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## A Theatrical Approach to Teaching EFL

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Theatre training techniques provide educators with the opportunity to explore innovative ways of employing the visual and performing arts in the teaching of EFL. In the past, educators have put the arts at the bottom of their list, referring to them as extra curricular activities. Historically speaking, the value of the arts in the language class has never been fully understood or appreciated. Now with the awakening of a new respect for the arts in educational thought, educators are beginning to recognize the impact the arts can create and they are incorporating them into standard curricula. The theoretical foundations which support using the arts to teach English as a foreign language combine the relevant principles of:

- cooperative learning
- project based language learning
- content based language learning

The EFL classroom is the perfect arena for the arts. Through the use of drama, music and visual art, it is easy to set in motion an educational process aimed at increasing student capacity for self-expression. An ancient Asian proverb says it all;

*Tell me, I'll forget*

*Show me, I may remember*

*But involve me, and I'll understand*

Understanding! That is the key. People speak of learning a new language, but do they actually comprehend all aspects of that language?

Can they feel, smell, taste and touch the culture from which that language developed? I believe that the process experienced by an actor learning to act and a student learning a language are remarkably similar. When actors begin to learn their parts for a play, they must delve deeply into their character's life, motivation and culture in order to fully understand the character's particular persona. In acquiring a new language a person meets words in the full context of some kind of genuine human communication. There is no special presentation of a new item, no organized drilling and no testing in the academic sense.

If only memorization is used in language learning, it becomes difficult to gain control of the target language. Therefore, newly acquired language must be used in a communicative manner. Language learning for most, is best approached in an enjoyable and entertaining way where students' inhibitions are released and a safe realm for exploration is offered.

Using drama in class should be gradual unless one has a course that is specifically entitled "drama". Most language teachers do not have set drama classes but may incorporate it into their regular lessons. This paper will present a number of theatrical techniques which can easily be used in language classes of all levels. Topics examined in this paper include:

- Guided imagery
- Warm-up activities
- Non-verbal and verbal improvisation
- Role-playing
- Story-Telling and poems
- Drama projects

### I. Guided Imagery

Guided imagery is a method of relaxation which stimulates students'

memories and awareness. The students must be relaxed and calm for this to work. This exercise gives the students an opportunity to articulate their experiences through drawing and talking. It develops listening and vocabulary skills necessary for increasing effectiveness in communication. It helps the students organize their thoughts and promotes asking and answering interesting questions.

1. Have all the students sit in a circle. (Include yourself)
2. If this is done early in the semester, you may want people to introduce themselves. It's very important for the students to know each other well when implementing drama into the curriculum.
3. Next, tell the students one of the best experiences in your life. Try to smile, laugh and use a lot of gestures.
4. Have the students close their eyes and prepare for an experiment in guided imagery. Turn off or lower the lights.
5. If you wish, you can use quiet, unobtrusive music in the background. Then, emote the following, pausing occasionally to allow the students to see in their minds the events that are occurring. The teacher or guide must have a smooth, rich voice to enhance the students' memories and imaginations.

"Please close your eyes. You feel safe. Here comes a fluffy white cloud. Gently, it lifts you up. You feel happy. You feel safe. Gently, slowly, the cloud lifts you higher and higher. You are now floating out of this building, away from the school. Gently, slowly, the cloud floats into the blue, clear sky. The sun is shining. It is warm and beautiful. Now you are going back in time. Yesterday, last week, last month, last year. Stop whenever you want to. Remember a day when you were very, very happy. You feel wonderful! Where are you? Are you alone? Are you with someone? What are you wearing? How old

are you? Now look around and see what is happening. What colours do you see? What do you hear? What can you smell? Can you taste anything? Do you feel calm? Do you feel excited? Are you smiling, laughing? Now remember. Take a minute to remember . . . When you are ready, slowly open your eyes. Then draw a picture of what you saw. Don't talk to anyone. Do this quietly. Draw your pictures".

When the students have finished their pictures have them explain their good experiences to each other. Have each student turn to the person on their left and explain their story, using their picture as a guide.

## II. Warm-up activities

Here are a few introductory exercises that have always proven to be quite successful with my classes. The games require movement and can help students learn how to express their feelings and ideas through their bodies and through interacting physically with other group members. Learning to communicate through movement brings physical confidence and the ability to get a message across in situations where words are not appropriate. Many movement activities are co-operative efforts and involve learning to trust others.

