

Creating theatre in Hong Kong: Transforming students' perceptions of English learning

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Abstract

This study explored the influence of socially constructed learning concepts of 23 tertiary Hong Kong ESL students in a theatre production. To facilitate this exploration, this paper identified the socially constructed learning concepts that influenced second language learning of Chinese students in a Hong Kong tertiary institution, and investigated whether these concepts were enhanced in any way in this unique learning environment. Reflective journals, pre and postproduction in-depth interviews and questionnaires were used to collect data before, during and after the theatre production. The two directors and four students (two from the cast and two from the production team) completed the journals. The pre-production questionnaire and interview aimed to identify students' educational background, learning strategies and motivations before exposure to the learning environment. The post-production questionnaire and interview aimed to determine perceived learning outcomes. It was found that students were motivated by the excitement of theatre performance and the prospect of learning English. Students became more self-regulated, disciplined and motivated – where they showed higher levels of self-confidence, as the theatre production gave them a meaningful and successful experience whilst implicitly learning a language. This study hence, showed that the learning environment of theatre productions enhanced existing concepts of learning (use of surface and deep learning strategies) in a low stakes, second language environment that encourages students to enjoy learning for themselves.

Keywords: Theatre, English learning, students' perceptions, second language environment

Introduction

This study explored the influence of socially constructed learning concepts of 23 tertiary Hong Kong ESL students in a theatre production. Socially constructed learning concepts refer to the ways these students process information (Biggs, 1996; Sternberg, 1988) related to their learning of English as a second language, using methods they have been conditioned to within their social and cultural background (Palincsar, 1998). To facilitate this exploration, this paper first identified the socially constructed learning concepts that influenced second language learning of Chinese students in a Hong Kong tertiary institution, and then, investigated whether these concepts were enhanced in any way in this unique learning environment. Hence, this paper's literature review explores research associated with the learning approaches that are linked with Hong Kong Chinese students learning English as a second language, and how theatre productions can be a medium of such learning process.

Learning approaches of a Chinese learner

Biggs' (1993, cited in Watkins & Biggs, 1996) 3P model (presage-process-product) of teaching and learning explains the inter-relatedness of student characteristics, their preferred learning strategies, the learning context, and student outcomes. According to the model, there are three common approaches to student learning: (1) surface approach which is defined as 'motivation/strategy of a learner to meet minimum requirements with minimum effort' (Gordon & Debus, 2002); (2) deep approach as 'motivation/strategy to understand the materials being studied (Havard, Du, & Olinzock, 2005), and

see how ideas learnt can be applied by inter-relating it with other ideas, and (3) achievement approach which is motivation/strategy to obtain the highest grade possible (Zhang & Sternberg, 2000). Studies have demonstrated the impact of the learning environment and student characteristics (pre-age) on students' approach to learning (process - e.g., Biggs, 1987), and its consequent effect on student achievement (product - e.g., Albaili, 1995, cited in Zhang and Sternberg 2000). Thus, in investigating the impact of a learning environment on student outcomes, an investigation of students' conceptions of learning before, during, and after the learning experience is necessary.

Studies on Hong Kong Chinese learners have demonstrated that, as opposed to their Western counterparts who memorise without understanding the text, Chinese learners utilise surface learning strategies (memorisation and repetition) as a route to deep learning (Wachob, 2000); when students memorise chunks of text, the goal is to understand the meaning of the text, and in learning a skill, constant repetition is believed to facilitate skill acquisition (Watkins, 2000; Watkins & Biggs, 1996). This clarification of student approach to learning elucidates other characteristics of a Chinese learner such as student attributions of success to effort and not ability (Gow, Balla, Kember, Kit, & Bond, 1996); student motivation driven by both intrinsic and extrinsic strategies (e.g., family face, personal ambition, material reward, peer support and personal interest) (Lee, 1996); and student preference for a collaborative learning environment especially in dealing with difficult tasks (Tang, 1996). Biggs (1996) noted that surface learning approaches are typically used in teacher dominated situations that emphasise memorisation and recall as main methods of studying. He also suggested that that deep learning approaches, on the other hand, requires student-centred methods where interactive and co-operative ways are used for teaching and learning.

Furthermore, Chinese society is collective oriented (Chan, 1999). Actions within the society are geared towards the benefit of family and society. In this society, Confucian beliefs of harmony and balance determine rules of engagement. To maintain peace, creativity is not encouraged and authority is seldom challenged. The importance of the concept of face (person's dignity and reputation) has Chinese people socialised into hiding their emotions, prevents them from questioning or challenging peers and authority, and has them communicating in an implicit, and reserved manner (Bond 1991).

