

Teaching Spanish through theatrical resources in Japan: A case study

Uso de recursos teatrales en la enseñanza del español como lengua extranjera en Japón: Estudio de caso

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Abstract:

This article examines the impact of using theatre in teaching Spanish as a Foreign Language at beginner levels, focusing on a theatre project conducted at the A1 level at the Cervantes Institute in Tokyo in 2022. The research aimed to inspect how theatrical techniques can enhance motivation and group cohesion among Japanese students. A qualitative methodology was employed, analyzing participants' testimonies collected before and after the project. The participants expressed in the initial interviews that they were seeking a more meaningful learning experience than what they found in regular course content. To address this need, a theatre project was implemented, consisting of a ten-session plan designed and conducted not only to achieve the linguistic objectives established by the CEFR (2001), but also to foster emotional intelligence and active participation.

The main results reveal significant improvements in interaction, cooperative learning, and self-confidence among students during the project. Additionally, the use of theatrical techniques strengthened emotional bonds between participants, contributing to increased group cohesion both inside and outside the classroom. An improvement in self-esteem and emotional engagement was also observed, which facilitated the achievement of linguistic goals. In conclusion, the theatre workshop proved to be an effective approach for promoting language learning and establishing a positive and cooperative learning environment at the beginner level in this case study in Japan. This study contributes to the field of the teaching Spanish as a Foreign Language by underscoring the value of incorporating theatrical resources from the early stages of language instruction.

Keywords:

Experiments; Spanish; teaching method; theatre; workshops.

Resumen:

Este artículo analiza el impacto del uso del teatro en la enseñanza de ELE en niveles iniciales, a través de un proyecto teatral desarrollado en el nivel A1 en el Instituto Cervantes de Tokio en 2022. La investigación tuvo como objetivo explorar cómo las técnicas teatrales pueden potenciar la motivación y la cohesión grupal entre los estudiantes japoneses. Se empleó una metodología cualitativa, analizando los testimonios de los participantes recopilados antes y después del proyecto. En las entrevistas iniciales, los participantes expresaron su deseo de una experiencia de aprendizaje más significativa que la que encontraban en los contenidos regulares del curso. Para responder a esta necesidad, se implementó un proyecto teatral, consistente en un plan de diez sesiones diseñado y llevado a cabo no solo para alcanzar los objetivos lingüísticos establecidos por el MCER (2001), sino también para fomentar la inteligencia emocional y la participación activa.

Los principales resultados revelan mejoras significativas en la interacción, el aprendizaje cooperativo y la autoconfianza desarrollada por los estudiantes durante el proyecto. Además, el uso de técnicas teatrales fortaleció los lazos emocionales entre los participantes, contribuyendo a una mayor cohesión grupal tanto dentro como fuera del aula. También se observó un incremento en la autoestima y en la implicación emocional, lo que facilitó el logro de los objetivos lingüísticos. En conclusión, el taller de teatro demostró ser una herramienta eficaz para promover el aprendizaje lingüístico y establecer un entorno de aprendizaje positivo y cooperativo en el nivel inicial en este grupo de estudio en Japón. Este estudio contribuye al campo de la enseñanza de ELE al resaltar la importancia de integrar recursos teatrales desde las primeras etapas de la instrucción lingüística.

Palabras claves:

Español; experimento; método pedagógico; taller; teatro.

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1. Introduction

The use of theatre in Spanish as a Foreign Language (SFL) teaching is predominantly implemented at advanced levels, where it helps achieve linguistic goals in an engaging way. However, there is a shortage of studies on its use at beginner levels in Japan.

This article examines how theatrical resources in the SFL classroom can enhance motivation and group cohesion through a theatre project conducted at the A1 level at the Cervantes Institute in Tokyo in 2022. It aims to assess the effectiveness of theatrical techniques not only in supporting the achievement of specific linguistic goals as outlined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2001), such as oral and written expression, but also in reinforcing cooperative work and active participation from the beginner levels.

This qualitative research is justified by the need to explore innovative methodologies in SFL teaching in Japan, taking into account the specific characteristics of the student population. The article presents the project, its objectives, the work plan, and analyses student testimonials to identify perceived benefits and challenges.

This study contributes to the SFL landscape by demonstrating that theatrical resources are an effective tool for promoting motivation, meaningful learning, and group cohesion, even at beginner levels in Japan. The qualitative research presented here provides evidence of the potential of theatre to integrate cultural and artistic elements into SFL teaching.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study places special emphasis on the role of emotional aspects in the SFL classroom and their impact on foreign language learning. It aims to analyse how theatre can contribute to both linguistic and emotional development without disregarding curricular objectives.

