

Lights! Action! Content!

Using Acting and Drama to Teach Content-rich English

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Abstract

The benefits of using acting and drama in second language instruction have been discussed in terms of positive effects of their use in the areas of improving pronunciation, natural body language, and fluency and confidence in oral interaction. This paper extends this discussing to include its effectiveness in facilitating the teaching of factual content as well as improving vocabulary. It also puts the discussion into the context of contemporary (2007) ESL/EFL classrooms and students with their related issues and challenges, as well as what might be called the current rhetoric of ideas that dominate academic discussions of teaching. Acting and drama as teaching methods will be distinguished from oral interpretation and roleplay. Specific examples of classroom methods will be presented from the author's experiences at Aichi Prefectural University and Nanzan Tandai.

Introduction

Drama and acting, Role-play, and Oral Interpretation

Drama and acting are imitations of reality. What is acting after all? It is imitating real life. When we say an actor was good, it is because he seemed "real." Convincing. Because another teaching method, role-play, is also a form of contrived reality, it is necessary to distinguish between the two. It will be discussed later in the paper.

Sometimes we are impressed with an actor's performance—not because he seemed "real" so much as because he was impressive and conveyed the emotion and meaning of the words in a powerful way. This is where acting overlaps with oral interpretation.

Oral Interpretation

The cousin of acting is oral interpretation. This has been most famously advocated as a method of teaching English by Mato Omi, head of the department at Nanzan Tandai. Distinguishing oral interpretation as practiced by Omi from acting, oral interpretation is primarily concerned with the performance of monologues, whereas acting is mostly dialogues. Drama is performed with a “fourth wall” between the performers and the audience, that is, the performers pretend the audience isn’t there. In recitation-style oral interpretation, the performer speaks to the audience with no fourth wall. Omi’s method utilizes great works of English—speeches, poems, extracts from literature—which the student inputs with considerable study and analysis. The student then delivers this input as a deliberately-interpreted output.

Besides the direct improvement in pronunciation and natural intonation, another direct benefit of oral interpretation is improvement in vocabulary and word use. The students must know the words they are outputting “inside and out.” Omi’s method of study also includes sophisticated exercises, such as changing the point of reference of the speaker.

Oral Interpretation and Acting

Acting shares some of the characteristics and benefits of oral interpretation. Acting requires deep study of written words and their meaning. Acting also entails a Mode Switch from Input to Output.

Types and approaches to acting.

There are many names for the different styles and approaches to teaching acting. For the general purpose of teaching English, as addressed within the scope of this article, it is probably best to simply divide them into two general categories: *method* acting, which essentially entails the actor analyzing

the feelings of the character and then summoning a similar emotion from his personal experiences and then delivering the lines with the emotion directing the manner of delivery; and *technical* acting, in which the actor makes conscious decisions about how he will deliver his lines and move his body. The former is inwardly-driven, the latter is outwardly-driven. In technical acting, the actor is simply making the performance as skillfully as he can, with coaching from the director. Method acting is probably not a good model for using acting as an ESL or EFL teaching technique. This is because of the essential difference between a native speaker and a second language learner and also the constraints imposed by the classroom format.

A native speaker of a language acquires perhaps hundreds or even thousands of nuances of experience as he uses his language. These experiences add emotional color to each word, phrase, and sentence. The body language he uses that accompanies each utterance adds muscle memory to this stored cognitive and affective memory of associations so that his understanding of his language has a vast and deep catalogue of intellectual, physical, and emotional references.

A second-language learner has far less of this. His stored catalogue of references is almost entirely in his own language—particularly in the categories of emotional and physical reference. To try and summon up emotional associations with words in his own language and somehow transfer them to the new language is a cumbersome process. It is far more direct to simply deliver the lines and actions as best he can (with some coaching). I use movie scripts, rather than plays, so students can watch the movie on DVD. They can observe the actions, pronunciation, and intonations that are associated with the words in the context of a scene and imitate them: outside-in, rather than inside-out.

