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Using Theater Concepts in the TESOL Classroom

This article discusses practical ways to incorporate theater concepts into the ESL classroom. The notion of a theater ensemble lends itself well to group work in language learning. I have used my experience auditioning, participating in theater games, and improv techniques to encourage second language learning through public speaking, group collaboration, and giving students the power to speak.

Introduction

As an ESL educator with an educational background in theater, I have observed that in many ways, the life of an actor resembles the life of a student learning a second language. In his article, “The Benefits of Using Drama in the ESL/EFL Classroom,” Chris Boudreault (2010) cites William Shakespeare:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.

As You Like It Act 2, scene 7, 139–143

As the world can resemble a stage and actors, so can the individuals of the TESOL classroom. In a similar way to the actor who prepares for his role during rehearsals, acts with a group of motivated individuals, and gives life to a character to present to an audience, so a second language learner prepares for assessments, thrives in conjunction with his or her peers, takes on a new identity in the language classroom, and communicates outside the classroom in the target language.

When I was an undergraduate at the University of California, Los Angeles, theater was my minor. The various theater classes I took lowered my social anxiety and made me more comfortable with speaking

in front of a group. As a shy person myself, I felt freedom to participate in my theater classes by being myself and even acting silly.

During my undergraduate career, I took part in a theater activity that had an especially great impact on me—creating an *autodrama*. An autodrama is an artistic piece, usually a play or a monologue written by the actor himself, that shows the main events of that person's life, both fortunate and tragic. Writing and performing an autodrama was a life-changing experience for me because it was then when I realized that an actor has to prepare for a role by first looking at himself, then looking at humanity, and trying to understand what it means to be human. My acting professor and coach at UCLA says:

When your “default setting” becomes one of authenticity, emotional honesty, and the ability to listen—both in acting and in life—then you can honestly say that you have developed a craft. (Scott Conte, 2014)

Through these theater experiences, I began to see acting as more than a hobby. I saw how each acting concept teaches about life and humanity, how to be a better human being, and how to be better at something. My theater experience has led me to see teaching as a way to not only help my students “develop their craft” of speaking a second language, but also to help them see life in a deeper way. One of the ways I have incorporated my educational background in theater and my experience with the dramatic arts into my teaching is by using theater in the ESL classroom. I applied my prior experience in theater in the TESOL classroom in three ways:

1. Modeling public speaking;
2. Creating group cohesion; and
3. Giving students the power to speak.

Theater to Model Public Speaking

In their article “Full-Scale Theater Production and Foreign Language Learning,” Colleen Ryan-Schuetz and Laura M. Colangelo (2004) state that foreign language theater production “involves students in a variety of communicative tasks on a daily basis throughout the numerous phases of production: auditions, rehearsals, textual analysis and discussions, set and costume preparation, performances, and postperformance reflections” (p. 374).

To engage my students, I often make references to these phases of theater production. For example, in a news and media studies class, in order to prepare my students for presentation skills, I showed them a short video clip about an actor in a film audition. In many ways, acting auditions relate to the format of an academic presentation. First, an

audition requires the actor to prepare extensively for his part. Sometimes the actor must know his lines, although in most cases he improvises. When the audition starts, the actor introduces himself to the directors, making sure to speak clearly. I used the audition to explain to my students how we must follow a similar procedure in the classroom. Like the actor, a student must be prepared, know the topic well in advance, and make sure he or she speaks clearly. In addition, having auditioned for film and theater and having taken speech classes, I was able to model and share my experiences for the audition setting and academic presentations. We also discussed how in both an audition and a presentation, it can be intimidating to speak in front of a group.

Finally, we watched the actor's actual video clip from the television show that he starred in, so that students could see the final product. I asked students to place themselves in the seat of the director and criticize both the actor's audition and the final product in the TV series. In a modified postperformance reflection activity, students discussed among themselves what they liked from the audition, as well as what they would change. Using acting auditions to model presentation skills in the ESL classroom gives students an authentic perspective on presentation skills in the real world. Students can see how a presentation, whether in the academic setting or in the entertainment business, must follow certain guidelines in order for the speaker to communicate with the audience.

Theater to Create Group Cohesion

Although possible, working completely alone in a theater production without the assistance of a director, crew members, or production companies can be quite difficult. Therefore, set managers, directors, actors, and many other individuals often collaborate to produce a play. This group of individuals works together with one goal in mind: to communicate with the world by presenting a masterpiece. This idea of an *ensemble theater* transfers easily to group activities in the ESL classroom. Dornyei (1994) presents the idea of *group specific motivational components* in which emphasis is placed on group activities as a strong motivational factor for students. As crewmembers of a theater or film production work as part of a group, through their collaboration successful musicals, plays, and films come alive. In the ESL classroom, working together fosters setting objectives and committing to them, and most important cultivates a sense of unity, which is a motivating factor (Dornyei, 1994). In the same way, promoting an environment of "togetherness," participation, and group work in the classroom positively encourages students, even helping behavior in the classroom. Bernard Weiner (1994) writes that participating in group activities is

a stronger motivating factor for learning than individual motivation. This suggests that students could be better suited to learn an L2 if they participate in an environment that is supported by group interactions. This claim is also supported by a study by Clement, Dornyei, and Nols (1994), their results indicating that “group cohesion is associated with a positive evaluation of the learning environment” and having this positive atmosphere “promotes student involvement and activity while moderating anxiety and promoting self-confidence” (p. 442). These studies reveal that group work encourages students to participate as a unit in order to attain goals as a group.

