

ACTIVATE YOUR ENGLISH - 30 YEARS ON !

www.activateyourenglish.co.uk

'Drama and Role Play in the English classroom' - British Council - Milan - 1/2/'14

Workshop Summary - John. L Norman. M.A.Ed - Director of AYE.

The use of drama and role play techniques in the English classroom and many other varied learning situations offers teachers and students a different kind of experience from ordinary classroom practice. It is based upon the concept of 'AS IF'(standing in the shoes of) - a concept familiar to every child who has learned through mimetic play - and, of course, that's all of us. It works through a process of engagement which is both cognitive and affective

Yet despite the considerable potential of these techniques in many learning areas, teachers often hesitate to use them and when asked why will often respond with comments like - ' I'm afraid of losing control of the class' - 'the students won't take it seriously' - ' I have no performing skills'- ' It's all too risky and might diminish my authority'. All these reasons are entirely valid and yet somehow they represent anxieties which are unnecessary and are more to do with a vision of teaching which is authoritarian, controlled, predictable and possibly even dull which I cannot imagine most teachers would prefer. None of these concerns need be a problem if the teacher understands the technique and its potential, plans appropriately and knows how to manage the activity effectively.

This workshop will focus on the use of drama and role play in the English classroom specifically in the teaching of English as a foreign language but many of the tools and techniques we'll experience are equally usable whether in the teaching of history, literature, social studies or whatever. In these examples of what we might call 'inward bound' activity our goals in general are about developing confidence, fluency, vocabulary, articulation and pronunciation and belief in the student's ability to communicate in English. All of these things are generated by the students' engagement at a feeling level - where the topic and role matters to them and they are inspired to find the language to express their thoughts and feelings without the normally attendant anxiety about making mistakes. At the simplest level role play is a more vital form of discussion and speaking practice and ensures that everybody joins in!

Some of the examples also have a specific teaching purpose such as giving directions to a stranger or using the language of persuasion, both of which might be enhanced by some brief pre teaching of vocabulary. So having done your planning to make sure that the topics/issues connect to the students' real world concerns and interests, you need to plan how a series of activities are fed by the previous exercise and language as well

Page 2 – Role play and drama - JLN

as develop the stages of the narrative or situation. The tools for managing the activity are clear and simple – as follows –

Lesson introduction – explain that today we are going to explore some topics about families (for example) by using some role play. Explain that you don't need to act – just be truthful to the attitudes of the role you are playing and if you feel the need to giggle, just stop for a minute and get a grip but don't come out of role. Etc

Activity Set up – organise the class into pairs,(ideally face to face) get them to decide who is A and who is B. Describe the situation, the problem/issue to be addressed and their roles, paying special attention to the role attitude which provides the potential for tension and drama. Give them a few moments to plan/think, either together if this is the first part of a sequence or individually if a starter activity. Provide a precise starting point (location/situation) and who starts.

Techniques for managing the activity –

Give a starting signal – check everybody is ready and say 'begin'. This seems rather obvious but is always a good idea. Sometimes, it's a good idea to have a 30 second silence with eyes closed to concentrate minds before you give the start signal.

Monitor and observe – move around while the role play is in progress and listen and watch. (make sure your tolerance level is comfortable with the noise generated by the whole class talking at once – nothing sadder than a teacher keen to promote fluency who sets up the activity and then goes round the class saying 'shush'.

Time limit warning and end signal – to avoid some pairs not having finished, give a two minute warning, saying 'try to finish/resolve the problem', etc. Give the finish signal when it is clear that some have.

Freeze - if you wish to intervene during the role play, use the 'freeze' signal - everyone silent and still but in role - this might be to offer advice, observation, new language input etc before continuing.

Open Door - another tool for monitoring - freeze the class, open an imaginary door close to a particular pair who then continue in their role play while the whole class listen. When you close the door, everybody continues from the point they had reached. (as with all these techniques, the students will need to be taught what they mean, if they are beginners)

Post Role play reflection - reflection on the activity and its meaning, as well as on the language performance of the students is vital. There are some 'in role techniques' such as -

Thought Bubble - at the end of the role play, keep everyone silent and in role, go around and when you tap a student on the shoulder, they speak in role releasing a comic style

Page 3 - Role play and drama - JLN

'thought bubble' - maybe just two sentences saying what they are thinking and feeling in the situation. Everyone else listens - maybe tap three or four - not the whole class which takes too long.

Diary/letter - after a more complex/lengthy role play, students are given a few moments to prepare a diary insert or letter, again describing, in role, their thoughts and feelings. Choose a few to read out their letters while the class listens.

'Out of role' reflection - depending on the learning goal of the activity, a simple sequence of questions focussing on outcomes of the role play and language matters arising promotes reflection purposefully - whole sequence to one pair or more - to model the process of reflection and then allowing all participants to reflect in their pair. A sequence such as -

What happened in your role play? Who said what? How did you resolve the problem? What might have happened if? eg etc (from action, to meaning, to hypothesis)

plus supplementaries and questions about their fluency, vocabulary, grammar, structures, confidence level etc.

As with any activity, students will need time to become familiar with role play and its rules but will grow in skill and commitment. In short, simple

pair work, always change partners in successive role plays - move all A's one place to the left for example.

During the workshop, we experienced or described the following different kinds of role/drama work -

SIMPLE PAIR WORK - a stranger who only understands a little English asks for directions to station/museum etc (an exercise for general fluency/ trying different ways to communicate/ practising directions and prepositions) Simple pair work like this provides a good way of building student skills in role work - use as an introduction to something more demanding - either stand alone or as preparation for a progressive sequence.