Using a technical acting model for teaching English has many advantages—one of which is that it is less stressful for the students. They are simply imitating what they see and hear and judging the success of their

imitation based on the response from the audience. This is also closer to what happens to children as they start using language: they operate on their environment using language. Some language usages are more effective than others in getting a response from others. These usages will be repeated and internalized.

Additionally, asking students to “get in touch with their feelings” and apply them to their second language utterances may feel uncomfortable for many students, especially since they may already be quite nervous from being in a 2nd language situation and being asked to speak and act in the 2nd language.

But even a purely technical approach to acting does include considerable exploration into the emotional “color” of words and the motivation of the characters. If the teacher has some knowledge of the learner’s first language, some examples can be given from their language to illustrate that native speakers act in their own language every day. For example, “*maji de!*” is a commonly used expression of amazement or surprise among Japanese students. Acting out this expression without emotion or body language and then repeating it with the appropriate emotion and body language can be a simple example of the importance of using intonation and body language to convey meaning. Once the importance of this is established with one or two examples, the emotional content of the second language vocabulary can be established by the teacher acting the words as he pronounces them and the students imitating his delivery.

And of course, in technical acting there is always some discussion of a character’s motivation of why he is doing what he is doing—but without the deep delving into the student/actor’s personal psyche to discover some kind of inner match with what the character is experiencing. The amount of student’s time devoted to a character’s inner motivation should be allotted judiciously. In preparing students to give a performance it must always be remembered that there is a limit to what can be done—and it’s better to

have the students know their lines as well as possible as an initial goal and assign work pertaining to character motivation as an adjunct, rather than as a primary goal.

Benefits of using Acting In English Instruction

The documented work about using acting to teach English reveals some positive experiences in a variety of different settings that are very similar to my own. Chamkaur Singh Gill relates experiences he has had with native speakers of Malay at Universiti Teknologi in the 1970's and at Universiti Malaya in the 1980's. He writes of students participating more and with greater enjoyment, having greater motivation, better pronunciation, improved vocabulary, and greatly improved ability to discuss any topic with confidence in English. He continued his use of drama to teach English at Bond University in Australia with similar results. Similar observations were made by Gainer and Lee (1989) in reference to a three day acting workshop they conducted for Japanese learners. Carlin reports success using acting to improve pronunciation.

These benefits are palpable and I have verified them from my own experience. I have seen some of the most reticent students imaginable start out at the onset of a class in an almost catatonic state when speaking English in front of others—and then gradually blossom and become markedly better at their acting and less shy and more expressive in speaking English in general as the class progressed. There is nothing like speaking in front of a group to lower anxiety levels about speaking in conversation.

Resistance to using acting in language instruction

There is some degree of reluctance to using drama to teach English as a second language. Singh Gill writes about "uncertainty about using drama" with many educators because it is not a teacher-centered situation.

Royka echoes this sentiment and also notes that many teachers feel that they are not drama “experts” and thus cannot teach it. Some of this has to do with the history and programming a language teacher probably experienced. Visiting an American, Canadian, or Australian high school or college, the performing arts teachers and students are generally a separate group. This is even more the case when it comes to television or motion picture studies. In my own university, California State University Northridge, the students in teacher-training programs or linguistics never ventured anywhere near acting classes. The only major interdepartmental “cross-pollination” that seemed to occur was with highly-political culture studies classes such as Asian American Studies or Chicano Studies. This is undoubtedly one reason why political rhetoric and bias is generally accepted in ESL/EFL academic writing and pedagogy, but using straight-on acting as a teaching method is not.

Acting to teach content

Because acting is “action English,” the above documented benefits in improving student’s fluency from its use in teaching come as no surprise. After all, a traditional “teacher talks, students listen” type classroom does not offer much opportunity for speaking. In fact, Long and Porter indicate that in a traditional-style classroom, students may speak for a total of one hour in an entire year. By contrast in a group-type drama class, they may speak 500% more than that. What has not been discussed to any great extent is the use of acting and drama as part of teaching content to second language learners.