L2 learning environment of a theatre production

Studies using full scale productions for second language (L2) learning have been successful because theatre activities allow students to use the target language in a meaningful communicative manner (Ryan-Scheutz & Colangelo, 2004; Smith, 1984; Via, 1976, 1987). Activities such as studying the script, memorising lines, learning characterisation, rehearsal, working with native speakers, and finally performance immerses learners in the target language in two contexts – the text and the production environment – which allows students to acquire and learn the target language in an implicit manner (Wessels, 1987).

In the process of studying a play script, students internalise the target language as they memorise the text, and verbalise it through performance. The script provides the learners with an authentic context which allows them to focus on authentic language use instead of language form. In addition, the process of creating a theatre production involves construction or procurement of sets, costumes, and properties, and this requires communication with native speakers and their peers, making the rehearsal environment go beyond simulated activities (as in classrooms) but to authentic, actual situations. This immersion experience focuses students on language use for genuine communication, which has been found to improve their communicative-expressive ability (Hui & Lau, 2006). All these elements involve the whole personality of the student (emotions and character) that goes beyond cognitive skills making language learning more personal and meaningful.

Furthermore, theatre activities alter the nature of the elements of a regular language classroom to cater to students' individual differences and students' interests, and change the relationship between teachers and students from formal and distant to informal and collaborative (Dodson, 2002). A fun and relaxed learning environment is created which positively motivates students to learn and use the target language; the environment makes it easier to foster trust between teachers thus reducing affective filter (Schultz & Heinigk, 2002). Theatre activities also require physical movement and this entails involvement of the facial expressions, gestures and body language of the learner (Schewe, 2002). All these characteristics of the learning environment develop students' self-confidence, motivation, autonomous learning and critical thinking (Via, 1987) and creative thinking (Hui & Lau, 2006). Further-

more, it has been shown that Chinese adult learners (tertiary students included) are more open to new modes of learning, different from those learned in early schooling, when faced with authentic learning situations in L2 learning (Kennedy, 2002).

Method

This study explored the influence of a collaborative learning environment found in a theatre production on the socially constructed language learning concepts of 23 tertiary Hong Kong ESL students. To facilitate this exploration, this research identified the socially constructed learning concepts that influenced L2 learning of Chinese students in a English theatre production in a Hong Kong tertiary institution, and then, investigated whether these concepts were enhanced in any way in this unique learning environment. The results of this study were intended to inform policy makers, teachers and students about the effectiveness of participation in a theatre production in enhancing socially dependent concepts of learning in a second language-learning context.

The Production

The study's research background consisted of a theatre production by staff and students of a teacher-education institution in Hong Kong that offers undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate education programmes. Most of the staff and students are Hong Kong locals with a few mainland Chinese and Western expatriates. The medium of instruction in this institution is mostly Cantonese, the local dialect, with the exception of classes mandated to be delivered in English medium. Regardless of the programme enrolled, however, all students are required to be trilingual (Cantonese, English and Mandarin) and bi-literate (English and Chinese) by the time they graduate, and so, are required to take 120 hours of English and Mandarin classes in their first year of schooling at the institution.

To support students in their language proficiency development and to foster whole person development, the institution funded theatrical productions as an extra-curricular activity for the students. The production in this study, *Disney's Aladdin Jr.*, is the first musical produced and was chosen because it was an opportunity for interdisciplinary departments at the institution to collaborate on a project. The production took seven months of preparation and rehearsals meeting twice a week for three hours each. Rehearsals always started with 30 minutes of voice, body and acting warm-up activities then proceeded to voice, acting, or dance rehearsal. Production members, who worked with the artistic designer and the set builder, had responsibilities which included construction and procurement of sets, properties and costume, and to act as stage hands during performance. A whole day dress rehearsal and technical rehearsal was scheduled two days before performance. The play ran for five consecutive days and had an audience of over 600 people each night.

Participants

The production involved 28 cast and 17 crewmembers with 23 students from various programmes involved as either actor or production team member. These students were a mix of Hong Kong locals and Mainland Chinese, and so students mostly used Putonghua (Mandarin) or Cantonese to communicate with each other. However, because the directors (the researcher and an English professor) and choreographers were native speakers, the official language between cast and crew members were English. Consistent with research ethics, all participation was on the basis of voluntary and informed consent.