1. *Mirror images:* Students choose partners. One of the pair will be a "mirror". The other will stand in front of the mirror and move in slow motion, using only hands and arms at first. As the "mirror" becomes more confident in copying movements, the reflected person should expand her movements to include the entire body. Students change roles often so that each gets lots of practice being both the mirror and the reflected person.
2. *Building a machine:* In groups of five or six, students stand in a

large circle so that as much space as possible can be used. One person stands in the centre of the circle and performs an action in a mechanical, repetitive manner (for instance, swinging an arm from side to side). One by one, in no predetermined order, everyone enters the circle by creating a new action which corresponds or "interlocks" in some way with the movement already being performed. An example of this would be the second player may lie on the floor and raise one leg up and down in rhythm to the first person's arm movement. Students may connect physically to one another or depend on someone for support. It is important that a variety of movements be used to create the machine.

Encourage learners to add movement in an unexpected direction, in a different rhythm, or on a different level such as lying down, squatting, leaning, standing. Ask them also to add a vocal sound to accompany the movement invented. An interesting option to this activity is to have the students decide beforehand on a product their machine will produce. While performing, the audience tries to guess what the machine is producing (e.g. popcorn, automobiles, teddy bears, etc.).

3. *Landing the plane:* Line up two rows of chairs to form a landing approach to an airport runway. Choose one person to be the pilot, another to function as the control tower. The airport is engulfed by fog, and obstacles such as books, clothing, and blackboard erasers are placed in the approach. Blindfold the pilot, and turn him around slowly several times. The pilot then begins the approach. The control tower talks the pilot through, around, and/or over obstacles. If the pilot touches an obstacle, the plane crashes. The game is over when the pilot crashes or lands successfully, and a new pilot and control tower take over.

### III. Nonverbal/verbal improvisation

Improvisation is an excellent way for students to see themselves and others as real people communicating in real life situations. Improvisation, as real life, is acted out on the spur of the moment; to speak or move extemporaneously. Our feelings, attitudes and ideas are with us no matter what we are doing and we express these in impromptu ways. Through improvisation, students begin to interact, regardless of their individual language ability. In an improvisation, it is the situation, not the character which is dominant. As in real life, we act through our situation, drawing from our own character.

Much of drama is about non-verbal expression, and mime, which teaches the art of carefully controlled movement, is certainly valuable training to have. Mime can be as simple as a hand gesture indicating "stop!", or it can be a demonstration of some complicated action such as climbing a mountain. With experience in exploring mime (Booth, 1985), learners can use its techniques in all of their drama work. They may choose to incorporate mime into the drama that their group is building, or may choose to use mime as a way of beginning or ending the drama. However mime is used, it is important for students to understand the importance of *nonverbal* language.

#### Mime:

##### *Tableau:*

Divide class into groups of eight to twelve people. Choose one person in each group to be the leader. Divide the classroom area up so that each group has its own space. Now each group moves around energetically in several directions like a crowd on a busy downtown street. At any time the leader calls out a word, and group members must freeze, forming a tableau which in some way reflects or illustrates the word. For instance, if the leader calls "Homework!", players quickly assume a position which displays their reaction to the idea of homework.

Each participant's position may or may not relate to another person's position. For example, one person might appear to be reading silently; another might appear to be reading aloud to another person, who in turn might appear to be puzzled or to be taking notes. The tableau is held for about five seconds. The leader then releases group members, and they again move about until another key word is called. This process is repeated several times, with group members responding to a new key word each time.

While group members are displaying their individual reactions to the key word, they must also be aware of the group as a whole. The object is to form a tableau, an overall picture, composed of individual reactions. If individuals came unsuspectingly into the room, they should be easily able to guess approximately what the key word had been. Instructors should encourage students to try to use a wide variety of stage positions, levels (kneeling, lying down, stretching upward), and gestures. Players shouldn't be overly concerned about composing the picture, but attempt to supply enough individual variety for an interesting tableau to occur.

#### *Peculiar Pencil:*

Put students into groups of eight to ten and have them sit in a circle. One person begins by taking a pencil and using it in such a way that shows that the pencil has become something else. The group must identify what the pencil has become. Then the pencil is passed to the next person in the circle who must use it in a different way. There can be no duplication, and the pencil should be passed around the circle several times.

#### **Nonverbal and verbal combined:**

#### *Situations:*

1. Hand out a situation to each group. A group of four or five



works best. let the students read the situation and then ask them to act it out in pantomime. Only body language and gestures are permitted.

2. After they have performed their pantomimes, ask them to act out the situations again, however, this time they are to use words.
3. It is very important that these are not rehearsed before performed. They must be performed on the spur of the moment. Natural, real language will emerge.

