

Preparing Students for Skit Koshien

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The following is a list of 14 stages involved in preparing students (and JTEs) for the Skit Koshien. Each stage includes ideas that were used in some form or another as I worked with my students at three senior high schools. My premise for this project was always: it is not just about winning (even though that would be good), it is about doing your best, and motivating students to learn English.

1. Selling the Idea

The first thing that you have to do is get a JTE on your side to ensure that you have the support of the school and the English Department which is vital in bringing your production to fruition. It is true that some JTEs will be naturally more motivated than others, but you have to know well the benefits of participating in this project and sell it like a new house. Remember that for the good of your students, you will need to invest your time and yourself to get it off the ground.

2. Getting Started

Before the event's official publicity information gets to school from the Miyagi BOE, start talking to the teachers about it; sensitize the students, get them excited and even start brain-storming things you can write about. It does not matter if you have 1 school or 10 schools, if you start early it can be done. If you manage your time well, you will even have your principal excited about it.

3. Finding Participants

So just whom can you get to participate in the project? Class or club, group or friends, anyone goes. I found that it is better to take the class or club route, as it was easier to find a set time to work on the project.

Class

The JTE and I introduced the project to the students and had them select an idea. In my experience one student was nominated to write the play. She started by writing it in Japanese, we then printed the script in a large font size on sheets of A3 paper and went to class. We divided the 3rd-year class into groups and gave each group a section to work on. We read the play together in Japanese, and I gave them a gist of what it should sound like in English. Then, armed with dictionaries of all colors and sizes, they attacked the passage. It took at least one class period to have them translate it, but to tell the truth, I have never seen students having so much fun while working on an English project. This breaks the humdrum of the

regular class routine and allows the students creative freedom. This also helps the students to see the project as their creation. After the students finished their work, we collected the sheets and the JTE and I corrected and typed the first draft and presented it to the class.

Club

In my experience, the club selected the topic and three students were elected to write the play. They were brave enough to do the very first draft in English. After they completed it, the JTE and I again corrected and presented them with the first draft. Working with a club had the benefit of there already being an established time outside of regular classes to dedicate to the project.

4. Brainstorming Ideas

Have a session where all ideas are written down. Anything is fine. After your period of brainstorming comes to an end, put all the ideas together.

5. Keeping Track of Guidelines

By the time you have written the script, the official announcements and information from the Miyagi BOE regarding procedures for entering the competition should be at your school and your JTE (under your gentle supervision) should be handling application matters. As the ALT, you need to know the guidelines! Read carefully and keep them next to you as your Skit Koshien Bible. Qualifications for participation, skit specifications, manuscript specifications must all be taken into consideration at this stage.

6. Controlling Script Quality

Sample scripts are available for you to ensure that your students' scripts are up to par. The JTE and ALT should give the students freedom to create, while you specifically could see your role more as "quality control." When you have checked your script by the standard of the examples sent out by the Miyagi BOE (i.e., JHS example: "A Ghost from the Dog's Graveyard"; and the SHS example: "Volunteer Work"), it is time for the second draft. Pay very special attention to the first page of the Skit Koshien evaluation here (i.e., I. Content). You have to go through it with a fine-tooth comb and ensure that everything is in harmony with the guidelines.

7. Choosing Performers

Each skit group needs to have three performers. (Having an understudy for each character is a good idea; in case someone is ill or suddenly falls out, the show must go on.) Choosing the performers is one of the most crucial decisions you will have to make during this process, so time and thought must go into this decision. Chances are that the JTE will play a crucial role in this area as well, and taking a quick glimpse at the Skit Koshien's evaluation sheet would be a good idea (i.e., II.

Expressivity), paying special attention to voice and delivery and the students you think will do a good job. When all the dust settles and you ensure that no feelings are hurt—and you love those who need to be loved—delegate duties to the others as members of the production crew.

8. Creating the Production Crew

These people are a crucial part of the production and without them you will find it a little difficult to get everything done yourself. Here are ideas for crew member titles: stage managers, videographers, special effects personnel, costume and make-up personnel, production assistants (script control), prop managers, stage hands. Get many students involved in the planning and decision making process; by doing that you make it about them. The final section of part II. Expressivity is creativity, and this is where your production crew comes in. Give them all copies of the script and a copy of the creativity guidelines, and hammer it out together.