Intentional Language Input

In drama, a script is memorized. Input is deliberately a major part of the process. The actor must know the words and also what they mean

in connection to his actions. In this, the benefit is similar to that for oral interpretation. As in oral interpretation, there is a direct benefit to the student's vocabulary. But "vocabulary" is not limited to definitions, it also extends to cultural, historical, and other factual references.

For example, in the Aichi Prefectural University class described later in the paper, in the script for *The Big Sleep*, the detective Philip Marlowe and other characters speak about the missing character Rusty Regan. He is referred to as "running rum" and as a "bootlegger" or "legger." To make these words of dialogue make sense it is necessary to understand Prohibition in The U.S. and the effect that making alcohol illegal had on crime during the Depression. Suddenly there was an illegal, dangerous, but highly profitable way to make money during a time when many people had none. Marlowe was a lawman whose job it was to arrest Regan: they were opponents. Yet Marlowe clearly admires Regan for his pluck and daring—and shooting ability. So the actors playing Marlowe and other characters that speak of Regan must know the historical facts behind the dialogue words "bootlegger," "legger," and "rum runner." Thus a short lecture or lectures on the subject of the American Depression, Prohibition, and the American Gangster in conjunction with the acting of scenes from *The Big Sleep* gives the student a real factual understanding of an important part of Twentieth Century American History.

So, teaching of factual information accompanies the acting of the scene. The student's inquiry is driven by the specific words and actions they are setting out to reproduce by acting. Thus their questions are specific and answerable in a way that is possible given the time constraints of a class. The student's acting provides a tool for understanding and contextualizing the facts they learn. It also can fill in the previously unseen nuances of color that are part of the deeper level of understanding of a set of facts or a concept.

Drama vs. Role-play

The very nature of role play causes it to de-emphasize factual input in favor of spontaneous output. If it is true role-play and not a dramatic re-creation of a specific even, it is by nature intended to be somewhat spontaneous. In role-play students do not memorize scripts. Input is limited to “setting the scene.” Students may be given information about where they are supposed to be and what they are supposed to be doing. Similarly, vocabulary is not taught unless the teacher gives a list of words prior to the role-play and stipulates that students must use these words in their speech. The emphasis is on students “becoming” their roles and creating “original utterances.”

While the creation of original utterances is certainly a worthy goal, if teaching factual information is part of the definition of “meaningful content,” care must be taken to ensure that the student’s output contains factual information or else the effect is of teaching something that is simply wrong.

I am reminded of a role-play I observed as part of my ongoing training for my California Adult Teaching Credential wherein the high school teacher was having her students reenact the Tiananmen Square Protests that happened in Beijing China in 1989. She gave them some background and set the scene and turned them loose. Some students shouted some impromptu slogans about freedom and democracy and the students playing soldiers came and shot at them. The students did seem to enjoy hamming it up after being shot. Afterward the teacher held a discussion and asked what the Protests meant to them. One student said it was just like “The Rodney King Uprising,” (Los Angeles Riots) of 1992, an astoundingly inaccurate statement that many of the students agreed with.

After the discussion had wound down, the teacher asked me if I had any questions for the students. I asked them simple questions about China’s government and why the people had gathered in Tiananmen Square. The answers could be summarized as “for freedom.” Beyond this,

not one student could answer even a basic question. Not one student was aware that university intellectuals were angry that their pay had not risen in conjunction with the increase in business activity—and business income—and that this was a major component of the anger expressed. I had copies in my backpack of a blank map of the world I used to teach English names of places in my ESL classes. I asked the students who had enacted the role-play to find China and Beijing on this map. Only two students could. Later, the teacher and I spoke privately and she related that she just didn't have enough classroom time available to teach "all that stuff." To be sure, to teach how the Chinese government works and the historic events that precipitated the various protests around China that occurred between April 15th and June 4th would require a lot of classroom time. So the net result of this classroom activity was that the students experienced some feelings of what the protestors and police felt, but they also internalized a highly questionable analogy between the L.A. Riots and the Tianamen Square Protests without knowing much of anything factual about either event.

