Poetry in Motion – Revamping Literary Recitals

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Abstract
Speech and recital contests are not rare in the language learning landscape of Japan and elsewhere. However, preparations often neglect important aspects of a good delivery. Too often, student recitals are delivered either in a monotonous fashion with too little attention being paid to segmental phonology and prosody, or highlighting measures like pitch or volume are overused or inappropriately applied. At Aichi Prefectural University a special class has been developed in order to tackle this problem. For this class, a format piloted by Anke Stöver-Blahak at the University of Hanover in Germany has been adapted to the Japanese teaching context. Students are thoroughly familiarised with what is a successful spoken performance. Students are practically introduced to basic aspects of drama pedagogy, phonation, voice coaching, and to simplified concepts of target language (TL) prosody. Further, a strong emphasis is placed on identifying one's audience and adjusting the delivery accordingly.

The preliminary ‘whys’
Becoming more proficient in a language is an arduous multifaceted process that is known to every language learner and language teacher. Improving students' ability in spoken language performance is a major challenge (not only) in Japan (Stephens, 2011). The choice of appropriate content and methodological formats for the situation at hand plays a vital part in this. Mere direct, skill-driven instruction is likely to be insufficient for students to consciously and cognitively acquire the complex systems governing language: that is, the interdependent correlations between grammar, spelling, vocabulary, and prosody when encountering a target language (TL) text. The study of languages in Japan has long been dominated by grammar-translation
approaches, dissecting the TL at the word and sentence level up until they have been rendered nearly unrecognisable to the native speaker/reader. It is epitomised in what Stephens (2011, p. 69) calls the “bottom-up approach.” Arguably, the best way to approach any foreign language (FL) text, is not by attempting to explain even the smallest of facets predominantly of morphology, syntax, and semantics through the medium of native Japanese. Especially, when looking at literature, the abyss between intellectually instilled bottom-up zeal in translating on the basis of word lists and grammar tables and being able to appreciate the communicative qualities of a speech performance has to fail spectacularly (cf. Ellis, 2001, Bibby, 2012).

More recent approaches aiming at enhancing communicative abilities are faced with at least one fundamental systemic obstacle in Japan: the necessity to study and teach with a view to passing examinations – often university entrance exams – with no or only marginal oral components (Stephens). And while neglecting any linguistic factor outright is not advised, “the consequences of not presenting prosody are an enormous burden on the memory to process written text without clues as to how to segment meaning.” (Stephens, 2011, p. 71). Therefore, a lot is to be said for teaching basic or even simplistic prosodic patterns for students to apply to the text themselves when reading or delivering it. Moreover, getting students to playfully explore the performance side of the prosodic marking of meaning is likely to further their holistic language experience and thus facilitate the learning of the multifaceted properties of the language studied (L2). There are those who argue that “[…] the use of literature should be a means, not an end in L2 education” (Iida, 2013, p. 9). But this is not to be understood as a contradiction to a holistic approach towards language. Rather, living language is so much more than mere linguistic form and pattern. Contrary to translation approaches of language learning, meaning is never self-evident. Understanding is a permanent process of formation, interpretation, and the negotiation of meaning.

And what better literary genre to choose for facilitating such an undertaking among students than poetry: “[…] the words (images) of the poem become vehicles that jog the students’ diverse memories and stimulate creative thoughts, which students as ‘the performers’ transfer to emotional, vocal, facial and physical reactions” (Elting & Firkins, 2006, p. 129). On a more mundane level, Stöver-Blahak (2012, p. 13) defines the act of speaking as per se communicative. Every speech act has an audience. Even the person dictating something into a recording device has to mould their speech in such a fashion that the prospective recipient can understand
appropriately upon listening to it. Thus, in Stöver-Blahak's understanding of “Ästhetische Kommunikation” [Aesthetic Communication] (2012) the audience becomes a major focus in speech planning and execution. Learning to presuppose features of one's audience and their needs, and to cater to them accordingly, becomes a highly desirable skill.

This is true for any type of speaking, but especially when speaking in public. For students in particular, this is a skill commonly required of them throughout their studies. For students of FL other than English, however, it is rarer in the Japanese context to ever be required to make a speech or give a presentation in the TL. If and when students are exploring academia in other parts of the world, namely on study abroad stays, they are quickly confronted with the reality of having to deliver a fair number of speech acts in public as part of their training and education (cf. Hunke, 2014a, p. 59). In order to improve students' speech delivery in the TL, a special class addressing the issues mentioned thus far has been implemented at Aichi Prefectural University.