Emotion serves as a guiding thread throughout this study, supported by various authors. What is meant by emotion? According to the Royal Spanish Academy (RAE, 2001), it is "an interest, generally expectant, with which one participates in something that is happening." Izard (1991, p. 67) defines emotion as "a complex state of body and mind that involves a physiological response, a subjective experience, and a tendency to act." Authors such as Arnold and Foncubierta (2019) highlight the importance of fostering emotions that strengthen group cohesion and promote a positive learning environment, which is relevant in the context of this work.

Theories on emotional intelligence by Goleman (1995) and interpersonal intelligence by Gardner (1983) underline how social and emotional skills influence the willingness to communicate and information retention. Gardner (1983) defines intelligence as "an ability to solve a problem or produce a product valued in at least one cultural context. (...) This new way of conceptualising human intelligence has profound implications for educators, whose work should involve identifying and nurturing the different talents that all students bring with them" (Ernst-Slavit, 2001, p. 319). Goleman (1995, pp. 43-44) emphasises the importance of skills such as self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, empathy, and relationship-building.

Furthermore, as Stevick (1980, p. 4) states, "success in second language teaching depends less on linguistic analyses, techniques, or methods than on what happens within and between the people in the classroom." In other words, the classroom environment can facilitate the consolidation of knowledge in long-term memory.

Arnold and Foncubierta also advocate for the importance of "the affective dimension, specifically individual factors, personality traits, and relationships between people - teachers and students - in the classroom" (2019, p. 11). For them, "the affective aspect contributes to our ability to retain and make use of stored information." Furthermore, "the cognitive work required for language learning is more effective when supported by the affective" (*ibid*). They also emphasise that "the affective does not oppose the cognitive; rather, both dimensions form an integral part of effective information processing" (Arnold and Foncubierta, 2019, p. 24).

Mora (2013) suggests that for an experience to transform into knowledge, it must pass through the emotional brain. According to his theories, the greater the emotion involved (the so-called "emotional glue"), the more effective the learning process becomes. He also notes that negative emotions limit learning, whereas positive emotions enhance it.

Verdía (2010, pp. 226-227) expands on this idea, underscoring the importance of "the beliefs an individual holds regarding their abilities, skills, or aptitudes" as psychological aspects that can either facilitate or hinder progress in learning SFL.

Additionally, according to Verdía et al. (2012, pp. 23-24), in the section "Managing Feelings and Emotions in Work Performance" and its subsections "Developing Interpersonal Relationships" and "Engaging in the Development of Students' Emotional Intelligence," it is crucial for teachers to understand their students, including their emotions, feelings, thoughts, and needs. This involves establishing and fostering cooperative and collaborative relationships, as well as helping students become aware of the emotions and feelings of their peers.

Regarding experiential or meaningful learning, based on initial interviews and participant observation within the target group at the Cervantes Institute, student needs were assessed, revealing the importance of fostering greater engagement by encouraging emotions and personal growth, building group cohesion, supporting student initiative, and creating lasting learning. This "learning by doing" approach, or action-oriented approach (according to the CEFR, 2001), contributes to the consolidation of knowledge (Arnold and Foncubierta, 2019, pp. 18-19).

Additionally, various studies have addressed the benefits of dramatization and theatre in language teaching. Maley and Duff (2005) highlight that theatre is effective for developing oral competence, as it exposes students to authentic communication situations. Similarly, Yousefian (2013) explores the use of theatre in the SFL classroom as a tool for enhancing communicative competence, stating that "Dramatization is an ideal means of creating social interaction activities and promoting the student's role as a social agent, autonomous learner, and intercultural speaker."

The use of theatrical techniques fosters all communication skills, bringing language learners closer to communicative situations outside the classroom" (p. 387), which directly aligns with one of the main objectives of the Cervantes Institute theatre workshop: "To develop general competences and provide authentic communicative competence in SFL." For his approach, Yousefian (2013) follows Martínez Cobo's model (2006), which includes drama games, selection and introduction to the play, character work, rehearsals, and final performance.

García Burgos's Master's Dissertation (2020, p. 8), *Theatre in the Spanish as a Foreign Language Classroom* (University of Alcalá), also highlights that "theatre (understood as the performance of a theatrical text) is a useful and valuable tool in the field of SFL didactics." Similarly, Arnold and Foncubierta (2019, p. 50) emphasise the benefits of dramatization and role-play for fostering favourable attitudes towards the target culture.

Research in this field demonstrates that the use of theatrical resources promotes motivation and group cohesion. This is indeed one of the specific objectives of the theatre workshop: to foster group cohesion, motivation, and autonomy, while strengthening self-esteem and confidence. It also facilitates a positive and effective learning environment.

Furthermore, the observation by Aguilar López et al. (2021, p. 96) is particularly relevant to the average profile of a Japanese student, who is not accustomed to standing out in a group: "by embodying other, even our own, fictional identities within the game environment and under the group's support, we forget our shyness, shame, and fears, as our 'self' is not exposed but hidden behind another identity, relegated to the background in favour of that identity's characterisation."