In fairness to the teacher in the above-cited example, the dismal results of her role-play exercise were not so much her fault as an intrinsic drawback to using role play to teach content. Yes, she could have presented a more detailed lecture or reading to familiarize the students with the facts behind the situation, but where could she have begun and ended with these facts? How much would have been enough to give an accurate re-creation? The practical advantage of using scripted material to teach content is that the student's questions are generated by the words and references in the script so there is a finite limit to their inquiry. Answering these specific questions with lecture, reading, and realia is much more do-able within the limited time and scope of a class.

Role-play activities can have other drawbacks. The use of any teaching method must always be looked upon in the cold light of reality. In an ideal teaching environment, all of the students in a group would be of

approximately equal level in the language being studied. The reality is that this is not the case. In Japan, for example, the declining state of both the number of students and their general ability, has led to a softening of standards of admission, so that a class may contain both high-level students and students of considerably lower level.

Any activity where students of different levels are asked to give spontaneous utterances is going to cause the lower-level students some degree of distress and anxiety. They are asked to pull something out of their brains in a second language and very often they simply don't have anything to utter spontaneously. They need more meaningful input before they can produce meaningful output.

Acting drama and—and also oral interpretation—does not have this problem. The input is provided that will be converted into the student's output. The only anxiety created is that of the general nervousness of performance. The student has the simple and direct task of study and memorization as his first job. While this may be difficult, it is a task that can be attacked straight on. It is not the ambiguous and potentially frustrating task of straining to summon up something that isn't there. The new words he needs to understand are right there on paper. The guiding force in all classroom planning is the reality of limited time. Most lessons fail because the teacher tries to do too much.

Another drawback to role-play—or any activity that is entirely focused on output—is that what is summoned up is only what the learner knows, which may be quite limited. While it's nice to get students to use what they know, however small, there can be a negative consequence of this. Language learners have a “comfort zone” of knowledge of vocabulary and factual information they can express in their second language that they rely upon. If this functions for them, they will rely upon it more and more, rather than strain to learn new words and references.

It must always be remembered that language may be communication, but

in the real world there is such a thing as better communication. In simple settings, such as a classroom or the oft-cited example of ordering a cup of coffee in a restaurant, communication is enough. But outside of these basic situations, in the real competitive world, there are winners and losers based on the degree of skill an individual possesses in language use. Some people can close a business deal or convince an employer that they should hire them or handle a difficult customer or generally impress to the extent that they are always successful at what they do. Others can not. Possibly the most important part of our job as language teachers is to help prepare our students to win in the real world.

So, its part of our challenge is to expand our student's comfort zone to include new vocabulary and "meaningful content." In place of the latter term, I prefer the expression "factual information."

Teaching Methodology

Classroom environment

The point that second language instruction requires a high degree of trust and a low level of student anxiety in order to be effective has been well established. This is one point where I actually agree with Krashen. Drama classes require movement, so the larger and more comfortable the room, the better. Having students sit on the floor or at least putting the desks in a circle or less-regimented arrangement where its easy for the students to get up and move around is also recommended.

Tools

As I mentioned earlier, I prefer using movie scripts from popular films instead of plays. There are several reasons for this. First of all, commercial movies are examples of popular culture. Popular culture is infinitely more interesting to the student and teaches more about the mentality of the

people of a given country than books or films chosen for their political or social value. In recent years, as political correctness has become more of the standard by which literature has been deemed worthy in an academic setting, students have become bombarded with “message” books.

Additionally, the availability of popular movies in DVD or videotape at the local video shop means that a teacher can get any movie he wants to use. Obtaining the screenplay to a movie is only slightly more difficult. Many screenplays from famous movie or movies that were noted for the quality of their screenplays have been published as books and are easily available.

Another alternative is to order an actual “shooting script” (script as actually used to make a movie) from one of several companies, usually located in Los Angeles. One of these companies, Hollywood Book and Poster Company, is listed in the Appendix.

Using a movie as a reference for acting from a script has the effect of having native-speaker teaching assistants. Scenes can be viewed over and over again. The DVD can also be loaned to the student or students and taken home or the student can rent their own copy.

