% mentioned “able to complete the story”. Only two students specifically mentioned English. Matters of theatre were also less frequently mentioned. “Made a good performance” was mentioned by 8% of the students, while “rehearsals were good” was mentioned by 5% of students.
**Group weak points.** Students mentioned a greater variety of responses for weak points than strong points and no single weak point was mentioned by more than 9% of the students. The response of “performance was not very polished or smooth” was one of those weak points mentioned by 9% of them. In a similar vein, “insufficient or unproductive rehearsal” and “writing went slowly or took too long” were each also mentioned by 9% of the students. Lack of cooperation or lack of enjoyment were less frequently mentioned (5% and 1%, respectively), and only two students mentioned language at all - in this case only to comment that they “spoke Japanese in the performance”.

**Difficulties.** In Project One, students were asked to identify the most difficult parts of the tasks as they were largely encountering this task type for the first time. In this question, composition and language came to the fore. The top response was “translation into English” which was mentioned by 34% of the students. In a similar category, the response of “writing and/or completing the story” was mentioned by 28% of them, while “writing one’s lines” was mentioned by 18%. Performance related matters were also mentioned more frequently, as 12% of students simply mentioned “the performance” and 11% mentioned a related response of “actions; gestures; (stage) movement”. Responses that related to other aspects of task orientation, such as “getting things in order”, “[thinking] how to complete the project” or “distribution of work responsibility” were mentioned by no more than 4% of the students.

Overall, a good deal of similarity in student responses for both task types was observed. There was not a great difference in terms of how students regarded their enjoyment. Also, both tasks produced similar strong and weak points for group work, and they were both perceived to be difficult rather than easy. However, in terms of this difficulty, the two task types were more divergent. The original play was clearly the more difficult task. As to what accounted for the difficulties that students encountered during either task, a notable difference was that 65% of the responses for the above mentioned “translation into English” were from the adapted play, while 70% of the responses for “writing and/or completing the story” were from the original play. Additionally, the original play accounted for 75% of responses that mentioned performance
related matters (which include the two mentioned above). Other frequent difficulties were more evenly split than for those two areas.

These results of the short-answer questions lead to three general observations: (a) the tasks were enjoyable and cooperation and working in a group were frequently and positively mentioned; (b) While both task types were seen as difficult, the original play was viewed as the more difficult of the two; and, (c) translation was the main difficulty of the adapted play while composition was the main difficulty for the original play. The first observation suggests that working with a group of classmates was a large part of what made the projects enjoyable. The fact that far fewer students mentioned the performance as a strong point is likely an indication of either their unfamiliarity with theatrical performance or perhaps a lack of confidence in their ability to perform the stories they had collaboratively written. The other two observations are closely related and suggest that the writing itself, and neither the collaborative nor the theatrical nature of the task, was the greatest challenge. This was consistent whether it was an adaptation of an existing story (and importantly not a straight translation of an available source text) or a wholly original creation. All in all, most groups cooperated well and had fun writing as a group, but struggled to complete their compositions. In order to further discuss these observations, I now move on to the analysis of the open-response question.

**Open-Response Feedback**

Several salient themes emerged from the open-response question for each project (number 6 on each survey), and similar to most of the short response questions, there was considerable consistency between task types in terms of what students discussed. In general, responses mirrored the findings discussed above, namely: (a) many students wrote about their enjoyment of the projects; (b) many of them also drew a direct connection between the opportunity to collaborate with others and their enjoyment of the project; and, (c) this ability to successfully collaborate was frequently a strong impression they had from the projects.
Some of the open responses did shed more light on the difficulties discussed above. Broadly speaking, there was an oft-mentioned period of uncertainty as work on the projects commenced; and this uncertainty slowed the creative process and typically left little time for rehearsal. At the same time, successful collaboration with their group members often worked to balance the task’s difficulty and transformed the experience positively for many. As an example, Liam reported that he initially lacked motivation. As he worked with his fellow group members on their play, however, his perception changed. He wrote,

At first I thought I couldn’t be bothered, but while getting on with making the story and dialogue I came to feel it was fun. I could have a lot of fun working together with my group and so on. (Liam, task survey)

In a similar vein, another student, Ella, offered a detailed synopsis of her group’s experience when she wrote,

In our group, although we talked about the content, we didn’t move forward easily. Step by step we came to decide the content, and gradually we expanded the story. It became really enjoyable. By the last lesson, we hadn’t finished writing so we weren’t able to rehearse at all. So, the actual performance was not polished…When I watched other groups’ performances, it became a fun project…. (Ella, task survey)

So, as they stated, the nature of the projects was transformed for students such as Liam and Ella as the opportunity to collaborate eventually provided some intrinsic motivation to work productively, even when students were unsuccessful at reaching their desired outcomes for the task.