In the Japanese context, this characteristic is particularly beneficial for participants. Studies such as those by Martínez Martínez (2003) and Moreno García (2013) highlight the need to adapt teaching strategies to engage Japanese students. Martínez Martínez (2003) emphasises the importance of interculturality in teacher training. To teach SFL effectively and to avoid misjudging the character of Japanese students, the teacher "should immerse themselves in the student's society and culture" (Martínez Martínez, 2003, p. 610). What, then, are the characteristics that distinguish Japanese learners from those of other nationalities? According to Martínez Martínez (2003, p. 611), some traits are:

Apparent passivity in class. The Japanese conception of a good student involves being calm, passive, and obedient, successfully passing written exams.

The fact that they do not speak spontaneously. They only do so when the teacher assigns them a turn.

Their strong written skills but not oral skills. Their listening comprehension and oral expression levels are often low.

The time it takes for Japanese students to formulate their responses is longer than that of other students, most likely due to a perfectionist tendency. Indeed, in the university context in Japan, students often face difficulties in communicating spontaneously in speech. Additionally, not all students manage to pass written exams successfully. Failure is a possibility if students are not motivated to learn. An important factor influencing their motivation is the acquisition of two academic credits upon successful completion of the SFL course. While this incentive may encourage students to strive for passing, it does not necessarily imply a genuine interest in learning the language.

Martínez Martínez (2003) classifies Japanese SFL students within the Reflective-Theoretical profile. However, performance in the classroom also varies depending on individual learning styles and other factors. Moyano López (2012) and Martínez García (2008) highlight factors that hinder participation in the classroom, such as low motivation, fear of standing out or making mistakes, passivity, and respect for hierarchy. These factors reinforce the student's passive role and limit the adoption of the CEFR in formal teaching in Japan (Ezawa, 2010). Moyano López (2012) also observes a gap between Japanese university curriculum content and the CEFR standards (2001), which negatively affects learning. He also points out the difficulty of motivating low-participation students, who attend classes unprepared.

Often, the passive attitude in the classroom is exacerbated by students' work and extracurricular commitments, impacting their performance.

In the plenary session of the III CELEAP, Moreno García (2013), who taught in Japan between 2012 and 2019, emphasises the ethnic identity of her Japanese students, noting certain limitations that influence both their habitual reluctance to communicate orally and their approach to reading texts. Martínez Martínez (2003) also refers to this latter issue.

Ugarte Farrerons (2008) pointed out that the interest in Spanish in Japan had not reached the growth observed in other parts of the world, raising the challenge of defining strategies to promote the study and understanding of Spanish and Hispanic culture in this context. Despite advances in the field of SFL in Japan, this challenge persists in 2024. Although the principles of the CEFR are gradually being integrated into university curricula, their application in the classroom still generates confusion and even some resistance among students, particularly concerning communicative activities based on these principles.

Finally, studies on the use of theatrical resources in SFL in Japan are scarce. Calderón de la Barca Fernández (2015, p. 44) examines "theatre as a teaching resource outside the classroom, but within the context of SFL teaching and in connection with curriculum content in Japanese universities," through public performances designed to motivate students of different levels. Furthermore, he suggests that the voluntary nature of these activities increases motivation: "students are always there, punctual and with their homework done, something that is not easily achieved in curricular subjects" (2015, p. 52).

Based on these premises, the research questions that guide this study emerge: How does participation in a theatrical project influence the improvement of interaction and group cohesion among A1-level students? In what ways does the use of theatrical techniques facilitate the achievement of the linguistic objectives set for the beginner level? These questions are related to the pedagogical objectives of the workshop.

3. Methods

3.1 Teaching Methodology

Regarding the presentation of the group and the questions raised about the type of course, content, needs, and characteristics of the students before the project, it was a regular A1.3-level course consisting of 20 sessions, totalling 30 hours, at the Cervantes Institute in Tokyo. The textbook International Classroom Plus 1 (2020) was used, specifically Unit 5, "Your friends are my friends," which covers appearance and character, contrasts in tastes and interests, and personal relationships; and Unit 6, "Day by day," focused on habits, frequency, and how to ask and tell the time.

The 90-minute classes were held weekly from 18:45 to 20:15, after a full working day, which negatively affected attention, performance, and the physical and emotional state of the five enrolled students, and consequently, the efficiency of learning. The students, shaped by the previously described university education system, arrived at the sessions demotivated and showed signs of fatigue, resulting in a lack of active participation. As the class progressed, their concentration ability diminished, which was reflected in hesitations when answering questions or completing activities. Additionally, the assimilation of new content was affected, as they required more support to stay focused. Regarding academic performance, the results of the final activities in each session were generally more inconsistent compared to the earlier ones. All of this hindered both effective learning and the formation of emotional bonds between classmates.

Class observation was crucial for the needs analysis, carried out continuously since the beginning of the course in July 2022. Notes were taken on deficiencies in knowledge and participation in group dynamics using participant observation. This regularity allowed for precise and consistent collection of changes and results over time.