You can create your own situations. If your students are advanced enough, have them create situations for other groups. Here are a few suggestions:

1. You and your friends are walking in the park and you find a wallet with a lot of money in it. Do you keep the money, or do you return it to the owner?
2. You have just won a trip around the world. You are allowed to take one person with you. Who will you take?
3. You and your friends are at a supermarket. You have just bought a lot of food. When you arrive at the cashier, you realize that you don't have enough money to pay for all the food.
4. You have a terrible argument with your boss at work and he fires you. Now you must go home and tell your family.
5. You and your friends are walking at night. You see a spaceship land. You want to meet the aliens, but your friends want to run away.
6. Your girlfriend is pregnant. She wants you to marry her. You really don't want to get married. Your friends think that you should marry her.

#### *Compound Words Game:*

1. Divide the class into two teams.

2. Have the players from one team choose a word out of a pile of words. Example: butterfly, lightbulb, blackboard, washroom.
3. One student pantomimes the first part of the word and the partner pantomimes the second half.
4. Team members must guess the words and then put them together. A time limit is a good idea for this game. You can also use two word verbs instead of compound ones, such as turn off, put out, sit down, pull off, and take off.

### Verbal Improvisation/Theatresports:

Adding an element of competition to the lesson usually has quite positive results. When using drama, you can play what is called "Theatre Sports". This is where two teams of four are made and they must improvise situations provided by the instructor. In addition, they are judged by four or five classmates who hold score cards up after each team has performed. Below are just a few of the many improvisation activities I have done with my students. In the true sense of improvisation, rehearsal is not permitted beforehand. In some cases, however, depending on student level, instructors should use their judgment to decide whether the students need a couple of minutes to decide what to do. As the term goes on students should be weaned from this preparation time. Depending on the type of improvisation, the instructor may ask the audience (class members) for the following information to be given to the team performing:

1. What is the relationship between the actors? For example: brother-sister, boss-employee, lovers, doctor-patient, etc.
2. Where are they? e.g., at home, in an airplane, in the supermarket, etc.
3. What time of day is it?
4. What emotions are they experiencing? (optional)

## 5. What is the conflict?

*Theatresports improvisations:*

- *Continuation:* The opposing team begins a scene. After a period of time, e.g., 30 seconds, the referee (a student) blows a whistle and the challenging team continues and ends the scene.
- *Story from the audience:* Players act out a scene based on a true life story related to them by an audience member. This could be a memorable or typical day in the person's life, a dream, an embarrassing moment, a first date, kiss or day on the job, etc.
- *Death in a minute:* A scene in which at least one character dies sometime (usually at the end) during the one-minute period.
- *Die:* Two or more players from each team line up. The referee points to one player who begins a story. The referee then points to another player who must continue the story without hesitating, stumbling, repeating words or changing the grammar of the sentences. If a player makes a mistake, the audience yells, "DIE!" She then improvises a death, using an audience suggestion. The game continues until one player remains.
- *Dubbing:* Voices for players on stage in the scene are provided by offstage players.
- *Emotional roller coaster:* Players ask for three or more emotions. An offstage player calls these out one at a time during the scene. On stage players take on and justify the emotions as they are called.
- *Ending in "I love you" or "I hate you":* Scene must end with the specified phrase.
- *Free association-reincorporation:* A player free associates (lists a series of images) for 30 seconds. Opposing team members tell a story or perform a scene reincorporating as many images as possible, usually in one minute. The process is then repeated with the

other team.

- *Freeze tag:* Two players begin a scene. An offstage player calls "freeze", on stage players freeze, a new player tags one of them, assumes her physical position and justifies the position in a new scene. Another offstage player calls "freeze", and so on.
- *Interpretive dance:* Players dance to music for a short period of time, usually from 30 seconds to a minute. They freeze when the music stops and begin a scene from the body positions they find themselves in.

#### IV. Role Playing

Through the use of role-play learners can experience and practise functional and everyday language. The structure and vocabulary used in one situation will be quite different from another. For example, the way the pregnant young woman speaks to her boyfriend is going to be quite different from the way the friends talk about meeting the aliens.

The main functions used when people talk include: negotiating, feeling, imagining, informing, and controlling. Each of these language functions can be taught, experienced and practised through role-play. Eliminating the roles of student and teacher, enables the students to experience the process of language learning without the threat of failure. They must get beyond the need for approval or disapproval. When a non-authoritative atmosphere is created, the students' intuitive and creative side will emerge. Then, and only then can the student use the language learned and be creative in her language acquisition.