PROGRESSIVE SEQUENCE ROLE PLAY - the Harris family is comprised of Mum and Dad in their mid forties and two teenage siblings, one boy, one girl aged 14 and 16 respectively, both still at school and ambitious for university education. Recently, there have been some problems because both teenagers have come in very late at weekends and Mr Harris has imposed new rules - which are that they are allowed out only on Saturday evenings and both must be in by 10pm. The siblings are very unhappy about this, and feel that since they study every evening in the week they should be allowed more freedom at weekends as their friends are. (this sequence is about general fluency, using the language of persuasion and negotiation and planning a strategy for change) Organise the class into groups of 4 - one pair as Mum and Dad, one pair as brother and sister - prepare names, role, attitudes etc.

Page 4 - Role play and drama - JLN

Role Play 1 - Mum and Dad having a cup of tea - Mum starts by saying to Dad that the children are unhappy about the new rules and want to have a serious discussion about them. Dad is persuaded to at least talk to them and listen. Mum is more sympathetic to the children's position.

Role Play 2 - The Siblings discuss the rules and agree that they need to talk to the parents soon and try to persuade them to relax the rules. They have slightly different attitudes - one more conciliatory than the other. They discuss and plan a number of different arguments and negotiating ploys.

(these two activities to run simultaneously- max 10 mins)

Role Play 3 - The Family meet - begins with Dad saying 'I understand you both want to talk to us - what's it all about?' Both sides put their case, with discussion and negotiation. Hopefully matters can be resolved perhaps by some degree of compromise or perhaps the meetings ends in anger and recrimination. (20 mins)

Role Play 4/5 - After the meeting - both pairs in role reflect on what happened and what else needs to be done. (10mins)

Whole group reflection - as per previous methods listed.

CIRCULAR ROLE PLAY - An excellent way of building skills and confidence and practising different roles and registers. It can also be hilarious. Best situation is some kind of meeting with teacher in the chair role. Up to 10 roles - thus 20 participants. Define the situation and the problem/tension - prepare roles (eg a tenants association meet with the estate management to discuss the lack of facilities on the estate and vandalism from young residents - thus tenants - young and old and representatives from the management) Each role is paired and prepares a role card which is left on the chair after any change. Chairs in a circle - 10 roles sit while their shadow stands behind them - only the role can speak - but the shadow can whisper to their role partner and make suggestions.

Signals to change - the action is continuous - the person speaking when the change signal is given, their shadow (now the role) must continue and speak first.

1 clap - role changes with shadow

2 claps - named roles change

3 claps - all speaking roles move one place to the right

4 claps - time out - for review or reflection

Page 5 - Role play and drama - JLN

HOT SEATING - one of the most familiar techniques in which the teacher takes on a particular role to meet with the class, as themselves or in role . The teacher's role is created by a change of language or persona and/or by a hat, glasses, coat or whatever. Control is through the role by authority or need - (never come out of role to be the disciplining teacher)

Prepare by introducing the role and organising what the students role will be and help them prepare their questions/advice/enquiries etc.

Examples -

Younger students as themselves meeting a children's entertainer who's lost her/his confidence and asks them to help him be funny and entertaining again. (I need your help is always the most successful of approaches)

A famous writer is interviewed by journalists about his book/play etc - use a piece/ character being studied by the students - Shakespeare / Wordsworth just after the publication of 'The Prelude'.

A fictitious character from a piece the students are studying -

A school inspector asking the students as themselves how they would alter/reform the curriculum. He's part of a government research project.

An ideal way to engage/inform/ a class, with a special kind of magic especially if the students role is that of experts. Not surprisingly teacher in power roles is least successful.

The possibilities are endless.

WHOLE GROUP DRAMA - you will recall that we began the workshop by going straight into the start of a whole group drama without any preparation. I was interested to see how quickly participants could pick up the clues and engage by creating a role. The situation was a meeting of distinguished scientists and professors, members of The Institute of Brain Technology who had invited Dr Simeon Brunovski to address them about his research into the Brain Chip. He introduced the research and invited questions and comments from the assembled company. Some participants made contributions which raised a whole series of ethical futuristic questions about such a programme but some were clearly unsure and not very comfortable.

This classic 'teacher in role' whole group drama would only be suitable for older students with a very confident teacher since it is like an open book with no story other than the start. In reality, had this been a real lesson, we would have stopped after a few minutes to ask the students what they had understood about the situation, to prepare roles and

attitudes and begin again, with a series of group tasks and structures in mind. This kind of drama is more

Page 6 – Role play and drama - JLN

improvisational and demanding but often exciting and very engaging simply because the students in effect make the drama themselves. But at the very least this brief example illustrated the considerable potential of the teacher in role technique.

This workshop was designed to encourage teachers to use role play and simple drama techniques in the English classroom and provide examples of practice and practical ways to manage, promote and control the activity. I'm sure you appreciate that this was a very brief introduction to these techniques but I hope that colleagues will have been helped to feel confident enough to try, despite their reservations. Please do let me know about any activities you try and any feedback you wish to send me about the workshop.

We use many of these techniques in our ACTIVATE YOUR ENGLISH SUMMER SCHOOLS, details of which I gave you. If you feel able to recommend our courses to any of your students, I would be most grateful.

With kind regards to all,

John. L Norman

Director of Activate your English

www.activateyourenglish.co.uk

john@whitfieldplace.co.uk

+00447831403164