Additionally, this process enabled the identification of a lack of personal involvement in learning, a crucial factor for achieving authentic and genuine learning (Arnold & Foncubierta, 2019, p. 24), or meaningful learning, in contrast to mechanical learning, according to David Ausubel (1983, p. 1). While meaningful learning, according to Ausubel, "produces an interaction between the most relevant knowledge in the cognitive structure and new information" (1983, p. 1), in mechanical learning "new information is stored arbitrarily, without interacting with pre-existing knowledge" (ibid). After the observation phase, the results obtained were analysed with the aim of providing an appropriate pedagogical response.

Cestero Mancera and Penadés Martínez (2007, p. 634) distinguish between objective and subjective needs in the educational context. Objective needs are related to the socio-cultural characteristics and educational level of the participants. The group that participated in the experiment was composed of Japanese students with university studies and an average age of 44 years. Regarding gender distribution, 60% were women and 40% were men. As for their socio-economic level, due to strict privacy in Japan, no explicit data was obtained. However, considering their ability to finance studies at the Cervantes Institute, it is plausible to assume that they were in a comfortable economic situation. The learning of Spanish as a Foreign Language mainly responded to personal development interests.

Regarding subjective needs, there were differences in language proficiency; some students had higher prior knowledge, while others showed insecurity, especially during activities involving oral communication. As a result, some students used more Japanese or English during class activities, which reduced the use of Spanish. Despite this diversity, the majority were willing to use Spanish in class. Additionally, initial motivation differed significantly: some students wanted to travel to Spain, highlighting an interest in developing communicative competence, while others planned to work in Spanish-speaking countries, which increased their urgency to improve their level of Spanish.

The students did not know each other previously, except for two female students who had met in a previous course without forming significant connections. However, all the learners showed a need for a meaningful learning experience in a positive environment (Arnold & Foncubierta, 2019, p. 13), which aligns with one of the general objectives of the theatrical workshop, "To satisfy the students' need for personal growth."

A proposal was presented to the Cervantes Institute in Tokyo to organise a theatre workshop, which was accepted on the condition of complying with the contents of the regular course and that workshop would be organised as an extracurricular activity. On the other hand, the students, after a week of reflection, also agreed to participate in the theatre workshop outside of regular class hours.

In order to better understand this "daring" involvement in a theatre project, it is necessary to examine the place that theatre holds in the Japanese education system. The performing arts do not usually play a central role in the formal curriculum of basic education in Japan. While there are subjects related to artistic expression, such as music, theatre is not part of the mandatory curriculum. Opportunities to participate in theatrical activities are typically found in extra-

curricular contexts, such as school clubs ("bukatsu"), where students explore various areas of interest, including Japanese theatre or theatre from other traditions. However, participation in these activities varies by school, meaning that many students have no prior experience in the theatrical field.

As for amateur theatre in Japan, although there are groups and communities dedicated to its practice, or cultural centres such as Culture Ltd., which are spread across the country and mainly attract housewives and older people, its presence is not widespread. Therefore, theatre may be seen more as a specialised activity rather than a common form of expression in the everyday life of Japanese students.

In the specific case of the target group, it was found through a round of questions that none of the students had prior experience in theatrical activities, which made the proposal a completely new experience and a challenge for them. In this context, several students initially showed signs of inhibition, likely stemming from the public exposure, emotional expression, and physicality involved.

After presenting the characteristics of the group, a key question arises: What should the objectives of this workshop be, developed within a limited time frame and aimed at Japanese students with no previous theatre experience?

As mentioned earlier, the use of theatre in teaching Spanish as a Foreign Language can be appealing, especially at advanced levels, although students from beginner levels also participate in activities such as role plays, dramatized reading, and improvisations. These practices help develop the necessary vocabulary and serve as basic training for participating in a simple play by a foreign author. However, the experimental group decided to write their own play, reflecting from the very beginning the growing group cohesion and the taking on of an active role in their learning, with the teacher acting as a facilitator. This approach highlights the increase in confidence and progress towards autonomy in their Spanish as a Foreign Language learning from the preparatory stage of the workshop.

To support this initiative, a pedagogical proposal was designed with the following objectives:

General objectives:

- To develop general skills and provide authentic communicative competence in Spanish as a Foreign Language.
- To meet the students' need for personal growth.
- To promote learning strategies and practise skills.

Specific objectives:

- To foster linguistic competence.
- To provide meaningful learning of Spanish as a Foreign Language.
- To develop the production of oral and written texts, encouraging creativity and risk-taking in the use of the language.
- To promote group cohesion, motivation, and autonomy.
- To reinforce self-esteem and confidence.

- To give students a leading role, in accordance with the Cervantes Institute Curriculum Plan (2006, p. 33).