Two salient themes emerged from the data that offered valuable insight into how some students perceived the task and its usefulness for their language education: (a) the benefits of seeing other performances; and, (b) opportunities for language development. Each of these will now be discussed.
**Benefits of seeing other performances.** Each group that collaborates on a creative project will produce its own distinct and original outcome for the task. The opportunity to see the variety of these outcomes for the same task was undoubtedly a further appeal of the projects. With regard to this, take the words of Alex, for example, as he reflected,

> It was good that I saw other groups’ stories and that my group worked together successfully. Writing the story was tough, yet although it was difficult, the performances in English were quite interesting. Each group’s story was also really interesting. (Alex, task survey)

Along similar lines, Emily reflected on the chance for groups to show their individuality when she wrote,

> I thought it was good that we could all work together, make a story, and perform it. I also liked that I could see the personality of other groups' performances. (Emily, task survey)

Another student, Daniel, wrote,

> Watching everyone’s performances was fun and I could concentrate on listening to what these stories were about. We were called upon to create a story and we thought our hardest using the grammar we had studied up to now. (Daniel, task survey)

In the comment above, Daniel discussed how his group worked hard to use the language they learned in his group’s play. Performing the play for an audience became an opportunity for his group to see whether or not they were successful in communicating their story to their classmates in English.

Seeing this end product of each group’s creative process allows students to recognise the work necessary to overcome the challenges of the task and the enjoyment inherent in meeting this challenge of content creation with a group of one’s peers. Perhaps for some that shared enjoyment alone was enough, but others reflected more specifically on how the performances themselves created more opportunities for learning, both for the audience and the performers.
As an example, Madison made the following reflection:

Listening is a weak point for me, so when we go through a lesson, it was really good to come into contact with English from others besides the teacher… [ ] … it was good to hear the other performances. It was good, not just as study, but enjoying theatre at the same time. (Madison, task survey)

The chance to hear a variety of English being spoken was a benefit for Madison, while for another student, Ryan, the performances gave him a great chance to focus on meaning, discerning it from context. He wrote,

Because we knew the storyline already [of the adapted plays], it was fun even if I didn’t understand the [exact] words, and also the English was easy to understand. It was good to hear and learn new words. For words I’d never heard before, I could understand what was being said because I knew the story already. (Ryan, task survey)

This last comment from Ryan draws attention to a potential advantage that the adapted play task may have over the original play variation. As he mentioned, his prior knowledge of famous stories made watching a performance of an adaptation that story easy to follow. Perhaps, with this familiarity, he could understand adaptations more than wholly original works. Thus, it is fair to suppose that such prior knowledge would similarly scaffold the listening comprehension of other listeners in the audience as well.

**Opportunities for language development.** While the intrinsic value of performance is certainly worth considering, the current study was designed, at least ideally, to offer students a highly interactive process, one that would facilitate language learning. When designing the playwriting task, I anticipated that the whole process of collaborative theatre should provide students with plenty of opportunity to work more autonomously and develop their language ability further through primarily peer-to-peer interaction.

For example, collaborating on the language of the play certainly offered students exposure to new vocabulary. Consider the following responses:
By using English and talking, the words I hadn't known before increased in the sentences. I felt enjoyment talking in English. (John, task survey)

I learned a lot from everyone teaching and discussing English together. (Dylan, task survey)

The goal was to make it ourselves and since there were words I didn't know, I really learned a lot. (Leah, task survey)

The responses of these three students show collaboration with classmates to be a viable means of learning new vocabulary. Through similar means, other students reported perceived gains in areas besides vocabulary. As an example, Layla reflected on her grammar knowledge with the following:

When making English sentences, because we were making it [the story] using grammar we had learned up to now, I think I got a little better at writing English sentences. (Layla, task survey)

Collaborating on a creative writing project also provided the chance for more experimentation with the target L2 in authentic communicative situations. Several students discussed this in their responses, commenting.