The ‘how’ of the poetry performance class

In the poetry performance class offered, there were thirteen students who chose the course as a non-credit elective. These students were from years two through four. Out of the thirteen students, eleven completed the class.

Every session of the poetry performance class was started by drama-pedagogy-inspired exercises in order to get students used to actively and deliberately engaging their bodies – with or without speech components. The activities were further envisaged to build up trust and to promote a good class atmosphere and cohesion. Using the entire body, gestures and facial expressions were integral parts of these exercises. Further, activities featuring elements of voice coaching and phonation enriched every session of the course. Here, the focus was largely on practically exploring the German vowel inventory and to mimic intonation patterns and ways to mark stress. Segmental phonology was not the focal point. Walter argues that readers with an alphabetic first or native language (L1) “do not mentally see what they have just read: They hear it.” (Walter, 2008, p. 458) In the case of Japanese learners of an alphabetic language this process is likely to occur in a different fashion:

“There is evidence that learners whose L1 orthography is ideographic may store the immediate products of decoding in the visuospatial sketchpad, rather than in the
phonological loop; and that they may transfer this decoding practice to the reading of an alphabetic L2, at least initially.” (Walter 2008, p. 460)

In an important study on the matter of L1 orthography interference in L2 acquisition with languages featuring differing types of written representation, Chikamatsu (1996) infers that for Japanese native speakers the situation is more complex than for native speakers of other languages with ideographic systems. In Japan, the writing systems acquired in school are first the two syllabic alphabets hiragana and katakana, to be superseded by ideographic characters known as kanji. Simultaneous to the other three writing systems, romaji, meaning Latin letters, are also learned, often through the medium of the EFL classroom. Stephens purports further that L2 learning cannot replicate the settings for L1 acquisition, but that a certain aspect of the latter ought to be adopted: the principle of exposure to (exaggerated) prosody (Stephens, 2011, p. 68f). For Walter, comprehension by FL learners is presupposed by qualities not tied to either the L1 or L2:

“In other words, comprehension is not linguistic: It is not in the first language (L1), so it cannot be transferred to the L2. Rather, readers of L2 who comprehend well do this because they have reached a point where they can access, from the L2, their existing skills in building mental structures” (Walter, 2008, p. 456).

In the next step, a number of ‘training’ poems were used to exemplify and practise features of German dynamic and contrastive stress. Students were also introduced to rhyme – a phenomenon not found in Japanese poetry at all. “Rhyme would be unimportant if reading were just a matter of grapheme-phoneme conversion, but that is certainly not the case” (Goswami & Bryant, 1990, p. 103). Hirschfeld undertakes to define what properties are most crucial for mastering speech performances in stress timing languages: “For stress timing languages like English or German, this means mastering dynamic phrasal stress in order to make what is being said more intelligible to the (native) listener (2011, p. 42f).”

After initial practice with the ‘training’ poems, students each chose their own poem from a selection of German poetry covering several hundred years of German poetic history. The reasoning behind this is eloquently summed up as follows:
“Because of poetry’s rich language resources, its indeterminacy and multiple levels of meaning, it can provide a unique opportunity for [language] learners to become agents in the construction of meaning. Armed with a basic understanding of the text, students can arrive at a new understanding of language as a living, breathing, artistic material. Introducing drama to embody the personal and creative response to the poem rather than privileging a particular authoritative or monologic interpretation of the poem can extend this understanding” (Elting & Firkins, 2006, p. 129).