Work on self-esteem focused on fostering pride in belonging to the group, which not only followed the regular course but also explored theatre. Given that the group was heterogeneous in terms of age, gender, motivation to learn Spanish, and previous language competence, the aim was to facilitate the development of individual capabilities, with special attention to this diversity to ensure an inclusive approach tailored to the particular needs of each student.

All of this, in accordance with the principles of the Cervantes Institute Curriculum Plan (2006) and its reference levels for Spanish, is based on the idea that the student should be at the centre of any curricular planning, in line with humanistic approaches. These, as outlined in the Dictionary of Key Terms in Spanish as a Foreign Language, include common characteristics that were particularly important for the development of the theatre workshop:

They consider the affective aspects of learning and language to be important, emphasising the significance of the learner's inner world and placing individual thoughts, feelings, and emotions at the forefront of human development.

They are concerned with treating the learner as a person, with a holistic involvement in the learning process, rather than focusing solely on the development and use of cognitive skills.

They value a learning environment that minimises anxiety and enhances personal confidence.

They operate on the premise that meaningful learning only takes place when the material being taught is perceived by the learner as personally relevant and when it involves their active participation; that is, when it is experiential learning.

These principles laid the foundation for the design of the theatre workshop's work plan, enabling the creation of an environment that responded to both the individual and collective needs of the students and facilitated the achievement of the objectives outlined above.

3.1.1. *Presentation of the work plan*

Following the criteria of the CEFR (2001) and adapting the pedagogical approach to a participatory and motivating environment, ten sessions of a theatre workshop were planned, scheduled between September and December 2022.

After each session of the regular course, participants engaged in activities related to the dramatic work they were writing. The plan was adjusted after each session, incorporating relevant feedback.

Figure 1. Action plan (excerpt)

Session	Task	Comments
Session 1: 29 September 2022	Choice of the theme for the dramatic work (comedy genre as a suggestion) and the setting where the events take place. Theme: Journey. Setting: On the plane. Characters: Father and son.	As an introduction, in assembly, a brief explanation of the plot of <i>The House of Bernarda Alba</i> by Federico García Lorca, as an example of a dramatic work of great cultural and literary significance.

Session 4: 20 October 2022	Dramatised reading of a short play/several dialogues taken from different dramatic works to explore and practise strategies such as reading comprehension and written expression.	The chosen texts should serve as a model for the dramatic writing of the students' own work. The structure of a play is explained: the division into acts (introduction, conflict, resolution), the importance of stage directions, etc. Emphasis is placed on intonation, pronunciation, and voice projection.
Session 5: 27 October 2022	Dramatic writing: first draft of a scene.	Review and feedback in assembly.
Session 8: 17 November 2022	Dramatised reading standing of the second draft of the entire dramatic piece.	Review and feedback in assembly. Focus on intonation, pronunciation, voice projection, and body language.
Session 9: 24 November 2022	Rehearsal.	Focus on intonation, pronunciation, voice projection, body language, and stage movement.
Session 10: 1 December 2022	Premiere.	Post-production feedback. Collection of testimonials.

Source: own elaboration

During the first session, the plot of *The House of Bernarda Alba* by Federico García Lorca (1997) was presented. In the second session, the teacher, actress, and theatre director Alejandra Prieto explained her staging of the Lorca play with minimal use of verbal resources. This activity was carried out to ensure that students had a model in mind before developing their own theatrical proposal.

In the following sessions, various ice-breaking activities were implemented to eliminate shyness and reinforce the vocabulary and grammatical structures that students knew and could use during the dramatic writing phase. Additionally, in assembly, visual stimuli were used, such as airplane, stewardess, and family travelling, which were introduced in assembly: each student contributed a word they associated with each visual stimulus. For example, airplane prompted vocabulary like flying, fast, and big; stewardess was associated with words like tall, beautiful, uniform, pretty, and sexy; for the expression family travelling, students mentioned words like beach, happiness, and expensive. These visual stimuli generated collective linguistic output, which was included in the draft of the dramatic text.

Furthermore, as shown in Figure 1, during the development of the play's dramatic writing, the proposals of Llorián González (2007, p. 9) were closely followed to organise a 'real-life' task. The play included various actions, such as travelling by plane, placing an order in a restaurant, and filing a complaint at a police station.

3.1.2. The Process of Preparation for Dramatic Writing

During the preparation of the dramatic piece, once a common goal had been established, the students intuitively developed a collaborative work approach by dividing tasks equitably. This methodology was also promoted by Muñoz-Basols, a professor at the University of Oxford and director of ASELE, during a workshop held in Tokyo in 2023, where the importance of a collaborative approach was emphasised.