To encourage group cohesion in the ESL classroom, I have incorporated *theater games* into my lessons. These games lessen students’ social anxiety and develop their collaborative skills.

Zip-Zap-Zop: Decreasing Social Anxiety

At the beginning of each class, and especially the first day of class, an important goal is that students bond with other students to lower their social anxiety, help them feel more comfortable making mistakes, and encourage them to act relaxed with their classmates. The first game I have introduced is a warm-up game called “Zip-Zap-Zop.” This is a common theater warm-up game in which students stand in a circle, aim, and “send” each of these three words, one by one, by means of a single clap, to any other student. Students are eliminated if they mispronounce a word or take too much time to respond. In this game, students are reminded that making mistakes is normal, and acting like themselves is encouraged. Through this theater game, students feel more comfortable with one another as a group.

The Twin Expert Show: Collaborating to Create Meaning

Another theater game that I have found to be effective for group learning is called “The Twin Expert Show,” an improvisation game that I have implemented in my intermediate class. At this level, students are able to form complete sentences, although they struggle with accuracy. The game consists of two students sitting in front of the class (or the audience). The teacher asks the audience to come up with an imaginary “area of expertise” for these students. Example areas of expertise might include *art, dancing, history, or chemistry*, to name a few possibilities. Then, the audience asks questions about this area of expertise to the “twin experts.” The twin experts must focus on accuracy when responding to the audience questions. Each twin is allowed only one word at a time when responding. I have found that the two students often help each other in the process to make sure they respond accurately to each question. This activity interests and engages

students while also helping them to produce sentences accurately. The entire class collaborates to make meaning in a creative way.

Theater to Give Students the Power to Speak

Along with modeling speaking skills and creating group cohesion, theater activities can also be empowering for students. Shelley Angéilil-Carter (1997), in her research study “Second Language Acquisition of Spoken and Written English: Acquiring the Skeptron,” shares valuable insight to give students the power to communicate in their L2. Angéilil-Carter holds that past learning experiences of discourse can hinder or facilitate students’ learning. She states that to further facilitate learning of the L2, is important to pass on the “skeptron.” In other words, as instructors, we should ensure that we let our students speak about a topic that is relevant to them. By doing this, we are allowing our students to discover that learning an L2 can be meaningful for them.

Every Idea Is a Great Idea

The theater concept of improv lends itself well to empowering students to speak. In my ESL class, I have introduced the improv game called “Every Idea Is a Great Idea.” In this activity, the students’ task is to brainstorm and create an imaginary product that they could market. As a group, they must think of a name, a package design, and a jingle. They must also select a spokesperson to talk about their product. The purpose of this improv game is for students to have the power to speak about an invention that they themselves have created. The challenge of the game is that *every idea is a great idea*, meaning that students are not allowed to use the word “no,” an important component of improv theater. Furthermore, each student must contribute something to the product, allowing them all to have the power to speak and contribute. I have found that when students have the power to speak without fear of their ideas being vetoed, they collaborate to come up with very creative ideas. For example, one group of students created a product in which we could break the laws of physics by creating flying shoes for people. In addition to having the freedom to be creative, students enjoy participating in this activity because they are able to talk about topics that they choose themselves.

Conclusion

Including theater and acting in my ESL classes has been an effective way to keep my students interested and engaged during class. By incorporating concepts from theater, I have been able to model public speaking, bring a sense of classroom cohesion and collaboration

in language learning, and empower students to speak. Furthermore, I have used theater to help students lower their social anxiety and to feel more comfortable speaking English in front of their peers. I have also explored the role of theater games that promote learning. While I have incorporated my own experience in theater into my teaching, I believe that theater activities and concepts can be incorporated into the classroom by most ESL/EFL instructors regardless of their educational background. With this article, I intend to communicate the benefits of including theater games in ESL classes. It is our responsibility as teachers to “set the stage” for our students so that they can learn, create, understand themselves, and succeed in their process of acquiring their L2.

Author

Gina Tiffany Badie is a graduate student in the MS in Education (TESOL) program at California State University, Fullerton. A native speaker of Spanish, she has a BA in Psychology and a minor in Theater from the University of California, Los Angeles. She has experience teaching English as a second language, as well as Spanish, and now teaches at CSU, Fullerton's American Language Program, Kaplan International, and Berlitz International. She has studied French and Portuguese and plans to study abroad in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, at the Federal University of Minas Gerais in 2015.

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