

Description of a Theatre Review Writing Task in an Online University Classroom Setting

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Abstract

The Internet provides us with a plethora of material to read and view and is the tool that people use today to communicate and acquire information. Youtube is a globally used platform for individuals and organizations to share audio and visual material. Due to the COVID-19 situation, many teachers in schools and universities have looked to this website to supplement their teaching as it provides a scope and depth of material that is easily and readily accessible to the public. Theatres having been forced to close because of the pandemic have used this platform to share their work, and many teachers, especially those teaching theatre or performance-related studies have accessed recordings of performances to use in the online classroom as it is, as far as I know, the only way to access the arts for free during the pandemic. As a teacher of English language with an interest in drama and theatre arts I had been viewing many free performances as I hope to share and foster an appreciation of drama and theatre in my students. With that in mind I attempted to design a theatre reviewing task for use in the English Language classroom. The report shows my findings and my reflections of the task, and reveals that viewing and writing about the theatre arts can have a positive influence on students.

Keywords

Review writing, theatre production, production elements, online setting, asynchronous teaching.

Background

After British prime minister Boris Johnson announced the “lockdown” in late March 2020, all theatres in Britain shut their doors to the public as most of the public were asked to “stay home”. In response to this unprecedented situation, the National Theater of London announced that it would broadcast a selection of recorded productions under the banner of National Theater at Home. Initially six shows were announced – including *Jane Eyre*, *Treasure Island*, *Twelfth Night*, *Frankenstein* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, and premiering with Richard Bean’s comedy *One Man, Two Guvnors* – and this gesture of goodwill was extended to a further ten performances, all of which were shown free of charge to the public on YouTube for a limited one week run (Lukowski,

2020) On its premiere *One Man, Two Guvnors* was watched by 200,000 people – which was four times the number of people who saw the first National Theatre Live show of *Phedre* in 2009 – and approximately 2.5 million people watched the production during its limited run (Pollack-Pelzner, 2020). In addition to these popular broadcasts, the National Theatre Collection, a selection of 30 plays and an extensive range of theatre books, was made available (via Bloomsbury and Pro-Quest) to the global education sector. My university’s library obtained access to this collection for a six-week free trial, so I decided rather fortuitously than by design to have a group of students watch and review one of the theatre productions.

Introduction

The use of drama can bring many psychological and communicative benefits to students in the English language classroom (Miccoli, 2003; Ranzoni, 2003; Sato, 2001; Shapiro & Leopold, 2012; Zyoud, 2010). But how might it benefit students in an online setting? As theatres have been closed and classrooms have gone online, perhaps the only viable option is sharing recordings of productions. Having watched most of the free productions which the National Theatre made available to the public via Youtube, and with some access to these productions through my university library, I thought it might be interesting to have students see one of them. The setting for this activity was my first-year Media Literacy class which had twenty Japanese university students with TOIEC scores ranging somewhere between 700 and 800. During the course students been introduced to literal or factual content in the form of articles, TED Talks, interviews, and debates, and since the class was taught asynchronously and there was no live platform for communication, all correspondence was carried out electronically. However, midway through the term as I was searching for an interesting project for my students and realizing that the 6-week limited trial of National Theatre Collection was soon to expire, I decided to have students watch and review a production. At that stage, I had no idea whether my students had ever seen a live piece of theatre, let alone written a review of a theatre production. Quite simple I went ahead with the plan and put my faith in the words of *Guardian* theatre reviewer Lyn Gardner, who in a 2012 *Guardian* article on the subject of how to write a theatre review had stated that “there are no rules” (Gardner, 2012). The production I chose for review was the National Theatre’s *Frankenstein* which was praised in a *Telegraph* newspaper review as being ‘well worth seeing’ (Spencer, 2011). The decisive factors were it was a modern adaptation of a classic story, it was, unlike many of the other shows in the collection, under two hours long, and it starred Benedict Cumberbatch, who I discovered most students knew after being made aware of the media consumption patterns (i.e., Netflix) through an activity we had done earlier in the term. The main purpose of the task was fostering a greater appreciation of arts and theatre craft in the students, and to examine whether students were able to review a piece of theatre. As my choice to do the activity was a last-minute decision, there was little time or room to guide students on how to respond to the task. One website I accessed before setting the task was a Wikihow blog entitled ‘How To Write A Theatre Play’ (2020) which helpfully laid out 14 simple steps to writing a theatre review.