In theatre, we often talk about problem-solving techniques. This is where we offer the group a situation in role-play where they must work together to solve problems. The problem solving technique used in a language class provides a mutually objective focus to teacher and students. It does away with the need for the teacher to analyze,

intellectualize, and dissect a student's work on a personal basis. This eliminates the necessity of the student having to go through the teacher or the teacher having to go through the student to learn. It gives learners direct contact with the material, thereby developing an instant relationship between them. It makes experiencing possible and smoothes the way for all classmates to work together. The situation below is just one of many and instructors may prefer to create their own that relate particularly to a theme or content area being studied in class.

*Problem-solving through role-play:*

1. Divide the class into groups of six to eight.
2. Give each group a situation. An example might be: The city is going to build a new large airport. They have chosen to build it in what is now a farmer's field. If you were the following people, how might you react; a farmer, two environmentalists, two unemployed construction workers, a snack bar owner looking for a place to open his snack bar, an unemployed airline clerk, the owner of a vegetable market.
3. Each student takes a role as one of the above people.
4. Discuss how you would feel if you were this person.
5. Have all the characters meet at the city hall to discuss the problem and try to find a solution.
6. You can build and build on this, until you have a full length play if you wish.

## V. Story-Telling

Story-telling can be done in a variety of ways. Depending on whether you want the students to use their language skills or their physical skills. If the former is your goal, then you would use the following method.

1. Have the students sit in a circle, include yourself. Explain to the students that you are going to start a story but they must continue and end the story.
2. Begin the story. Once upon a time . . .  
When you reach a semi-climactic point, you indicate to the person sitting beside you to continue with the phrase, 'and then'.
3. That person must say at least enough to carry on the story line. When she is ready, she can in turn pass it on to the next student.
4. This continues until you reach the last student in the circle. This person must finish the story. This is an excellent listening as well as communicating exercise.

If you want the students to express themselves through action, then have one learner with a vivid imagination stand to one side and tell a story. Other students are chosen to act out the story as it is being told. This can be an exciting and constructive way to have the students interact with one another using body language and words. If you have a very low language group, then read a children's language story and have the students act it out.

#### *Making poems*

1. Divide the class into groups of five.
2. Each student in the group must write a part of speech. One student must write a noun, another writes a verb, another an adjective, a pronoun, and an adverb.
3. Then take all the nouns from each group and put them in a pile. Do the same with each part of speech.
4. One person from each group goes up and picks at random a noun, adjective, verb, adverb and pronoun. The group then

must make a short poem using these words. They can of course add other words.

5. Finally, the group says its poem and acts it out.

## VI. Drama projects—combining all four skills

### *Docudrama:*

In this section I will explain how your students can take simple stories from the newspaper and make them into impressive in-class performances or video productions. First, however, I would like to emphasize that in regular language classes in which you want to introduce a drama component, projects like docudrama should only be approached once students have had a taste of drama “appetizers”. These activities will help them to become comfortable with the idea of getting up in front of the class and taking risks. Some of the activities mentioned earlier in this paper will hopefully allow your students to leave their inhibitions at the door.

The word “Docudrama” combines the words “documentary” and “drama”. Basically, the point behind doing docudramas with your students is that they can take actual newspaper stories (or not so real if taken from some of the supermarket tabloids) and bring them to life. Two to three weeks before beginning the work in class on the docudrama, ask students to start looking through the English newspapers for two stories that:

- involve people
- are not too complicated or lengthy
- are interesting to them and would possibly be to others
- cover a particular content area or current issue being studied in class (optional)

This homework assignment is quite challenging for lower level students so they can work with a partner or in groups. If your class is at the false beginner to upper beginner level then you may want to

choose the stories for them. What I usually do with all levels is to have the students bring their stories into class then put the learners into groups of four or five. At this point, they must summarize orally their stories for the group. Those listening should be encouraged to ask questions if they do not fully understand the summary provided. Once all students have summarized their newspaper stories, the group votes on the story they would like to turn into a drama.

A word of warning here. This of course depends on your class and your teaching style, but I strongly suggest you have the students write out their summaries in point form and orally recount the story to the group rather than read directly from the article. You may want to give points for this first portion of the assignment. Some students may not have done the homework, some may bring in entire newspapers and start looking for stories in class, some may bring their stories but give them to the others to read rather than orally recounting the contents. To safeguard against these pitfalls, I suggest you count the story research for points. That, of course, is up to you and whether you favour a point system in your grading.

Once a story has been selected, the learners must make a list of characters in the story and those who are implied. If the group numbers and the story character numbers do not match, allow the students to add a character. This, of course, changes the idea of it being a true docu-drama but I have always done this in the past and it has worked out very well. Implied characters, however, are usually the answer to this numbers dilemma. The next step is for the students to make a list of possible docudrama scenes. They can either do one scene, or a combination of scenes for a longer production.

