

USING PLAYS FOR PRONUNCIATION PRACTICE: ACTING AND ENGLISH IN SEVEN EASY STEPS

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Charlyn Wessels¹, in the introduction to her book *Drama* (1991), uses a Chinese proverb:

*I hear and I forget,
I listen and I remember,
I do and I understand.*

Such expression is appropriate to the use of drama in language teaching and learning as it reflects the process through which the learner proceeds when involved in drama and drama activities.

Most language teachers are acquainted with the use of role-plays and dialogues and use these as part of their repertoire of technique to support language acquisition. Many teachers use improvisation, either self-created or drawn from textbooks, to have students play out scenes that develop fluency with functional vocabulary. Other teachers may even have students improvise and structure whole plays that can attain performance level and be shown to an audience. The use of scripted plays to support the work of language acquisition, however, is more limited. Thus, I would like, in this report, to discuss some ways that work with written plays may be used to develop language facility.

Fifteen years ago, at the Institute for Language Education, where I work at Southern New Hampshire University, we began developing our drama program in tandem with pronunciation and culture studies. Although we work with all the techniques referred to above, it was in the development of short plays for performance that brought language acquisition pedagogy to meld with the work of drama. In the process, we have articulated seven basic steps that lead students to a good level of acting and speech production, as well as cultural understanding.

Step One

The first step in our process is to select a number of short plays that can be read and digested quickly. The material can be the choice of the teacher, but the criteria for the choice should be as follows: the plays should be only ten to fifteen minutes long, should contain vocabulary that is, for the most part, understandable to second language learners, and they should address issues that have some cultural or social meaning. The plays should be short in order that students can read them to completion within class time and have time for discussion. They should be of such vocabulary that, if performed, most

¹ Wessels, Charlyn (1991): *Drama*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

students would be able to comprehend the meaning of the play. And, they should contain enough stimulating social and cultural information that students will be motivated to discuss such issues.

Step Two

In the second step, students are exposed to the International Phonetic Alphabet. All phonemes should be worked with and sounded individually so that the student may apply them in his reading and, when correction is needed, notate the areas of his/her pronunciation that needs work using IPA transcription. Likewise, the principles for stress, emphasis, and intonation can be explained so that these may be applied (and coached by the teacher) as the play readings proceed. In this way, students get to stretch their vocal range, pitch, and intonation to build new vocal habits typical of the target language.

This technique is not new. In fact, it was developed and used for generations in the training of professional actors. In the U.S, the technique has been associated with Edith Skinner, whose book, *Speak with Distinction*², we use as part of our speech training for ESOL students.

Step Three

In step three, our language learners read over the series of plays, practicing pronunciation and intonation to clarify basic meaning. At the same time, students have opportunity to discuss the characters of each play, the major issues in the play, and the basic theme or idea of a script. Thus, they involve themselves in using the target language for discussion. Beyond these worthwhile activities, the reading of short plays serves another purpose: Students are given the opportunity to survey a host of characters, differing plots, and assorted themes. This is important, as we must remember that the character that the student ultimately chooses to play serves his/her process of *becoming*; what the student chooses to perform in terms of character often serves a psychological need of the learner. Thus, the shy, inward-looking student may choose to play the extrovert, the clumsy, the graceful, the ill-bred, the genteel. Usually, students pick characters that satisfy a developmental need. That is why the students should be allowed *to choose* the characters they wish to play. Such freedom of choice leads to motivated rehearsals and natural performances because it satisfies each student's need to "become". In addition, the student's choice of material extends his/her vested interest through delivering, in performance, a chosen theme in which s/he believes.

Step Four

After having read and discussed ten to twelve short plays, with step four, the students are given an opportunity to choose which characters and which plays they would like to develop. As decisions are made, groups are formed. Each playgroup is composed of three to four students. In these small groups, the students further discuss the super-objective of

² Skinner, Edith, (1990): *Speak with Distinction*. New York: Applause Theatre Book Publishers

their plays (the play's *raison d'être*), the objectives of each character, and analyze the script for clues to their character's temperament.

Next, acting as a coach/director, the teacher needs to listen to the students read their play a section at a time and coach their speech, pointing out mispronunciations and having students note and repeat the correct phonetic sounds so that they can incorporate them in their performance. At the same time, intonation, stress, and pitch indicators should be added to the scripts to create a "score" similar to a musical one. The score of the part will encourage students to develop their vocal range, pitch, and tone. It also creates a structure of meaning through which the student/actors can develop the inner world of their characters... to be discussed in Step Five.

Finally, as a homework assignment, these student/actors should be asked to write a detailed autobiography about their character, filling in all details of their character's life from the minimal clues provided in the script. Such complex work imitates the work of the professional actor and leads to the next, important assignment, the development of the character's inner monologue or "subtext".