9. Scheduling Rehearsals

After the script has been passed out, and the students are all working on their responsibilities, it is time to begin practicing. This is where you will spend many of your afternoons / nights / much of your life after you decide to do this. A good idea is to have a contact list with all the phone numbers of those involved on it so that rehearsals can be called, or plans can be made or changed quickly. In the early stages, once a week may be fine and, as the days draw closer, step it up to two or three times, or as much as the students and the JTE deem necessary. Start working on time of the skit *after* the students have gotten a handle of things.

10. Providing Feedback

Do not overkill correcting the students in the beginning; give them a chance to feel the characters of the script themselves and ensure they understand the meaning of what they need to say. Then work on pronunciation, intonation, volume, pause—though not all at once, rather introduce new elements daily. You may even go as far as giving the students a tape to practice with at home. When they have that, work on delivery: eye contact, stage blockings, body language, etc. When all that is in place give them props and costumes; help them to forget themselves and become the character. Then take it to the stage.

11. Producing the Video

The details for this can be found on the final page of the guidelines for video specifications. Get it done early, it is never a good feeling to rush the students; they will not perform well. When you feel the students are ready, have a few dress rehearsals, invite some people (e.g., a few teachers, students, and of course the principal and vice principal) to sit in and watch the practice. You will need to start concentrating heavily on timing. Even start video taping your rehearsals so that the

students can get used to the camera and watch themselves a few times; your technical crew can get used to the movement on stage to prepare them for the real thing. When you are finally ready to tape, they will not be doing it for the first time, so they should feel more relaxed about the camera's presence. Have the students do the scenes a few times and tape all of them, view all the scenes and choose the best ones. Let a few teachers see the video, ask the principal and vice principal to give the students a word and view the video for approval.

12. Waiting

While you are waiting for the letter from the Miyagi BOE, have a rehearsal or two, and a meeting with the production team because now you will have to change your mode from video production to stage. Take the students to the gym get them on the stage, have your production team look at the adjustments they will have to make to the props and the restrictions that will be imposed by traveling to the venue. When finally you get positive word from the Miyagi BOE, begin working with great fervor. Remember to praise the students for their good work have a mini celebration party to keep the morale high. The beauty of the Skit Koshien is that it falls in the summer, which means that students may be a little more willing to practice for longer hours.

13. Putting on the Final Touches

After confirmation you will want to take all the suggestions that you can from the Miyagi BOE according to where your work can be improved. If it means adjusting the script and having the students learn a few new lines, cut a few old lines. Whatever it takes, ensure that your product is of the finest quality.

14. Doing the Real Thing

Your major concern at this point is refining, so check and recheck the guidelines. It should be smooth sailing from here on in if you have followed them carefully. During this period, a form will be sent to your JTE which will be in Japanese only, specifying the venue, the due date for the final script, the limitations for props and the date for the acceptance reply. Even though you may not have access to this information in English, ask your JTE to brief you on this information and see what you can do to help. Invite teachers to see the program, and bring some students to cheer the performers on.

Final Notes:

The ideas above can be made as broad or as low key as you want them, depending on how they are forced to be in any situation. If you are working against the odds in a school where a JTE is not very cooperative, it is very unlikely that you will be able to make the project a great production. But this is why you are an ALT—we have had to sell ideas for class, nag a little to get a few things changed, so you are already

"street smart"! No matter what the size of your production is, you should be able to apply the flow of this advice in guiding you with your preparation. Working with a small group also has its advantages because—without much effort—it helps you to keep things under control, in check, and in good order.

If your skit performers win a trophy, enjoy your glory. Remember to thank and praise the students and JTE(s), and by all means have a celebration. Make the victory public, and chances are the principal will take care of the rest (i.e., certificates of congratulations, etc.).

If it is your unfortunate experience not to be awarded a trophy after all this work, take comfort in this: You have to believe that your students have benefited from a summer of living English! You may not believe it now, but when you get back to class and you hear them trying to pronounce those troublesome words properly, and you recognize that their attitude to English has changed, remember that it is for THAT reality that you worked. Remember to love your students and praise your JTE(s); take them out for dinner, and let them know you appreciate them and their hard work. Give out your own certificates of appreciation, watch the production as a class, put up pictures on your school notice board and let everyone be proud of what they have done!

There is no shame in not winning; there is only shame in never trying.