Instruments

Reflective journals, pre- and post-production in-depth interviews and questionnaires were used to collect data for the study. The two directors and four students (two from the cast and two from the production team) completed the journals. The directors' journals presented the teacher-director perspective of rehearsal activities and language learning activities within rehearsals while students' journals gave the learner's perspective. A coding system of recurring themes in the data was developed for analysis. The journals were read once for an overview of the data and then a second time for coding and analysis.

The pre-production questionnaire and interview aimed to identify students' educational background, learning strategies and motivations before exposure to the learning environment. To get a representative of varying experiences in the cast, the pre-production interviews were of two members of the production staff (the assistant director and the music coach) and two members of the cast (an experienced actor and an inexperienced actor). The interviews were conducted a week before rehearsals and each lasted for twenty minutes. The questionnaire was given to all 23 students on the first day of rehearsal. The questionnaire asked two open-ended questions on students' motivations and expectations in joining the production. Open-ended questions were used, so as not to prompt student responses. The pre-production interview, a semi-structured interview, aimed to enrich the results of this questionnaire by asking similar questions and a detailed description of their previous and current second language learning experiences. The transcription of the interviews and questionnaire results were coded similarly to the journals.

The post-production questionnaire and interview aimed to determine perceived learning outcomes. The students answered the questionnaire on the last day of performance and participated in the group interview scheduled a week after performance. A one-hour group interview was arranged instead of individual interviews due to scheduling problems. Furthermore, peers supported each other when questioned on difficult topics. There were four students in the group - one production team member and three actors. The transcription of the interviews and questionnaire results were also coded similar to the pre-production ones.

Results

Reasons for participating in the theatre production

Regardless of their programme of study or previous drama experience, the pre-production questionnaire indicated two reasons that motivated students to join the theatre production: interest in theatre itself (17 out of 23 students), and desire to improve their English proficiency (14 out of 23 students). Specifically, students interested in theatre viewed theatre as an opportunity to have fun, to display their skills (singing, acting or dancing) or to simply learn more about the process of creating a theatre production.

The results of the pre-production questionnaire were extended by the pre-production interview. The narrative below describes a student's learning experiences in tertiary level and its influence on her motivations to participate in a theatre production.

um, one of the reasons is that I join this is I can have fun. That's one of the most important reasons... and I really do enjoy drama as I can meet a lot of people from different programmes and different people from other countries as well.

Student A

When asked to explain her motivation for participating in the musical production, the student emphasised her desire to simply do something non-academic in an academic environment. She expanded on this motivation by explaining her love for drama as a means to improve her social life.

Learning activities in the theatre production

The directors' and students' journals described the learning activities within the learning environment. These activities were dependent on the students' role in the production; student-actors studied the script and learned how to act, sing, and dance. Students in the production team were tasked to construct the set, procure costumes and properties, and to liaise with the directors. Regardless of their roles and responsibilities, directors and teachers expected students to learn explicitly through direct instructions, and implicitly through the immersion environment of rehearsals.

Learning activities of production team

The production team were responsible for backstage work such as set construction, and makeup, costume and properties procurement. The production process started with the directors' visualising the overall artistic effect desired on stage. They communicated these ideas to the artistic director and set builder, and they in turn communicated their ideas to each other as to how they can make the direc-

tors' vision a reality. Once they decided on what to do, they delegated responsibilities to students according to their area of interest. All students reported to either the student assistant director or the artistic director and they both reported back to the directors. During performance, all students were given additional tasks such as backstage management (stage manager, stage hand), lighting and sound operation, and finally, overall maintenance and operation of the show during performance (organising costume, props, music, microphones, etc.). Throughout the process, directors' emphasised the need for coordination, cooperation and effective communication amongst all members of the production team to achieve their goal of producing a musical production.

Learning activities of cast members

The journals revealed that in the process of putting up the show, student-actors were primarily given direct instructions on performance skills (singing, dancing and acting). The first two months of rehearsal were dedicated to learning all the songs under the tutelage of the musical director.

Singing

To facilitate instructions and learning, students were given copies of the music (lyrics, music with and without lyrics) to study during the first week of rehearsal. The musical director asked a male music student assistant who had a clear baritone voice to assist in warming up students' voices for an hour. Then, the musical director will teach the melody of the music and then work on harmony by asking the student assistant to teach the men while she teaches the women.

The musical director was very pleased with the commitment of the students. They didn't understand all the words they sang, though... after the musical director left, I decided to go over the lyrics with them. I made sure they understood the words they are singing and pronunciation too. I think it was pretty helpful. I was really amazed most of them didn't understand what they were saying.