Table 1. ‘How to Write a Theatre Play’ by Wikihow

1	Understand the purpose – give a subjective and informed response.
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2	Look at structure – introduction, themes & plot, acting & direction, design elements, recommendation.
3	Read the examples – analyze other theatre reviews.
4	Read the play – get familiar with the subject matter.
5	Get a sense of the context – get an idea of the production style, the company and director.
6	Look at the program – read director’s notes, production information, and cast biographies.
7	Take notes during the show – write down striking details for the review.
8	Write a rough draft immediately after watching – describe, analyze, judge.
9	Create a strong hook – something to engage readers at the start.
10	Answer 4W questions – who? what? where? when? in the first few lines.
11	Discuss the plot – summarize story, setting, characters.
12	Talk about the acting – react to relationship between the characters and believability of the actors.
13	Analyze the design – set, props, lighting, sound, costume, make-up.
14	React to the whole play – give overall judgement suggesting why audience should watch it or not.

The task

I decided to have my students write a 300-word review and they had a two week period to watch the recording of the production and complete the review before submitting it electronically via the university learning management system. I also reduced the 14 steps suggested in the blog to a more manageable size to fit the word count. The following table shows the areas the students were instructed to cover in their review.

Table 2. Instructed areas for students to consider when reviewing

1	Word Count
2	Cast and Crew
3	Plot and Themes
4	Acting
5	Costume and Makeup
6	Staging and Set
7	Sound and Lighting
8	State whether you liked it or would recommend it.

I chose these areas because I felt were the typical elements addressed in theatre reviews. Word count was simply a way to measure how much students had written.

Word Count

Table. 3 The range of words students wrote in their review

Word Count	237	243	247	250	251	256	258	259	277	284	287	288	288	321	336	359
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Sixteen of the twenty students submitted a review of the production of *Frankenstein*. Three of them managed to write 300 words or more – 359 was the highest number of words, and 237 was the lowest. The average number of words was 277 which was within the 10% leeway applied to

the task. However, half of the students wrote below 270 words which might suggest they found it too challenged or not motivating.

Observations

Cast and Crew

The naming of those involved in the production produced some surprising results. Only five students mentioned the name of an actor in the production, and all five of them commented on the lead actor playing the creature (Benedict Cumberbatch). There was not one mention of the company that staged the production (Royal National Theatre) or the director (Danny Boyle), or any other actor or crew member involved. Seven students mentioned the title of play (*Frankenstein*). Most of the students referred to the doctor role as “Frankenstein” or “Dr. Frankenstein” whereas three students did not even mention his name at all, which made me wonder what production they were indeed reviewing.

It was surprising that not all the students were able to distinguish between Dr. Frankenstein and the creature. Ten students correctly referred to the doctor role as Frankenstein. Among those, two students stated they had initially thought of Frankenstein as the creation. Three students did in fact mistakenly refer to Frankenstein as the creature, which is not an uncommon mistake (if you consider movie posters of *Frankenstein* with Boris Karloff’s image on it). The omission and inaccuracy of basic details made some of the reviews confusing and difficult to read. The focus on Benedict Cumberbatch was not at all surprising since he is a famous actor and played the lead part in this production, but it was striking there was no interest at all to anyone else in the production.

Plot and Themes

In an interview at the time of the production with ArtsDesk about his adaptation of *Frankenstein*, playwright Nick Dear admitted “purloining” the story of Mary Shelley’s novel to get the result he wanted (2011). Two significant differences between the Shelley novel and Dear’s adaptation were that the story was told from the perspective of the creature rather than Dr Frankenstein, and at the end of the production the creature’s life is spared. One student expressed disappointment at this latter difference - “I want to [make] some changes in plot such as change of end”. On the other hand, one student thought this ending was “thought-provoking”, resembling the ending of the Ryunosuke Akutagawa’s novel *Rashomon*, a story depicting two accounts of the same event which leaves readers wondering what actually happened. A common theme in both stories is self-interest because the main characters go on a trail of destruction to fulfill their needs. This fatalistic outlook was pointed out by one student who wrote “it is very dangerous to seek own ideal without others’ advice or opinions because it is possible to cause disaster likes Frankenstein’s experiment that created the monster in the story.” In addition, six students noted the theme of revenge and other notable themes included “identity crisis”, “rejection by society”, “finding love”, and the idea of nature versus nurture, which one student referred to as the “born good theory and born evil theory”.

In the same interview playwright Dear had said he had hoped audiences would characterize the production “more by questing intelligence than by creepy thrills” (ArtsDesk, 2011), and like this my students were showing thoughtful inquiry into the themes and plot. However, several students did acknowledge some of the squeamish elements – “zombie-like” and “blood” – within the production, and some even seemed frightened or put off by it, which is not unsurprising considering the dark content. The major drawback was that many students did not elaborate their ideas far enough and some of them connected their ideas on plot with those on other elements of production, so the focus for the reader was not always clear.