Even if I am getting taught English, I don't really think up [original thoughts] and say [them] much in English; so this kind of project is good. (Anna, task survey)

It is good to understand difficult words, but I think the most important thing is to use simple English and familiar phrases effectively. (Scarlett, task survey)

Since we all had to make up the story, it was really difficult, but as English study we learned everyday conversation and so on, so it was useful. (Isaac, task survey)

To be certain, not every learning context mirrors that of these participants. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that similar contexts, ones that have historically been largely exam-centred, might not always provide students with enough opportunity to practice using what they know. If students could have this opportunity through theatre, they might have the potential to further
boost their confidence in their language ability. For example, one student, Claire, discussed how the projects opened her eyes to what she was capable of doing with the language knowledge she already had. She reflected,

I was kind of surprised [doing this task] to find I could talk about something in such simple English… […] I thought it might be possible to use simple English in everyday conversation as well. (Claire, task survey)

Looking at these last few responses together, Scarlett implies in her reflection that she had the opportunity to use “simple English” effectively when devising and performing a play. Similarly, both Elijah and Claire recognised how much of their stories could be performed with just simple vocabulary and expressions. Moreover, Claire felt this simpler approach could apply to daily communication as well. With a focus on simplicity, some students reported on the chances they had to learn new vocabulary, others recognised the chance to use the vocabulary and grammar they already knew, and those learners also saw the extent to which they could still manage a range of communication needs with their existing inter-language. So many students were perhaps, like Claire, surprised by how much meaning they could actually communicate with just their current language ability.

**Discussion**

Overall, student feedback provided broad support for the implementation of theatre within a compulsory high school EFL oral communication course. Indeed, students’ generally positive assessment of the collaborative playwriting tasks themselves, along with (post-task) self-reported language development from some of the participants, and the recognition by some of the useful opportunities for language practice that theatre affords, were similar to that of the prior studies reviewed earlier in this paper (Carson, 2012; Raquell, 2011; Ryan-Schuetz & Colangelo, 2004).

While it is important to acknowledge the consistent popularity of theatrical activity amongst participants, reaffirmed as it was in the current study, it is equally important to carefully examine
evidence for theatre's efficacy with regards to language development. After all, in most contexts we encounter in the literature, the ostensible rationale for implementing theatre activities in L2 lessons is to improve language ability, rather than simply to make the students better at some aspect of theatre. In this sense, the rationale that motivated the collaborative playwriting projects in the current study was no different. That being stated, the results of my research project reminded me of a simple reality that, while perhaps obvious, is important to keep in mind when considering theatre for the L2 classroom. That reality being that encountering collaborative theatre for the first time has its own set of demands that often have little to do with language ability. This was most evident from the open-ended reflections, where the number of responses discussing the collaborative and creative aspects of the tasks far eclipsed the number of responses that discussed language learning in general, or self-reported development of specific language skills (by almost two to one). Importantly, this was true even when students were specifically prompted to write about language learning after they had completed the second project.

This state of affairs raises two related points for consideration. Firstly, novices at this type of task are likely to be much more concerned with learning how to successfully navigate and complete the task than with learning how to select and use target L2 to accomplish this. As my students' responses imply, an appropriate (i.e. effective and mutually understood) orientation to a collaborative playwriting task is not as intuitive as I had expected, even given the relative lack of theatre-specific praxis present in the task design. To be clear, how much of this is due just to the nature of working in a group with five or six other people rather than specifically to the theatrical nature of the tasks cannot be definitively answered from the findings of the current study. At the same time, however, the creative demands of the task were certainly a main factor of the task difficulty. Thus, secondly, the current study offers some evidence to suggest that a sizable part of this difficulty that students will encounter in this type of creative project will not be due to gaps in language ability, nor to a mismatch between task difficulty and learner ability. Instead, this difficulty will likely be due to participants' lack of familiarity with theatre practice and creative writing, particularly with regard to the needs inherent in the collaborative writing and performance of a play. Indeed, a large volume of responses reported difficulties with different
aspects of task orientation rather than with language selection. That being stated, the design of my research study did not feature repetition of either task type, so there is no evidence to suggest to what extent familiarity with the creative demands of these task types would better facilitate task orientation and completion, and by extension foster greater recognition of language use.

