

# My Way as an Oral Interpreter: Toward Multicultural Coexistence

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## 1. Introduction: What is Oral Interpretation (OI)?

The way that language is expressed orally has a marked impact on the way it is understood and grasped by the listener. In this paper, I would like to look back at my journey as an “oral interpreter” in the process of studying and teaching English as a foreign language (Kono: 2004). I would specifically like to reflect on the significance and joy of oral interpretation in language teaching aiming at multicultural coexistence.

What is Oral Interpretation (OI)? Lee and Gure (2001:3) defined OI as “the art of communicating to an audience a work of literary art in its intellectual, emotional and aesthetic entirety.” For example, below are two perspectives on OI, based on Omi (1984) and Omi (1996), as well as on my own OI practice and teaching.

- 1) The development of students’ skills to coordinate critical and appreciative reading of text with its oral expression
- 2) The overlapping area of literature, phonetics, speech communication, and language education

I will elaborate on these perspectives later.

## 2. My Earlier Studying and Teaching Experiences

Now let me describe some of my earlier studying and teaching experiences of OI when I did not know the term.

### 2.1 Brief Descriptions of My Student Days

#### ○ Junior High School Days

- Listening to radio English conversation programs, longing for authentic oral English
- Participating in an English recitation contest and gaining confidence in myself by being awarded a prize in it

### ○ Senior High School Days

- Developing the habit of *shikan-rodoku* (Kunihiro 1999: 15-96), or repeated oral reading, unconsciously
- Winning the all-Akita-Prefecture Senior High School English Oratorical Contest
- Acting in an English drama, *The Merchant of Venice*, in a school festival, thus sharing the world of imagination with peers

### ○ University Days

- Losing confidence among brilliant students from all over Japan
- Reading *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams in the English Phonetics Course without realizing the course's aim was OI
- Becoming interested in the teaching profession

## 2.2 Teaching at Senior High School

I began to teach English in Akita Senior High School in 1961. I was ambitious enough to teach English *in* English. In the classroom, I tried to use the technique of oral introduction, that is, a kind of storytelling, with the students' textbooks closed. I tried to make the students understand the contents of the text through my oral English as well as through my non-verbal strategies, like facial expressions, gestures, and body movements. One of the memorable stories I used as teaching material was *The Little Prince* by Saint-Exupéry, a French novelist. With its simple language and deep thought, it attracted me very much. I listened to the original French version of its record again and again, and tried to coordinate its messages with its oral expressions in the classroom. In addition, I enjoyed coaching a number of interested students in public speaking and drama as extra-curricular activities.

## 2.3 In-service Studies at University of Sydney, Australia

After seven years of teaching at senior high school, I was transferred to Akita National College of Technology, a 5-year system college with senior high school and junior college combined. I taught there for 20 years, from 1968 to 1988. I focused on oral communication education in the classrooms, but did not enjoy working there so much, perhaps because I could not find chances to be an oral interpreter myself or to coach students in oral interpretation activities.

Luckily, however, I was given a chance to get a scholarship for in-service studies at the

University of Sydney, Australia, in 1976. I was enrolled in the Graduate Diploma Program in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language, or TEFL. The main three areas we studied were The Principles and Methods of TEFL, English Phonetics, and Theoretical and Applied Linguistics. What I was most interested in was English Phonetics, especially Prosody, or rhythm, stress, and intonation.

Besides the compulsory phonetics course, I took the elective prosody course. It was composed of two parts. The 1st part focused on the theory of prosody and the 2nd part on its application to what I later knew should be termed “oral interpretation.” We were provided a play script and induced to practice for a dramatic performance on stage. I greatly enjoyed the practice and performance of the play. I had never imagined I could revive the joy of performing on the stage again. While rehearsing, I had a lot of interactions with my peers, mostly English teachers from Asia-Pacific countries. It was really a wonderful experience for me, but at that time, I little thought what wealth it would bring to me in my later teaching career. Actually, the organization of the elective prosody course, i.e. the theory of prosody followed by its application to OI, gave me a useful hint on the teaching process on my English Phonetics Course later in my career. I will elaborate on this later.

#### 2.4 Turning Point in My Academic Career

After returning to Akita, Japan, I continued to study English phonetics and found a chance to take part in the summer vacation course in English phonetics at University College London, UK, in 1985. It was a nicely organized course, with theory and practice wonderfully combined. I was especially interested in prosody there.

I was lucky enough to be transferred to Akita University in 1988. I took charge of the English Phonetics Course there until my retirement in 2004, as well as the Principles and Methods of TEFL course for the last 7 years.