Director 1

The director journal entry illustrates students' enthusiasm in learning how to sing, most of them would have had some sort of formal training in music. However, despite having had the song and music with them since the first week of rehearsal, students still needed direct instruction on the melody of the song and the directors had to make time to go over vocabulary and pronunciation of the lyrics.

Dancing

Dancing was the next performing skill that students had to learn. In dancing, two choreographers would teach a dance step sequence and the students followed. To make it easier for the students, they would mostly teach the dance not according to the rhythm of the music, but according to the lyrics of the song. They rehearsed a sequence until the students got it right, then when the choreographers thought that the students have learnt it, they moved on to the next dance sequence until the entire dance was taught. They followed this pattern of instruction with all the dances to assist students in memorising dance steps and to get them dancing as a group. All the dances had to be rehearsed every rehearsal.

As the rehearsal progressed, the directors observed that all the students found it a challenge to sing and dance at the same time as only a couple of them had ever been part of a musical production (three out of 23 students).

We went to the theatre to try integrating everything on "Prince Ali". Some were singing but not dancing well while some were dancing well but not singing. A lot had trouble remembering dance movements. So I had them sing standing still and think of the movements while singing, and then return to moving. They were a little bit better, but what's good is that they got more feeling in it... I think I pushed and pulled them to a better gestalt, but much of it will be gone next time, and there's a long way to go.

Director 2

The students rehearsed their dance [Prince Ali]. They look a lot better... more together and unified... they also look like they now understand what they're doing. They really are so much better when they practice and practice.

Director 1

The directors' journal entries described the difficulty finding the relationship between song and dance. Despite three months of rehearsal, the directors still had to come up with activities to help students' sing and dance. Furthermore, while the second director was satisfied with the results of the exercise, he concluded with resignation that most of the students would forget what they had just done and backslide. Only with constant practise and rehearsal did the students improve.

Acting

After the students had somewhat refined their singing and dancing, the directors turned to teaching the students how to act. This process involved a series of short activities that helped students develop voice, movement, and character to ultimately express the characters in the script through voice and physical movement.

We usually tell students to memorise their lines before they come to rehearsal to make blocking easier. But, as usual, most of them haven't even bothered to read the script yet. So I decided to start the rehearsal with a warm-up of body and voice. I divided the cast into two halves and had them stand on opposite sides of the stage, and had them use their voices for expression on "Unique New York" with different dramatic situations. Then I had them lie on the floor and went through the relaxing thing and made them visualize their characters on a white screen in their minds, get up and do it. Finally I had them do tableaux within groups of characters.

Director 2

The journal entries described the kinds of activities that the directors would do to train the students to become actors. To develop articulation, projection and expression, the directors had students say a number of tongue twisters. To help students understand character motivation, the directors had students do role-plays and improvisations to help them visualise dramatic situations and make it more realistic and personal.

With regard to physical movement, the directors assumed that the students understood the scene that they were going to work out and so first allowed the students to interact and perform in a naturalistic manner. If the directors were not satisfied, they worked with the actors to express the emotions or actions they desired through an acting technique called emotional memory (recalling events in one's life and the emotions or feelings experienced in that particular event) or through demonstration.

I worked with the narrators on the reprise this time with their movements. I let them figure it out first themselves. I noticed that they were getting better at facial expressions. However, I noticed they end up all doing the same body movements. Then I asked them to vary it a little and Mary asked how they would do that. I asked them to experiment with their bodies. I demonstrated a little – she ended up copying me. Anyway, the others however tried to work it out on their own. I still had to block them to create levels.

Director 1

As mentioned in the journal entry, the difficulty that the directors and the students experienced in this activity was getting students to express themselves individually in a theatrical dramatic manner. To overcome this problem, modelling was usually the teaching approach used by the directors. However, students ended up imitating the directors and had to be reminded to come up with original movements.

Student outcomes of theatre production

The production gradually came together and improved after eight months of approximately 200 hours of rehearsal. Each rehearsal was planned and scheduled to work on an aspect of the production and once finished, moved on to the next. Constant rehearsing was imperative to make the performance seamless and flawless.

We just finished dress rehearsal, and for the first time in eight months, I'm confident and relieved. We'll have a great show tomorrow. The kids are working together as a group and doing things automatically now. No one's forgetting lines and hardly anyone forgets blocking. What's important is that they are enjoying themselves. I'm pretty amazed at their patience during technical rehearsal yesterday. It was a long day but no one complained (except for the heavy makeup they have to wear). Technical people are also enjoying themselves with being in control of op-

erating spotlights, curtains and everything else. Things are running so smoothly we could probably do this in our sleep.