With the above concessions made, it is still worth emphasising that a fair number of students in the current study did, in fact, write about perceived gains in various language skills, including vocabulary, grammar, sentence composition, and conversation, rather than about improvement with their ability to do theatre. In fact, some of them, like Dylan and Leah for example, explicitly indicated that working with their peers facilitated this language development. Therefore, it is also reasonable to assume that this feature of collaborative and creative work to foster peer-assisted language learning could be better harnessed with a more deliberate scaffolding of the task. This could better ensure that students develop an awareness of the need to engage in such language related discussion in order to complete the task. At the same time, however, the creative quality of this work makes it difficult to predict which direction a group may go when devising content. As a result, too much overt scaffolding of procedures could conceivably hinder the creative process or, at the very least, exert too strong of an influence over it.

As a final point, in OC classes similar to mine, the emphasis is obviously on spoken communication (in English) and, consequently, pair and group work is already a frequent component of lesson plans. This is especially true for a TBLT approach that usually places a premium on student-to-student interaction as a catalyst for language development. In line with the aims of this approach, collaborative playwriting is an occasion that allows students to exercise greater autonomy within the classroom and invites them to take more responsibility for orientating themselves to the tasks’ demands and managing their own classwork more effectively. In this respect, despite the difficulty inherent in such a creative endeavour, it has a great potential to lead students to more of the peer to peer interaction that TBLT wants to encourage and facilitate. To be sure, other well-known tasks such as ranking, information gap, or consensus building often require similar levels of sustained interaction between participants, the kind of
interaction that also often concerns a more discrete, specific range of target L2 forms. However, theatre gives us the chance to move beyond those basic processes and their potentially limited language scope, and move towards an exploration of conceptual creativity. This creativity lends considerable intrinsic value to an activity for students, as evidenced by the high number of my students’ responses which voiced approval of the projects, reflected on the creative aspects of the tasks specifically, and expressed the desire to do the task again. Moreover, the creative output seen during the performances of other groups further affords students with ample opportunity for a wide range of language exposure presented in a unique and engaging manner.

**Future Directions**

Theatre in any form is about artistic presentation, so the idea of theatre being a display of *artistic skill* is a useful one to keep in mind. To truly undertake the process of theatre, my experience cautions me to think that teachers would need to approach such an undertaking with the intention of improving the skills students need for theatre, or, at the very least, acknowledge that the development of such skills would be a great asset for such an activity. At the same time, lack of experience and expertise should not be seen as a barrier to participation, of course, as numerous class reports and teaching manuals available now clearly demonstrate that theatre practices can be modified to work within a range of language courses. To help teachers and researchers alike, it would be useful to collect data of L1 speakers attempting the same tasks. This would provide a benchmark for task performance and could also help establish to what extent difficulties in task completion are not related to language gaps. Finally, it would be beneficial to directly compare how different levels of theatrical production influence how students perform on similar theatre tasks. For example, would the necessity to include design elements in the current study’s theatre task facilitate or hinder content creation, and by extension language learning, in some way? This manner of inquiry could shed further light on the specific benefits of engaging in either full-scale or minimal-scale productions.
References


此為上文摘要中譯

日本一所高中學生對校內協作編劇項目的觀感

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摘要
本文探討在任務導向架構下作為語文學習模式的協作劇場編劇活動。文中載述作者在日本一所高中的首年英語會話溝通課程中加入兩項相似而有別的劇場編劇任務，以進行類實驗性研究。本文簡略討論任務的背景、原理及設計，繼而檢視學生完成任務後交回問卷的相關資料。參加活動的學生雖然明顯欠缺劇場經驗，但反應相當正面。此外，若干學生更表示語文能力在多方面有所提升，認同在構思過程及演出作品中均有學習機會。

關鍵詞：戲劇與語文學習、日本、編劇、劇場

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