Students engaged intensively and extensively with their self-chosen poem over the course of large parts of a semester. They were required to do scripting with their own poems, meaning re-writing their own poem or rather copying it, but with the potential to visually display it differently or add some meta-information aiding the performance delivery. Where possible, poems were divided into performable parts (Elting & Firkins, 2006, p. 131f); occasionally a line-by-line re-scripting was also undertaken. Although, by and large, the performances were the major focus, like in Elting and Firkin's classroom project, line-by-line scripting was still permitted. This was seen as an extra set of scaffolding, with respect to the presupposed “visuospatial sketchpad” being more prominent with native speakers of ideographic writing systems (Walter) rather than the phonological loop used by speakers of alphabet-based languages. Students should make use of any aid possible in developing their own understanding and sense of ownership of the poem. At first, students were asked to apply a simplistic type of phrasal stress to their poems, identifying pauses – often marked by punctuation. Then a main stress in between these hesitations was to be identified. Students were made aware of the fact that their choice of stress may shift in future performances, given a more holistic and in-depth understanding of the poetic qualities to be developed over time. In cases of line-by-line re-scripting, students were shown how to use stylised intonation curves to graphically represent the movement of pitch in each line.

The recital performance required the deliberate usage of body posture, gestures, and facial expressions. “By placing the emphasis on dramatizing the poem, the aim in the […] classroom is less about an understanding of the author’s exact meaning than on students’ personal and creative interpretation – making use of the gaps in meaning left by the poet in the text.” (Elting & Firkins, 2006, p. 130) This was worked on intensively, as were phrasal stress and intonation. “Ideally, the skill of producing an utterance in the TL by correctly weighting and
reducing syllables and by applying deliberate overall phrasal stress is also acquired [...]” (Hunke, 2014b, p. 111). An important lesson to be learned was that even incomplete understanding of the content does not necessarily impede a good delivery. Students were strongly encouraged to develop a vivid mental picture of the poem as they understood it and to mould this into their recital performance.

Four of their recital performances were videotaped. These were made available to the students for feedback purposes. They regularly and continuously received feedback on aspects of their performance from fellow students and their teachers. Per session each student performed parts of or the entire poem multiple times. Initially, students were allowed to read out the poem. By the third recording only occasional prompts were allowed. The poetry performances all had to include the deliberate usage of body posture, gestures, and facial expressions alongside a speech delivery that met the prosodic characteristics outlined above. A final recording was made at an end of semester event – open to the public and with students asked to invite at least three friends – at the Multilingual Language Learning Centre iCoToBa.

Findings and lessons learned after the first poetry performance class

The first semester of the poetry performance class has been completed and the second class is currently under way. The retention of 11 out of 13 students in the first, already completed class, is encouraging, especially as the class is a non-credit elective. Students stated they appreciated the opportunity to work with the spoken TL through the medium of literature – a genre they otherwise often only encounter in order to translate into oblivion. The format chosen gave students both a lot of scaffolding and offered numerous challenges along the way.

An important scaffolding element for Japanese learners in particular was the mere canned or fixed nature of the text. Having a text to hold onto gives even insecure learners a chance to engage with the text at their own time, in their own space, and at their own pace. Further scaffolding could be offered through repeated feedback on performances and video recordings.

The challenges grew gradually, as the course progressed. Students were required to have moved away entirely from the written text and have memorised at least part of it by the third video recording. In particular, standing in front of the camera and the entire group when performing for the recording was a big step for some participating students. The four students
from year-group two especially needed more time to adjust to not only having to recite, but to performing their poem. However, all but one of these students continued until the end.

For all the students a developing sense of identification with their text was noted. Markedly, the way their performances improved became evident in the video recordings. The facial expressions, gestures, and body posture chosen often aided rather than hindered the process of continuously improving every aspect of their delivery. Above all, the students from higher year groups displayed a growing in-depth negotiation of meaning and a vivid engagement with their interpretation of the content.

The first semester of running the class was sufficiently encouraging to run a follow up, that also offered a chance for the improvement on a few minor issues. The scope of the drama-pedagogy-inspired activities could be widened. Students’ uptake of some of these exercises was at times hesitant. Students usually responded to the task at hand, but occasionally displayed a certain discomfort with freer, mingling activities. Some students also expressed the desire to work more intensively still on particular vowel sounds and certain selected consonant phonemes. Both are easily expandable or implementable although the latter issue will be best tackled on an individual training and feedback basis.

The class is likely to go into being offered a third time running next spring despite the fact that only four students enrolled this semester. One of these students is even participating for the second time. This student’s dedication as well as the other students’ enthusiasm are justifying the demand for running classes on performance aspects of speech acts.

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Author Note

Morten Hunke was educated in Germany, Ireland, and Sweden. For many years, he has been using literary formats creatively with students.
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