Acting

Comments on acting were uniformly focused on the creature, the protagonist of the production. The creature was referred to, both correctly and incorrectly, in a few different ways – “the monster”, “the creature”, “Frankenstein” and, as one student called it, “golem”. Several laudatory adjectives for example, “amazing”, “wonderful”, “impressive” and “unforgettable” were used to convey what they thought of Cumberbatch’s acting, and some students commented on the atmosphere the actor created with adjectives like “strange”, “surprising”, “creepy” and “scary”. Three students used simile to express physicality of the actor – “like a real zombie”, “like a wild animal” and, in referring to the opening ‘birth’ scene, “like a newborn deer”. One student gave a good description of the character’s movement: “The actor looks like as if he stood up for the first time. He bended his joint unusually which helped him to look his as a non-human.” Ultimately, the students were largely impressed (“I’ve never seen anything like this before”) or overwhelmed (“I felt sort of power from them”) by the Cumberbatch’s performance.

By describing what they had seen and how it made them feel, students showed they understood, empathized with, and had approved of the acting. Of all the different production elements they had reviewed, comments on acting were the clearest and easiest to understand. They could state whether they liked something or not and they seemed more at ease expressing what they thought of the acting. As mentioned, students were able to use simile and metaphor to illustrate their points which helped me envisage what they had described. Fostering a greater appreciation of theatre was one of the aims so it was pleasing that students were impressed with the acting.

Sound and lighting

Comments on lighting and sound were brief. Students could show how lighting was used to denote time of day – “sunshine and moonlight” – and could use simple adjectives to describe the effect the lighting established, for example, “if it was afternoon, the warm and bright light was used and if it was night, the dark and cold light was used”. One student commented on the associative effects by stating - “When the creature moved, there was no sound and light of only one color...(but)...When the people who live in the city moved, everyone sang the song with the music and light flashes.” The most striking comment was by a student who attempted to describe what the lighting was representing – “At the beginning, the stage was darkish and illuminated by

red lights so this setting could rouse feelings of nervousness". But there was an overall sense that students struggled to comment on lighting and sound. One student made the sweeping remark that the lighting was "powerful, shining and beautiful", and on sound, of which there was only one comment, a student stated it was "classy" and "particularly drew my heart", which at the very least suggests it was effective and affective.

It seems from the responses that there was little keen interest in lighting elements. Perhaps it is because lighting, like sound are not literal elements but to a certain extent immaterial, and often supplementary to a scene in a production in how they endow and give atmosphere to the action. Changes in lighting can be very subtle, and changes in music can be fleeting, so it is not surprising students had little to say on these elements. Perhaps only skilled people in those areas are able to pick up on specifics.

Staging and set

Observations on staging and set were also brief. Seven students commented on the size and shape of the staging. ("circle" which here means a revolving staging), and one student observed that the "set spins and sinks". Two students remarked on the speed and smoothness of the scene changes and how this helped to show a passage in time and shift in location. A further two students pointed out some of the special effects on the stage such as the locomotive, the rain, and the use of fire.

Staging encompasses several aspects. Among these are the stage space which the actors and crew work in and the dramatic space which is the different locations shown in the production. A couple of students were able to comment on the stage space by referring to size and fluidity of changes, but no one addressed the dramatic space and the different locations within the story. Few students commented on elements of the set in relation to what was happening in the story. It is surprising that even though the production had an interesting staging and numerous innovative examples of scientific discovery in the machine age – including the impressive three thousand light bulbs which hung above the stage and the auditorium to portray the discovery of the age of electricity – students commented the least on this section.

Make up and costumes

Students used adjectives such as "scary", "bloody", "terrible" and "horrible" to describe the bruised and scarred appearance of the creature. Similar drab expressions like "ragged" and "dirty" were used to describe costume design. Interestingly, one student made the observation that the creature acquired clothes as it grows in strength and knowledge, and another student thought the creature "looked like Adam" in the opening scene when it emerged from its incubator wearing a mere loin cloth. Two students stated that costume could be representative of "class", "profession" and "era", but their points were not supported with examples.

Although students gave brief comments about these production elements what was apparent from the culmination of the results was there was a sense of what costume could contribute to a performance.

Is it something the students liked or would recommend?

Considering that three students mentioned in their reviews that they had never seen live theatre before, it was encouraging to find out that most of the students had enjoyed watching the production of *Frankenstein*. Several students made positive comments such as “I am glad to see this video” and “This work is the most impressive work for me”. Equally encouraging was the level of engagement students had while watching the production – “I could see this with interest until the end” and “At first, I cannot understand this video content and I thought this video is too scary for me to watch, [but]... I became to like this story”. Most heartening of all were their remarks of appreciation (“Thank you for showing wonderful theater”) and endorsement (“Everyone should see it”). Students showed they not only had a good time watching the production, but they had also learned a lesson from it, such as, “learn the importance of life and love”, “forgive the fault of others and have a tolerant mind”, and “love is the very important factor of all the living creatures”. This suggests there was something valuable to be taken from this experience. Two students found relevance in the examples of science and technology in the story by stating “we already met the creature in the form of AI or robots” and “perhaps the same thing will happen in the process of making AI, clone, savior brothers... This play is lesson for us who live in 21st century”.