Step Five

Although tremendously important, the inner monologue, a technique analyzed and developed by the Russian acting innovator, Konstantin Stanislavski, is often overlooked by ESL/EFL coaches of student actors. However, the development of this technique not only leads to committed and focused acting, but to the student's understanding of the culture in which he is an actor playing a character. For this assignment, the student/actor is asked to write above his/her spoken lines, the thoughts that his/her character is *thinking* while speaking, what the intention or function is for the words used. Since the thoughts may be very different from what the character is saying, the actor gets a deeper understanding of his/her role that brings nuance to the lines and depth to the performance. At the same time, the thoughts must proceed in similar fashion as another character is speaking. In this way, the actor is engaged at all moments: *thinking in the target language and in character*. In this step, the actor develops vocal inflection and intonation that expresses specific character and objective traits – the subtleties of performance. This process, hopefully, leads to its imitation when the student is not rehearsing, but playing him/herself. Further, to *know* what a character is thinking involves an understanding of the character's objectives as well as the society and culture in which s/he lives.

Step Six

From the development of the inner monologues, students move naturally into work with their lines. I use Richard Via's technique, discussed in his "English through Drama"³ (1975), called, "Look and Speak". Using this technique, the student/actors look at their lines and hold as much of a unit as they can in their memories, then look at their partner in the play and speak the lines as they hold eye contact with each other. They continue to

³ Via, Richard A. "English through Drama." *The Art of TESOL: Selected Articles from the English Teaching Forum (Part 1)*. Ed. Anne Covell. Newton: Tower Press, 1975. 158-162.

take their speeches in chunks, speaking their lines to each other *according to their character's intentions*. In this fashion, they must communicate to pursue their objectives while uniting their thought (the inner monologue) with the support of the dialogue. With guidance from the teacher/coach, this process produces desired natural intonation and linguistic expression as learners link character needs to objectives, objectives to thought, and thought to speech.⁴

Step Seven

Once the dialogue of a play flows naturally and fluently, the student/actors begin to add movement. From the stage directions found in the script, they arrange the furniture (usually classroom chairs and desks) to form a set. They then experiment with movement and gesture. As they rehearse, the impulses supplied by the dialogue, inner monologue, and character intentions suggest appropriate moves, reactions, gestures. The teacher/coach must be alert to note each that is desirable to keep and guide the actors to a replay of the selected moves in each ongoing rehearsal. It is in the movement rehearsals that much culturally unique and paralinguistic meaning is introduced and explained. The actors “do” and they “understand”. Through movement, the students become the target culture in yet another way.

Finally, the total flow of dialogue, movement, and emotion bring the student actors to appreciate another culture from the inside, in terms of character, typical social/cultural objectives, and, most of all, expressive and articulate language. As they pursue an author's objectives throughout a script, they learn about the target culture, practice their pronunciation in a way that is close to “drill,” but has not the onus of drill because imbedded in play and has purpose. When the process achieves polish and rhythm, it can be viewed by a wider audience. The performance substantiates the understanding and the skills achieved.

To recapitulate: Seven steps may be used in a process that melds language acquisition to the work of producing plays:

Step One – Choose some short plays that are clearly written and deal with cultural or social issues of the target language culture.

Step Two – Introduce the International Phonetic Alphabet, train the students in the articulation of the phonemes, and develop their understanding of appropriate use of stress and emphasis to produce meaning.

Step Three – While students read the plays aloud, coach them in expressive use of stress and intonation to produce meaning, work with their production of segmentals, and discuss the characters, objectives, and themes of the plays.

Step Four – Let students choose their characters in the plays that they would like to perform and create autobiographies of their chosen characters from the hints in the plays.

⁴ Vygotsky, Lev. *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1986. 249-256.

Coach pronunciation, letting students note with phonetic symbols the areas of pronunciation that need work. Build a score indicating stressed words, intonation, emphasis, and pitch.

Step Five – Have students develop inner monologues – the thoughts their characters think while speaking and listening to others in the play.

Step Six – Have students learn their lines by looking at their lines, holding the words in their minds, then looking at their acting partners and speaking to them while maintaining eye contact. Connect all utterances with character intentions.

Step Seven – Let students add movement created from the impulses motivated by character objectives. You, the teacher, can adjust the actors for audience view and story telling clarity.

“I do and I understand.”

Acting is the pedagogy of doing. Through the action, the student learns to make him/herself clear when speaking and express feeling through the paralinguistics of intonation, pitch, stress, gesture, and movement. S/he is guided by the understanding of a character’s objectives that, by nature, are based upon the values of a particular society/culture. The pull of the objectives produce the thought that produces feeling and the feeling, now culturally conditioned, produces again the speech. The student achieves this through careful reading of the script, thoughtful analysis and discussion, and, finally, the full execution of the character of the play in the play itself. Through doing, through performing in this ritual of becoming, the student not only understands more fully a language and culture, but also -- himself.

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