In the Japanese context, recent research, such as that by García Ruiz-Castillo (2023), also highlights the relevance of cooperative work with a shared goal in second language learning, drawing on previous studies that demonstrate its effectiveness:

Regarding the type of action learners undertake in each intervention, we follow Clark (1996) and distinguish between individual actions and joint actions. A joint action (JA) is one in which both participants are seen coordinating to achieve the common goal. They base their actions on the context created by previous actions and, in turn, create new context for subsequent actions. The actions of the two participants are, therefore, inseparable. (García Ruiz-Castillo, 2023, p. 186)

On the other hand, various authors have approached cooperative learning from different perspectives. Johnson et al. (1999), in Cooperative Learning in the Classroom, highlight that this method not only fosters academic learning but also promotes the development of key social skills, such as positive interdependence, individual and group responsibility, and effective interpersonal interaction. Likewise, Sánchez-Marín et al. (2019, pp. 87-108), agree in emphasising the students' joint effort with diverse objectives in the learning process. These authors consider Cooperative Learning as an "appropriate method" to foster "quality social relationships in both personal and professional spheres" (2019, p. 87). Similarly to what was observed in the regular course at the Cervantes Institute in Tokyo, these authors note that "during the 2009-2012 courses, the teaching staff detected a lack of teamwork skills among the students" (2019, p. 90), which served as the starting point for their qualitative research.

The alignment between the practice of the target group at the Cervantes Institute and the views of these researchers suggests that collaborative work not only facilitates learning but also enhances the development of social and communicative skills, which are essential in the process of acquiring a new language. Although various researchers use different terminologies to refer to cooperative work, they agree on emphasising the effectiveness of this approach.

In the early sessions of the theatre workshop, students were asked to use a worksheet similar to that used in A1 level tasks for character development, once the theme had been selected and the characters defined and distributed. This tool facilitated both the gathering of information and the structuring of the characters, providing students with an opportunity to apply and consolidate their vocabulary and grammatical structures in a practical and creative context. This process promoted active learning and autonomy, both essential aspects for the effective acquisition of a foreign language.

In addition to collecting the data presented in Figure 2 (Annex I), students added five key words related to their characters. This activity is similar to Activity 10 of Unit 1 of the International Classroom Plus 1 (2020) textbook. The students completed this information individually and presented it in an open session.

Subsequently, a dramatized reading of the comedy The Love of the Cat and the Dog by Jardiel Poncela (2005), adapted for this purpose, was carried out. The dramatic structure of the play was analysed, highlighting the elements of exposition, conflict, and resolution, with the aim of providing students with the necessary tools to draft their own comedy, integrating the character data previously presented.

3.2. Research Methodology

The methodology adopted in this study is of a qualitative nature, a choice that allows for a detailed and contextualised assessment of the impact of theatrical activities on the learning of Spanish as a Foreign Language. The qualitative approach typically relies on the collection and analysis of non-numerical data, making it ideal for understanding complex and dynamic educational phenomena, such as students' experiences in a theatre workshop, linguistic outcomes, and the emotional and social aspects of learning. In the context of Spanish as a Foreign Language teaching, emotional factors and group cohesion play a crucial role in students' progress.

Theatre techniques, by engaging students in activities that require emotional expression and cooperation, create an environment that encourages communication and meaningful learning. Therefore, a qualitative approach facilitates the evaluation of these intangible elements. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p. 1), "qualitative research is a field of inquiry in its own right. It crosses disciplines, fields, and problems," and aims to interpret the meanings that people attribute to their experiences, providing a deep understanding of the context and processes involved.

To carry out this research, two main tools have been used: the notes journal and interviews, both oral and written. The notes journal has served as a tool for participant observation, allowing the systematic recording of perceptions and reflections during the development of the workshop. This tool provides a valuable framework for documenting students' evolution in linguistic and emotional aspects, as well as identifying relevant situations arising from group interaction and classroom dynamics. Participant observation, as described by Spradley (1980), not only allows for the observation of participants' behaviours and attitudes but also involves engaging in the experience, as opposed to ordinary observation (1980, pp. 53-54), which is essential for capturing nuances and aspects that might go unnoticed with other methods.

Additionally, both oral and written interviews were used to gather data on students' perceptions and experiences. The oral interviews provided a space for spontaneous expression, facilitating the capture of immediate emotions and reflections. On the other hand, the written interviews offered the opportunity to collect more considered responses, allowing participants to reflect on their experience in greater depth.

4. Results

To write an original literary text, the project participants carried out a series of activities, detailed in the previous sections, with the aim of making optimal use of the available resources. These actions helped address various issues, including initial lack of motivation, fear of failure, and lack of group cohesion. The performance of the comedy took place at the end of the final class of the regular course in the classroom assigned by the educational centre. The students carried out the staging using classroom objects, transforming them into scenographic elements. In addition, they created a PowerPoint presentation, which was projected onto the whiteboard. It served as a backdrop to delimit the different spaces where the action took place.

Once the performance was completed, testimonies were collected both orally and in writing. The oral testimonies were gathered immediately after the performance, while the written testimonies were submitted by the students during the same week.