Director 1

These results were confirmed by the data obtained from the post-production questionnaire. When asked what students learnt in the production, all of them answered learning how to sing, act and dance, simultaneously.

The post-production interview, however, revealed an interesting paradox. While students appreciated and valued the end result of the project, students viewed rehearsals as the least favourite activity in the production process (15 out of 23 students). This perception was confirmed in the post-production interview.

What did you like least in this whole experience?

Rehearsals! I don't understand why we have doing dance moves over and over again.

Student A

I don't like waiting for my turn to go on stage.

Student B

My character doesn't really do anything while others [chorus] are having fun.

Student C

When the researcher asked what students liked least about the production process, students' reiterated that constant repetition of dance moves during rehearsals, and waiting for their turn to go on stage was the least favourite activity. This shows that while students realised the necessity of constant repetition to achieve a flawless product, they did not necessarily enjoy the experience.

Discussion

This study explored the influence of socially constructed learning concepts of 23 tertiary Hong Kong ESL students in a theatre production. The students' original intention of joining the theatre production was mainly encouraged by the excitement of a theatre performance and the prospect of learning English – showing an element of personal interest (Lee, 1996) and the openness to new modes of learning (Kennedy, 2002). The theatre production gave the students a means of learning a language in a collaborative environment as usually preferred by most Chinese students (Tang, 1996). Despite their original intentions, the students perceived the learning environment as low stakes and highly sociable (fun and relaxed), and did not take the learning process as seriously as they could. It was also found that in the initial stages, these students mainly used surface learning as a strategy to learn aspects of the theatre production, a finding indicated by other studies of learners (Biggs, 1993; Gordon & Debus, 2002). Furthermore, this goes to show that students in the theatre production utilised surface learning strategies (memorisation and repetition) as a route to deep learning (Wachob, 2000) that happened in the later stage of the production (Watkins, 2000; Watkins & Biggs, 1996).

This study's use of theatre production as a medium of teaching and learning was based on previous studies that had successful language learning activities that allowed students to use the target language in a meaningful communicative manner (Ryan-Scheutz & Colangelo, 2004; Smith, 1984; Via, 1976, 1987). During the production, activities such as studying the script, memorising lines, learning song lyrics, and body and dance movements, immersed students in the target language through the text and the production environment. This immersion situation allowed students to acquire and learn the target language in an implicit manner (Wessels, 1987). The students, however, initially employed a large amount surface learning methods that included imitation and mimicking of spoken words, style and movement. This result could be contributed to the fact that the students were faced with a new learning environment and the only way they knew best was the prior knowledge and practice of surface approaches (Wachob, 2000).

The result showed that with more time and practice, the students gained better understanding of the materials and the wholesome role they were engaged in, and were able to produce both language and action within the collaborative learning environment of the theatre production (Watkins, 2000; Watkins

& Biggs, 1996). With continued use of the surface approach within the immersion experience students were able to eventually improve their creative product and communicative-expressive ability (Hui & Lau, 2006). With support from both the directors as mentors and their peers as advocates, the students were able to demonstrate commendable performance in the production. The directors were not only mentors but also became the students' advocates whilst the peers became mentors in other instances (Tang, 1996). All these elements involve the whole personality of the student (emotions and character) that goes beyond cognitive skills making language learning more personal and meaningful. This finding also extended studies which asserted that theatre activities alter the nature of the elements of a regular language classroom to cater to students' individual differences and students' interests, and change the relationship between teachers and students from formal and distant to informal and collaborative (Dodson, 2002).

The theatre production collaborative environment also motivated students in an exciting manner to learn and use the target language (Schewe, 2002). Although the students in this study found the rehearsals tiresome and tedious, the outcome of the practices were shown in the way students became more self regulated, disciplined and motivated (Schewe, 2002). The students displayed enhanced motivation to learn and achieve perfection through constant rehearsals and repetition. The students also showed higher levels of self confidence as the theatre production gave them a meaningful and successful experience whilst implicitly learning a language (Via, 1987). Such findings show that theatre environment could extend its function to include language-learning and affective outcomes.

Conclusion

This study hence, showed that the learning environment of theatre productions enhanced existing concepts of learning (use of surface and deep learning strategies) in a low stakes, second language environment that encourages students to enjoy learning for themselves. Further longitudinal research in how students improve and maintain their L2 learning after the theatre production would be informative and useful. Such a study would allow for a closer examination of the impact that new modes of learning with low stakes has on students' acquisition of a second language.

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