It was good to know that students were able to make connections between the ideas in the stories and what is happening in the real world today. This suggests that stories written two hundred years ago can still have considerable importance today, and that my students could show a level of perception in finding relevance and worth in this theatrical and imaginative work of fiction. It was also good to know they enjoyed watching the recording and learned something from it, which shows this was not only an entertaining and empowering experience but also an educational one.

Reflection

In hindsight, Gardner’s assertion that “there are no rules” to writing a theatre review may not be a great deal of help when it comes to guiding students to writing a theatre review in the English language classroom. Making comments, giving brief descriptions, and offering the odd example to illustrate a point are some of the things most of the students could do. But many of them seemed content on ‘doing enough’ and very were not very keen to elaborate on their ideas. For students to think more deeply and critically about the production and clearly articulate what they want to say, the task would require better planning and scaffolding, and greater motivation, and students would also need much more time to write the review. Some sort of rubric stating what is expected of the students would be useful and so would having a fuller understanding of the story, and greater knowledge of the elements and how to examine them in review. One book which would benefit this process is Pavis’s *Analyzing Performance* (2004), particularly chapter 2

titled 'Tools of Analysis' as it contains a comprehensive questionnaire of elements to consider in review (see appendix). Based on my experience and findings, I would suggest the following activities to teachers who are thinking of having their students review a recorded (or live) theatre performance in class:

Table 4. Suggested examples for teachers of theatre review writing in the English Language classroom.

1.	Provide students with two or three examples of play reviews to show them what a review looks like and contains, preferably reviews of different productions of the same play to introduce plot and ideas within the story.
2.	Give students a brief synopsis with information about plot, setting and character.
3.	Have students watch and analyze a scene or two from the production so they can learn how to identify and analyze the elements within it before attempting a review of the entire production
4.	Give students a rubric so they know exactly what is expected of them. This should cover the performance element for consideration, and suggested word counts for each performance element.
5.	Provide students with a note-taking sheet containing headings for the performance elements so they can jot down their thoughts while watching the production.
6.	Allow plenty of time for students to watch the production, write up their notes, and turn their notes into coherent thoughts. One suggestion is to use 3 ninety-minute lessons to do the following tasks - introduce the task, show review examples, analyze a scene, watch the whole production, discuss the elements (in groups, if taught synchronously, or via written correspondence, if taught asynchronously) and write up the review.

This research was very productive as it has enabled me to formulate a better way to construct this activity with Japanese learners of English. It is clear from the students' responses that they got great enjoyment out of watching the theatre production, so if the task is managed more effectively and there are clearer guidelines for students to carry it out they can complete the written work with greater knowledge, care and precision. I found students at this level able to reflect on the production they saw and articulate their thoughts in fairly focused and grammatically correct sentences and most of them could meet the task requirements in terms of word count. For more in depth and structured work, however, it might be better to try the steps I have suggested which give the students more time and space to reflect upon the performance and think about what they want to write. Additionally, for those interested, I would suggest the book *Performance Analysis* (Counsell & Wolf Ed., 2001), which is a collection of texts on critical theory of performance.

Conclusion

A few weeks after the emergency declaration Sonia Friedman (2010), theatre writer and critic of *The Telegraph*, said "theatre is incompatible with social distancing". Yet while theatres and schools have shut, teachers have had to search for alternative ways to bring examples of performance to their students into the online classroom. The sixteen productions presented by National Theatre of London on YouTube were a good example of what is available today online for free, and many other theatre companies have also made their work available to the public on the Internet. Viewing these theatre productions can bring benefits people in many ways in good and bad times. The recordings of the sixteen productions were prefaced by the statement:

“theatres around the world are closed and facing a devastating impact from coronavirus. Theatre and the arts are a positive force for our community in turbulent times” (National Theatre, 2020). Recorded productions of live theatre, as has been shown, can be a source of education, entertainment and empowerment, but they can also be a source of comfort and solace, in troubling times, particularly for students who are stuck at home all day behind their computer screens. Writing a review was a good way to challenge students to examine a work of theatre – a form which is often ignored in favour of cheap and populist forms of entertainment or considered too high brow. The act of critiquing a theatre production can help to enhance skills in comprehension, notation, reflection, analysis, description, and justification. It can also be a fun and emotionally rewarding experience to view a form of entertainment and a nice change from the seemingly more pedestrian and literal tasks which are often set as written assignments. Lastly, the showing of modern and digital material is satisfying for students and reminds them that they are learning ideas from the contemporary age.

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Appendix

Patrice Pavis – Theatre Analysis: Some Questions and a Questionnaire
Taken from:
<https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/S0266464X00001573>

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