The results of this research were analysed through qualitative evaluation, taking into account the observations made during the theatre workshop and the qualitative data gathered from the participants. To this end, the following evaluative research questions were formulated:

Have the general objectives of the proposal been met?

Have the specific objectives of the proposal been met?

Regarding the fulfilment of the general objectives, the students' testimonies reflect a notable achievement of them. Many participants expressed that the experience allowed them to improve their language skills in a motivating environment. For example, Student A wrote: "In July of this year, I never imagined I would perform a play in Spanish." This observation supports the objective of providing authentic communicative competence in Spanish as a Foreign Language, meeting the need for personal growth and promoting learning strategies. It also highlights how the limitations they faced in performing in the target language before the workshop began were overcome by practising the four language skills, demonstrating the effectiveness of the approach.

In relation to the fulfilment of the specific objectives, the results collected from the observation notes and the students' testimonies indicate that these were satisfactorily achieved. Student B orally expressed, "Writing a dramatic text together helped us communicate better and get to know each other better." This comment underscores the improvement in peer interaction and the development of group cohesion. Additionally, the notes showed an increase in participation and motivation. There was also notable progress in the production of both oral and written texts, demonstrating the promotion of linguistic competence and meaningful learning, both specific objectives of the workshop that fosters collaborative learning.

Regarding other specific objectives, Student C wrote: "The photographs are a treasure, and they have given me a lot of confidence to take the next step." This observation provides key information about the strengthening of self-esteem and confidence.

Regarding the students' taking on a central role and meaningful learning, Student D stated: "I believe that X's (name of the teacher) passion pushed me to successfully complete the play. Thank you very much!" This statement highlights the learners' central role and emphasises the transformation of their initial state before participating in the workshop, contrasting it with the sense of success experienced after the performance.

Overall, there is a sense of achievement, the satisfaction of personal growth, as well as the euphoria felt at the end of the performance. These testimonies reflect a significant collective action, based on a series of individual preparatory efforts, whose sum has successfully led to the accomplishment of a common goal.

In conclusion, the data collected through participant observation and the students' testimonies support the assertion that both the general and specific objectives of the theatre workshop have been met. The qualitative evaluation reveals that the intervention facilitated language learning and promoted an environment of cohesion and trust among the students, which was essential for their personal and academic development.

5. Discussion

The participants in the theatre workshop achieved their common goal thanks to their understanding of the objectives and the equitable distribution of tasks. Effective coordination was key to achieving this goal through joint action, as noted by García Ruiz-Castillo (2023, p. 186), since the lack of coordination or the absence of a member hindered progress. Unlike other academic contexts in Japan, the theatre workshop relied entirely on the voluntary commitment of adult students who were also working, which made its implementation possible despite the absence of official evaluation.

The participants' motivation grew throughout the workshop, overcoming initial doubts about their abilities. This allowed them to become actively involved, write a dramatic text, and coordinate "inseparable" actions, as described by García Ruiz-Castillo (2023, p. 186). Individual actions were coordinated for the progress of the workshop and became part of the collective action. To achieve this, the participants "opted for a collaborative strategy through joint action" (García Ruiz-Castillo, 2023, p. 187).

Calderón de la Barca Fernández (2015, p. 52) highlights that the extracurricular nature of such activities fosters motivation, while Johnson et al. (1999) emphasise how cooperative learning strengthens group cohesion. The students' testimonies reflect an increase in confidence to interact in Spanish and a greater sense of belonging to the group.

In the Japanese context, reluctance to communicate orally is common; however, according to Moreno García (2013), Japanese students demonstrate the ability to achieve their goals, albeit at a different pace. This suggests that, despite communicative challenges, students can achieve high levels of participation and learning in an appropriate environment. Theatre, as Maley and Duff (2005) assert, can provide a conducive context for developing oral communicative competence. Indeed, the theatre workshop showed an improvement in fluency and the ability to improvise, although vocabulary limitations were apparent. The resolution of this issue was addressed through research conducted by the students and revisions of the dramatic text by the teacher.

When analysing the later works of Moreno García (2023, pp. 264-265), another characteristic common to Japanese students can be identified that distinguishes them from other types of students:

In class, students look at each other before responding; this gives us an insight into a fundamental principle of this society: the group is what matters. Martínez Martínez (2001) expressed this by saying that Japanese learners view themselves as interdependent with other students. This means that consensus takes precedence when making decisions; cooperative learning is highly valued (Shiota, 2018). Standing out is not a cultural value.

The behaviour of the students in the target group also showed cultural characteristics of interdependence (Martínez Martínez, 2001; Shiota, 2018), although not all of them fit the traditional stereotypes of Japanese students being docile and obedient, always working in groups, and avoiding standing out. In fact, during a meeting of the Spanish Didactics Research Group (GIDE) in Tokyo, held on 26th July 2024, Japanese teachers expressed their disagreement with this stereotyping, identifying two distinct groups of Japanese students:

A) Students willing to collaborate and avoid standing out. They find it difficult to take the initiative and rarely wish to become the representative of the group during the sharing session.