### 3. OI Projects at Akita University

In 1992, I learned of an OI approach (Pryately and Schmider 1993) by way of Dr. Margaret Pryately, a visiting professor from St. Cloud State University, Minnesota, USA, to Akita University. I was involved in an OI collaborative project with her in 1993 and 1994, by helping her coach voluntary students to prepare for CAJ (Communication Association of Japan)

OI Festival and Seminar, with me focusing on speech reform.

After Dr. Pryately left Akita, I worked alone, coaching voluntary students in OI, and having them participate in OC (Oral Communication) Festivals sponsored by JACET (Japan Association of College English Teachers) OC SIG (Special Interest Group), of which I have been a member since its foundation in 1995. In the 1st Festival held in 1996, one student from Akita University performed a solo interpretation of *The Daffodils* by William Wordsworth.

Now let me refer to the conversion of the teaching process in my English Phonetics Course in 1998. Before then, I had adopted the bottom-up approach, i.e. teaching segmental phonemes first, and then prosody. In 1998, I reversed the process and adopted the top-down approach, i.e. teaching prosody first and then segmental phonemes, because I realized the latter approach was more relevant to effective communication. I also introduced the organization of the Sydney University prosody course, by integrating the teaching of theory with its application to OI, giving assignment and assessment as shown below (JACET OC SIG 2002: 102-108).

- 1) Submission of students' OI work in recorded cassette → 2) Individual guidance →
- 3) Presentation → 4) Performance in OC Festival by voluntary students (group interpretation of *Tatsuko's Romance*)

Then in 1999, I began to work with another reliable collaborator, Professor Masako Sasaki at Akita University. We collaborated by integrating 1) and 2) below.

- 1) OI as verbal and nonverbal expressions on the basis of prosody (Kono's English Phonetics Course)
- 2) OI as persuasive oral communication skills (Sasaki's Oral Communication Course)

We worked on our collaborative teaching as co-curricular activities (Sasaki and Kono 2002). Our project was part of the whole projects of JACET OC SIG. We, as well as our students, were encouraged and supported by the members of our SIG, especially in our annual OC Festivals. The group performances by our students in the 1999 and 2000 Festivals were *Twelve Angry People* (originally, *Twelve Angry Men*) and *The Verdict* respectively.

#### 4. OI in English Pronunciation Teaching Course as Part of Teacher Training Curriculum

Because of the innovation of the Faculty curriculum in 2001, my English phonetics course was divided into two parts: English Phonetics (1<sup>st</sup> Semester) and English Pronunciation Teaching (2<sup>nd</sup> Semester). The latter was placed as part of the teacher training curriculum. Recently, more emphasis has been placed on oral communication, including OI, in the junior and senior high school courses of study released by the Japanese Ministry of Education. No doubt, the success of the courses of study depends on the quality of the teacher training curriculum at university. From that perspective, I will report on how I worked with the students in my English Pronunciation Teaching Course, focusing on my 2003 project.

##### 4.1 Aims of English Pronunciation Teaching Course

- 1) Developing students' skills to interpret orally the messages conveyed by written texts and to express them prosodically
- 2) Developing students' nonverbal expressions in the form of dramatic performance, entailing extra-curricular activities.
- 3) Developing students' pedagogical skills to teach English pronunciation effectively.

##### 4.2 Steps Taken by Students in 2003 English Pronunciation Teaching Course

- 1) Watch the movie *The Little Prince* by Saint-Exupéry.
- 2) Select the most relevant part as text for performance.
- 3) Discuss the text, interpreting it orally. Then the students were encouraged to think about the intentions and emotions of the characters, as well as of the author, and express them in natural and effective oral interactions by incorporating the information gained from English phonetics, especially the discourse and attitudinal functions of intonation.

Steps 1 to 3 were conducted as in-curricular activities for all the students enrolled in my English pronunciation teaching course.

- 4) Revise the text as a play script. The revisions were made jointly by the teacher and the students.
- 5) Practice performance by using appropriate stresses and intonations.
- 6) Practice performance by coordinating verbal expressions with nonverbal ones, such as facial expressions, gestures and body movements.

- 7) Evaluate each other's performance.
- 8) Refine dramatic performance based on the evaluations.
- 9) Present the drama as performance in front of the audience.

Steps 4 to 8 were conducted as co-curricular activities, or the combination of the in-curricular activities with the extra-curricular ones for volunteer students. Step 9 was their final performance in the OC Festival.