Having a movie on DVD for reference has other advantages—especially for teaching content. “A picture says a thousand words.” A movie can not only depict action and dialogue, it also has images of places and things. For example, in the movie *The Firm*, the opening location of Harvard University is clearly visualized as are the actions of the graduating law students going to the University Job Placement Office and then interviewing for jobs. For the second year students at Nanzan Tandai, whose major concern is finding a job upon graduation, these images were a source of great interest.

Learning about movies

Another advantage of using movie scripts is that part of the content instruction of the class can be teaching about movies: the mechanics of

how they are made, their history, how they are different in each country, and, of course, famous actors. Students are always interested in this and the fact that they are holding copies of actual shooting scripts in their hands adds a compelling, real-world quality to their learning.

The script form itself is interesting. In addition to the actor's dialogue, it has stage directions and camera angles. All of these can be different in the finished film. The director has the final say in what is used in a movie. Also a major star will usually have the clout to change dialogue or staging. Finally, sometimes what a writer thinks is brilliant in a written script doesn't work when acted out. This means that frequently the dialogue one hears in a film can be different from what is written in the script.

In a classroom situation, this can be dealt with two ways. In making selections for students to act out, I recommend using scenes where the dialogue used in the film has been changed as little as possible from the script. The only way to check this is to watch the DVD or video with the script in front of you before you use it in class. This can be somewhat time consuming. Spotting differences between the script and film can also be used as a classroom exercise. This makes for an excellent small group activity.

Choosing a film can be a big question. As a general category, I prefer mystery or suspense movies because they are more fun and interesting. Older films have several advantages. First of all, the DVD's or videos are usually cheaper to buy and can be found in editions without anti-copying protection. This enabled me to have the office at Aichi Prefectural University make extra copies of the DVD of *The Big Sleep*. An unexpected plus to using *The Big Sleep* showed up in the student evaluations after the class was finished. A number of students commented that they appreciated the chance to see an older American film, as prior to this they had only seen recent ones. Several students also commented that they found the actor's speech easier to understand than in contemporary films. If you are going to

use a more contemporary film, using a film with a screenplay noted for its quality can be a good idea. Academy Award-winning scripts usually have fewer changes in them and, of course, also hopefully have better writing.

Format of classes

Aichi Prefectural University

In my preparation for this class I used as a guideline that Kendai places an emphasis on content: culture and literature. I decided on a general topic of the American Hard Boiled Detective Novel of the 30's with a background of the Depression and WWII.

Students were asked to purchase Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*. They were assigned to read a certain number of pages each week and write two questions about things they didn't understand in what they read. Each class started with a ten question quiz about the reading for that week. This served the function of providing an objective component to the grading, kept the students on a regular reading pace, and also provided incentive to come to class and be on time every week. After the quizzes, I called on students randomly to ask me questions. This insured that the instruction I was giving was generated by student needs. The lecture portion of the class was short—perhaps fifteen to twenty minutes and covered elements of the Great Depression, moviemaking, and studio history.

Reading the book was difficult for the students, but they grew to enjoy it. The first-person narrative of Chandler is the iconic voice of the American detective. To understand his dry sarcastic humor is to understand a lot about virtually every American movie hero.

The students really enjoyed the movie. Without any prompting from me, they asked a lot of questions about the relationship of the two stars, Bogart and Bacall, and commented about how movie stars are reflections of the times in which they are popular. The students were also deeply interested in

how movies are made.

By far the most interesting and rewarding aspect of the class was the acting of scenes from the movie. At first some of the students were shy, but as the class progressed, this clearly became the focal point of their interest. They started adding more and more to their scenes—costumes, props, and even elaborate arrangements of the classroom.

I randomly assigned groups and did not specify what characters the students should choose. Carlin comments that students choose characters to serve their process of developmental need, that they often choose a character that is the opposite of their outward self. I saw many examples of this.

One female student repeatedly chose a wild, sexy character named Carmen. She played her with such flair and passion that the other students in the class were stunned by her acting ability. When I mentioned her performances to one of her other teachers, they were very surprised: they had always thought of her as a “quiet” girl. This same student also began to open up to me after class. She talked to me about her desire to study abroad and perhaps work in the motion picture industry.