B) Competitive students who defend their individual work and resist collaborating in groups. This is because they fear losing their personal merits and having to share their individually acquired knowledge with other students who may have a lower level and could take advantage of it to improve their own grades, especially in group assessments.

The target group at the Cervantes Institute does not fully fit into either of these categories, as evaluation in the theatre workshop was not a determining factor. On the other hand, at the beginning of the workshop, the students mostly took little initiative and preferred not to stand out. However, the classroom dynamic was leveraged to foster the co-construction of knowledge. For this, the proposal of the Companion Volume (2020) was taken into account. Since there is no scale for the A1 level, some descriptors from the A2 level, such as "Lead group work" from the Mediate Concepts section, were cautiously applied. For example, the behaviour of one student aligned with these descriptors: "Gives very simple instructions to a collaborative group, as long as its members help with formulation if needed," under Manage Interaction, relational mediation, and "Asks what someone thinks about a particular idea," under Encourage Discourse to Build Knowledge, cognitive mediation (Companion Volume, 2020, p. 126). This suggests that, despite the lack of descriptors for lower levels and the cultural perception of passivity and inaction, it is necessary to consider the individual characteristics of students. Although they shared some characteristics outlined by Martínez Martínez (2003), they successfully overcame their initial insecurity and lack of motivation.

In terms of the main contribution of this intervention, it incorporated theatrical techniques adapted to the Japanese context, addressing the fear of making mistakes and shyness through voice, movement, and breathing exercises, which helped build confidence.

Moreover, this intervention focused on the A1 level of Spanish as a Foreign Language. The use of theatre proved beneficial for establishing a communicative approach, encouraging a proactive attitude towards the language and a willingness to participate actively.

Finally, the use of theatre at beginner levels proved to be a pedagogical innovation that effectively enhanced motivation and language skills in Japan, where theatre is not part of the school curriculum. The intervention demonstrated that these techniques can foster confidence, active participation, and group cohesion, offering an alternative to traditional methods.

6. Conclusions

The results of the project confirm that the evaluative research questions and proposed objectives were met, supporting the effectiveness of the theatrical approach in teaching Spanish as a Foreign Language at beginner levels in Japan. The qualitative evaluation shows that the workshop transformed an initially heterogeneous group into a cohesive and motivated learning community, improved interaction, and facilitated the achievement of linguistic objectives.

Activities such as improvisation, dramatisation, and speaking exercises helped create a collaborative environment, increasing active participation and reducing communication anxiety. The students optimised the use of resources and worked cooperatively, activating their interpersonal intelligence and improving knowledge co-construction, as suggested by Arnold and Foncubierta (2019, p. 42). Furthermore, this approach connected learning to emotional, physical, and mental processes, strengthening motivation and interest in teamwork.

Regarding the affective dimension, students' testimonials indicated an increase in self-esteem and linguistic achievement. This supports the positive correlation between both factors, as stated by Arnold and Foncubierta (2019, p. 33): "students need to experience success, and enjoying small achievements is a good antidote to low self-esteem." Furthermore, the improvement in emotional intelligence impacted the classroom atmosphere, extending beyond the workshop sessions.

Learning through the theatrical workshop, in line with the ideas of Ausubel (1983), has been particularly meaningful for the students. This approach facilitated an interaction between their prior knowledge and new information, promoting deeper and more relevant learning, rather than superficial or mechanical learning. In this way, the workshop enabled meaningful connections with the content, encouraging authentic learning. Moreover, the experience supported the development of emotional and social skills, key aspects of emotional and social intelligence according to Goleman (1995, 2006), such as the recognition and management of one's own emotions, as well as the ability to establish and maintain relationships and recognise the emotions of others. These skills not only improved students' willingness to communicate but also enhanced their learning.

Ultimately, the incorporation of theatre has proven to be an effective tool for fostering group cohesion and the development of Spanish as a Foreign Language skills, even at beginner levels. As a practical application in other educational contexts in Japan, Spanish as a Foreign Language teachers can implement activities such as improvisation, dramatized readings, and theatre games (Dorrego Funes, 1997, p. 92) to motivate students, engage them more actively, and improve their linguistic skills.

It is hoped that this study will inspire future research on the use of theatre in language teaching in Japan and other cultural contexts. However, it is important to acknowledge some limitations, such as the lack of comparison between different groups at various locations and the absence of a quantitative approach. Despite this, it is believed that other researchers will be able to expand and deepen this topic in the future, thus contributing to a better understanding of Spanish as a Foreign Language learning through theatre.

7. References

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ANNEX I

Figure 2. Activity for preparing dramatic writing

Name	
Surname	
Age	
Place of origin / Provenance (country and city)	
Place of residence / Address	
Phone number	
Email address	
Profession / Job	
Languages	

Source: own elaboration