Tsue (2004: 30-32), through her analysis of a questionnaire given to festival performers, observed, “All the students came to have more confidence in oral expressions and oral communication ability than before, and they came to have motivation to improve their oral communication ability.” She also found some of the students “knew what oral communication and OI were from the experience of their practices for the OC Festival, and they also had interests in OI and got some skills and ideas to teach OI in the future as teachers.” She noticed, moreover, that some of those who were ashamed to speak loud or gesture in front of the audience at first “finally performed and played their parts magnificently on the stage at the festival.” From these observations, we can see the effectiveness of OI through the accomplishments of the eight festival performers, who are prospective teachers of English.

## **5. OI in Terms of Language Teaching Aiming at Multicultural Coexistence**

### **5.1 Multiculturalism: Common Theme of 2001-2003 Projects**

Let me present here the common theme under which the 2001-2003 projects were conducted. It was “multiculturalism.” Below you will find each work and subtheme.

- *The Glass Menagerie* (2001) – Coexistence of Different Personalities
- *Dreamtime* (2002) – Messages from Australian Indigenous Peoples
- *The Little Prince* (2003) – Universality beyond Difference of Cultures

The 2001 and 2002 projects were collaborative ones with Sasaki, while in 2003 I worked alone. I will show you how in 2003 I adopted *The Little Prince* with its subtheme: universality beyond difference of cultures, by reconsidering what OI is.

The idea of adopting *The Little Prince* with its subtheme had been inspired by Professor

Ingram's lecture given at a workshop on education for intercultural understanding and EFL education held at Akita University in August 2000. Below is the relevant quotation from his paper, published later (Ingram 2001: 85).

Finally, if individuals are to demonstrate positive cross-cultural attitudes appropriate to life in a multicultural, multiracial and globalised society and world, they must be aware and accepting of human diversity while valuing the essential humanity that permeates all cultures. Language teaching can help to achieve this because it can provide the vital supplement to knowledge and understanding, the awareness and insight that comes from equal status interaction between the learner and people of other cultural, racial, and language backgrounds. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, a French philosophical writer of books for children and adults, often dwells on the relationships between people. He wrote: *Il est très simple: on ne voit bien q'avec le cœur. L'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux.* [Saint-Exupéry. *Le Petit Prince*]

*\*It is very simple: you can see clearly only with your heart. The essential things are invisible to the eyes.* [The Little Prince]

## 5.2 Reconsideration of What OI Is

With Professor Ingram's insightful remark and Saint-Exupéry's impressive words in mind, let me reconsider the two perspectives on OI that I mentioned in 1. The first perspective, i.e. **the development of students' skills to coordinate critical and appreciative reading of text with its oral expression** can be described in my own terms and diagram, as shown below.

- Theme, Message, and Voice Conveyed by Text (from bottom up to top)

Expressing Message . . . . . We express the message through voice.

↑

Spoken Language . . . . . Voice is given to the message.

↑

Interpreting Message . . . . . We interpret the message in the text.

↑

Written Text . . . . . The theme is included in the written text.

↑

Theme . . . . . At the deepest level, there is a theme.

More specifically, below are the theme, message, and voice conveyed by a passage from *The Little Prince* (Howard 2000: 59).

Theme: Universality beyond Difference of Cultures

Message : *Tame* = To create ties

Voice: Discourse and Attitudinal Functions of Intonation as Marked by Tonetic Stress Marks  
(ˊ fall: ˊ rise: ˊ fall-rise)

Fox: (to Little Prince) For ˊ me / you're only a little ˊ boy / just like a hundred thousand ˊ other little boys // And ˊ I have no need of ˊ you // And ˊ you have no need of ˊ me / ˊ either // For ˊ you / I'm only a ˊ fox / like a hundred thousand ˊ other foxes // But if you ˊ tame me // we'll ˊ need each other // ˊ You'll be the only ˊ boy / in the world for ˊ me // ˊ I'll be the only ˊ fox / in the world for ˊ you //

Finally, I will discuss the second perspective: i.e. **the overlapping area of literature, phonetics, speech communication, and language education**. So far, I have been discussing OI mainly as application of prosody, a component of phonetics, but I would also like to remind you of its contribution to humanistic education in terms of literature, speech communication, and language education (Omi 1984: 40-48, 230-232). OI has an intrapersonal healing effect (catharsis), and intrapersonal effects of cultural enrichment and personal growth, as well as interpersonal effects of developing reliance on and ties with peers, coach, and audience (taming). These intra- and interpersonal effects may be called additional effects, still very important and essential effects. What is especially essential, I believe, is the interpersonal effects.