Studying *The Big Sleep* takes the student into the world of the U. S. in the 1930's and 1940's and acquaints him with rum-runners, gangsters, and the gun culture of the U.S. —all subjects normally eschewed by teachers of English and/or American culture. Yet some of the “seamier” aspects of U.S. history and culture are far more relevant to understanding not only the U.S., but idioms and casual speech. Much of American vernacular speech is based on gambling, guns, sports, or sex.

Economics is an aspect of life almost never included in discussions of literature. Yet economic forces and changes affect people's lives profoundly, in both positive and negative ways. The Crash and the Great Depression are two of the most important historical events of the 20th Century. It is relevant to the literary study of the Hard Boiled School because it most

certainly contributed to the mind-set of the authors and the characters they created. On a larger scale it is imperative to understanding America, a country which was founded largely for economic reasons by businessmen.

Acting contributes to the understanding of these things. The male students took obvious relish in acting the tough guy parts of Marlowe and Eddie Mars.

As a final component of the class, I gave students the option of making individual projects that were outgrowths of the topics in the class. Students did reports on Chandler's life, film actresses of the 30's and 40's, made *manga* versions of *The Big Sleep*, compared the British detective style to the American—a virtual tsunami of wonderful output. One of the options I gave them was to act additional scenes from the movie. This latter choice was so popular with students that I had to schedule additional time outside the class to see them all.

Nanzan Tandai

The emphasis at Nanzan Tandai is not so much on culture and content, but on competency. It has the added bonus of having two ninety-minute classes a week with classes averaging twenty to twenty-five students.

For the second year class I selected the text *Idioms for Everyone*. This book features a new dialogue at the beginning of every chapter. Every week new groups are selected and they rehearse the dialogue. As the weeks progressed of my first term, the student's zest in their performances increased. I noticed they started adding details, such as props and costumes.

As their final, I asked the students to write original skits using the grammar and idioms from their weekly lessons. These would be given in performances. I invited other Tandai teacher to come and watch. One of their teachers from another class was quite surprised by what he saw. He said he had no idea that the students were so funny, dramatic, and creative in their use of English.

I have two second-year classes and the other one informed me that the entire class wanted to create an original play, in which every student would have a part. This was a daunting project, but I gave them the OK and they “ran with it.” They organized themselves into groups and sketched out a general plot on the board. Each group was responsible for a section, which they wrote and gave me copies of. I coached them on grammar, but that was all. In fact, they insisted that I did not see the show until it was finished.

When they debuted the show, I was stunned. It used the vocabulary from the class in natural ways and had elaborate staging and effects. I asked them to do it a second time and again invited other Tandai teachers. Those that came were quite impressed.

Besides the benefits to their speech and vocabulary, the most obvious benefit was the confidence and pride these students had after creating this show. We had a class party after the last performance and every student spoke to me in English in a way that could only be described as more natural and less hesitant.

Recommendations

Acting-style classes should not be viewed as a replacement for instruction in traditional grammar. Rather, they should be looked upon as a compliment. Much as in a biology class there is a lecture section and a corresponding laboratory, acting classes should be taught in conjunction with grammar and traditional English classes. For advanced literature classes, books that have been made into movies and their corresponding movie scripts provide an excellent tool for teaching culture, as well as the business and craft of movie making. This is enriched by acting out scenes from the corresponding movie.

Appendix

Reproduced below is the ordering information for scripts as provided by Hollywood Book & Poster Company.

Film scripts are \$ 15 each unless otherwise priced, they can be ordered with a credit card by phone, fax, e-mail, or regular mail with a check or money order. You can also stop by our store and order in person. We do ship worldwide. Postage in the U.S.A. is as follows: 1 script \$ 4.50 more will be determined by your location. We ship using USPS priority mail. International orders are shipped by global priority (\$ 10 for 1 script) or by air mail whereas price is determined by weight and charged to your credit card. California residents add 8.25% sales tax on the scripts (there is no sales tax on the postage amount).

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