For homework, ask the groups to prepare a script. Give them some idea of how long you want the docudrama to be. Anywhere from 3 to 6 minutes is sufficient. Make sure they have enough copies of the script for each group member. You may want to give them some time



in class to work on the script. This way you can walk around the class and help the groups with any language problems that may occur. If you want to edit the scripts (using an editing key rather than rewriting) you can collect them to return the following week. If you're focusing on fluency rather than accuracy then you can go straight into rehearsal.

Depending on your facilities, you may want the students to videotape the docudrama outside of class rather than perform live in class. I have found over the years that students prefer videotaping the productions because they have much more control if they make a mistake. Plus, there is no audience in front of them when they are performing. If media facilities are not available, ask the students to present their drama live in class.

### *Scripting:*

A script usually begins by introducing the characters and indicating the plot. It advances by adding complications to the plot until these complications are resolved by a crisis or climax, and the play or scene ends in a way which settles past conflicts and indicates future directions for the characters. With docudramas, scriptwriters often change this formula to remain true to the facts. However, it is a good base on which to build a script and knowing this in advance can help students choose appropriate news articles.

Creating a script can be approached in a variety of ways depending on your time constraints and class level. Some approaches are: group writing, individual writing or as a group activity in which polished improvisations are scripted. You may want to try all methods if you have the opportunity to do so.

The *group writing method* works especially well when the students are at the same language level. As in group compositions, the danger here is that one or two students may do all the work. It is up to the instructor to devise ways to avoid this from happening. One possibility

is to assign a group leader or ask the group to nominate someone. It is then the leader's responsibility to ensure all group members contribute to the script in some way, either with dialogue or stage directions.

The *individual method* calls for one writer, but the group is still part of the process because the writer observes the group's interpretation of the script on the basis of the problems that arise when the script is rehearsed. Students will discover that conveying ideas only through dialogue is not easy. However, not every attempt at scripting must become a polished piece of work.

The *group improvisation method* combines spoken and written exploration, with the emphasis on oral composition. Working in groups, the learners can focus on the chosen scene from the newspaper article. Here are the steps the students can follow for creating a script through group improvisation:

1. As a group, students read and discuss the chosen selection. They must determine the number of characters and the setting or settings of the story. They then must decide whether they will write a script about the whole story, part of it, or something that goes beyond it.
2. Having chosen the roles each group member will play, students must improvise the story several times. They must try to stay as true to the original selection as they can. After each improvisation, they must check the story for important aspects they may have missed and for details which they may have changed.
3. When students are satisfied with their improvisation of the story, they act it out again, recording it with a tape recorder. Then, they play back the recording to be sure it is satisfactory.
4. With everyone sharing the task, students play back the tape again, stopping it to write down the dialogue as it is said. Remind them to be sure their notes indicate which character is speaking

each line.

5. Students write (using a word processor or computer if possible) a good copy of the script, and make copies for each group member. They then read the script aloud several times and make any changes they feel are necessary for clarity and effectiveness.
6. Students then prepare a final copy of the script, rehearse and videotape it. One possible way to test the effectiveness of a script is to have the groups exchange scripts, rehearse and perform them. This alternative activity can be very rewarding for students when they see their work being performed.

*Creating scripts from other sources:*

There are numerous other forms of written material from which students can develop scripts and produce effective dramas. For example, learners can look through an anthology of poetry for poems which contain dialogue; choose cartoons and comic strips which have dramatic content; search through novels for passages of dialogue; or adapt Japanese or European folktales.

*Summary:*

Drama use in language learning works from the strength of the group and enriches the lives of everyone involved. Students will discover drama by working within the medium—by improvising, by exploring ideas through role-play, and then by replaying, discussing, and discovering new meanings in the situation. Learners work in drama with everyone in the whole class which allows them to learn about how they think, feel, and, at the same time, develop their communication and theatre skills. Once your class moves beyond improvisation and into script work they should be aware that script is literature that speaks. Drama, however, is much more than merely reciting lines and

performing actions. Actors must search for meaning in a script and attempt to communicate that meaning to others. As language teachers we need to make our students realize that the script is only the skeleton of a situation. It is their interpretation which must provide the flesh and breath to make the script come alive.

There exists a myriad of theatre techniques and games for teaching English of which I have just scratched the surface. Through theatre techniques, an additional realm for group and self-expression can be discovered. My approach stresses the need to develop effective dialogue, express opinions and think creatively. An educator must encourage students to become independent learners, not only in the classroom but also throughout their lives. Too often the classroom crushes ingenuity and rewards conformity. Therefore, by taking a risk and experimenting with the arts in your classroom, you and your students will find yourselves heading in wonderful new directions.

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