Tsue (2004: 32), in addition to her observations described at the end of 4, wrote in her senior thesis, "One of the big harvests through the practices for the festival was the friendship among the students was deepened. During the practices, they commented and advised on their play to each other to create and improve their performance altogether." I actually heard them talk about the joy of friendship and solidarity through the collaboration of creating a performance. This, I believe, is exactly the message that Antoine de Saint-Exupéry wanted to convey to us, i.e. the importance of taming under the theme of universality beyond difference of cultures, or in other words, the importance of multicultural coexistence.



## 6. Conclusion

Oral communication, of which OI is a genre, has recently been more and more emphasized in the junior and senior high school courses of study released by the Japanese Ministry of Education. Supporting and encouraging this trend, we should still be careful not to reduce oral communication to the development of “practical” communication skills or “atomistic” language skills. We should adopt more holistic approaches to the linking between skill development and humanistic education. In this paper I presented OI as such an approach. Specifically, as a case study of the 2003 project, I elaborated on OI’s two perspectives: skill development and humanistic education. In terms of the latter, I observed that OI gave the students awareness of universality beyond difference of cultures, or intercultural awareness, which I believe will lead to multicultural coexistence.

It was when I was a young high school teacher that I first met with *The Little Prince*. I was very much attracted to it, and used it as teaching material, though I was ignorant of a theoretical OI approach. It was fortunate of me to be awoken to the story, with its deep philosophical thought, by Professor Ingram’s lecture in 2000. Thus, about 40 years after I met with *The Little Prince*, I happily concluded the last year of my career as a full-time English teacher by teaching it to prospective English teachers through a holistic OI approach. I would like every one of you to try an appreciative oral reading of one of Saint-Exupéry’s essential messages in its Japanese and English translations, as well as in its original French version, described in **Appendix**.

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## Appendix

(Naito 2000: 102-103)

王子さまは、キツネのところに戻ってきました。

「じゃ、さよなら」と、王子さまはいいました。

「さよなら」と、キツネがいました。「さっきの秘密をいおうかね。なに、なんでもないことだよ。心で見なくちゃ、ものごとはよく見えないってことさ。かんじんなことは、目に見えないんだよ」

「かんじんなことは、目には見えない」と、王子さまは、忘れないようにくりかえしました。

「あんたが、あんたのバラの花をととてもたいせつに思ってるのはね、そのバラの花の

ために、ひまつぶしたからだよ」

「ぼくが、ぼくのバラの花を、とてもたいせつに思ってるのは……」と、王子さまは、忘れないようにいいました。

「人間っていうものは、このたいせつなことを忘れてるんだよ。だけど、あんたは、このことを忘れちゃいけないんだ。めんどろみた相手には、いつまでも責任があるんだ。まもらなけりゃならないんだよ、バラの花との約束をね……」と、キツネはいいました。

「ぼくは、あのバラの花との約束を守らなけりゃいけない……」と、王子さまは、忘れないようにくりかえしました。

(Howard 2000: 63-64)

AND HE WENT back to the fox.

“Good-bye,” he said.

“Good-bye,” said the fox. “Here is my secret. It’s quite simple: One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes.”

“Anything essential is invisible to the eyes,” the little prince repeated, in order to remember.

“It’s the time you spent on your rose that makes your rose so important.”

“It’s the time I spent on my rose …,” the little prince repeated, in order to remember.

“People have forgotten this truth,” the fox said. “But you mustn’t forget it. You become responsible forever for what you’ve tamed. You’re responsible for your rose …”

“I’m responsible for my rose …,” the little prince repeated, in order to remember.

(Saint-Exupéry 1943: 65-66)

ET IL REVINT vers le renard:

-- Adieu, dit-il ...

-- Adieu, dit le renard. Voici mon secret. Il est très simple: on ne voit bien q’avec le cœur.

L’essentiel est invisible pour les yeux.

-- L’essentiel est invisible pour les yeux, répéta le petit prince, afin de se souvenir.

-- C’est le temps que tu as perdu pour ta rose qui fait ta rose si importante.

-- C’est le temps que j’ai perdu pour ma rose..., fit le petit prince, afin de se souvenir.

-- Les hommes ont oublié cette vérité, dit le renard. Mais tu ne dois pas l’oublier. Tu deviens responsable pour toujours de ce que tu as apprivoisé. Tu es responsable de ta rose...

--- Je suis responsable de ma rose ..., répéta le petit prince, afin de se souvenir.