

# Building Speaking Skills by Creating 'Old-time Radio' Shows

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## Introduction

In this speaking task activity, students create a story and later voice-act their stories to their classmates – like an old fashion radio show and now found in today's "podcast dramas". The objective of this task-based exercise is to provide students with an opportunity and purpose to use their L2 English in a natural and creative manner by writing and performing in their own voice drama. This lesson focuses attention on how the students use their speaking skills to make their dramas more effective. As well, what makes this lesson particularly successful is that we also introduce a new element to the learner's recreational or commuting listening time by adding new downloadable programs that goes beyond music or specific language tape-like materials.

## Background

The pragmatic approach to language learning tells us that the best way to teach our students effective speaking and listening skills is by having them do it and not simply study it in a textbook. The 'read and discuss' type of exercise can be useful but we also need to do more to make the classroom environment more realistic. Indeed, classroom communication in itself is limiting and not necessarily naturalistic. I, like so many other language teachers, always seek out those lessons that have our students both speak and interact with each other in English while in class. The radio show is one exercise I have developed that attempts to meet this need of natural like, if somewhat dramatized, communication and it does so very effectively. More importantly, for the students it is a very enjoyable and creative experience the results of which they can share with their class.

## Procedure

In this exercise, students must use their English not only to relate a story they have created but also draw out the emotions that they want the listener to experience and they must do it without relying on visual clues to assist the audiences' comprehension. Basically, this description is similar to that of the old 'radio shows' from the pre-TV era hence, this lesson is a throwback to the days when life was less visually complicated but more aurally imaginative.

This is a three class (90 minutes each) lesson which is made up of two classes devoted to creating and developing an original story, half a class for practice telling the story, and half of a class for the groups to voice-act their stories to their classmates. Within these three classes, there are five key steps that need to be followed for this lesson to be effective.

1. Beginning with the first half of class 1, play a short "radio show" (these are easily available off the internet) to the students for about 20-25 minutes. Next, then discuss the show for another 10-15 minutes. Questions such as: 'How did you feel?' 'Could you imagine it?' 'How were they able to make you believe it?' are all great in focusing the students on the topic of a radio show. As well, these questions also help by giving them ideas on how to build their own 'believable' play.
2. Next, give students the theme for the story. I have tried a Halloween and a Christmas story, and I am sure that other themes that go beyond seasonal holiday, such as folklore, are equally as effective.
3. In the second half of Class 1, and for all of Class 2, have students, in groups of 4, create a story/script that is to be acted by them. As a general guide, I ask for plays to be 20 minutes in length which averages to about 5 minutes speaking time per student). Usually, performances are 10 minutes in length but in the end, the play's length is not really very important.
4. For the first half of Class 3, allow the students to practice voice acting their play for their class performance.

5. Lastly, in the second half of Class 3, students voice-act their group play to the class. Note: It is best if the audience closes their eyes or face away from the actors in order for them to pretend that what they are listening to is a radio. Listeners are to use their imagination based on the actors using sound effects, voice stresses, intonation and inflection to portray the range of emotions that they want to elicit in the listeners.

## Assessment

This exercise should be completed in two parts: the first time students do it, it should be a practice exercise. The second time this exercise is done, about two weeks later, each play should be given a score by both their classmates and myself based on the following categories based on a scoring guide that is ranked from 1 to 5 with 5 being the highest. The categories are as follows:

- Voice Skills (stress, intonation, pronunciation, inflection, rhythm)
- Naturalness (Is the interaction between the actors in the play natural and effective?)
- Sound Effects (Are the sound effects effectively utilized or do they distract from the listener?)
- Believability (Does the play make my imagination work?)

The mark that is given for each play is subjective however, the student's classmates' marks did not differ so much and in fact, when there was a difference, my mark was higher than the peer marks.

## Comments

- It is important that students be willing to attempt to communicate in English only, which is a challenge at times, for this lesson to work to its full potential.
- This is a challenging task for the students because they must not only make the 'radio play' but must also consider, for example, what type of voice they are to use, what type of emotion they want the audience to experience and how to bring out these particular emotions, what sound effects might be needed for the play, and how to fairly spread out the speaking-time among the group's members.
- I have tried to do this activity without giving the students a theme but it was not as successful as when a theme was assigned. Therefore, I would suggest that the instructor assign a theme and one that is topical to the season seems to be most effective.
- Often they want to physically act their stories but that is not what this task is about. I have the listeners sit with eyes closed and thus the listening skills of the audience members are increased.
- Sound effects enhance the listener's experience and this makes the play even more fun for those involved. I also encourage the use of sound effects, as they are important in lending the script a sense of reality: e.g. a door opening or closing, footsteps, knocks etc.
- I have found this to be an easily adaptable exercise. For example, high-level students get only one day to make their play while lower level students might get an extra day to do their play.

## Conclusion

Students have difficulty becoming comfortable speaking only English in class. However, I have found this type of exercise to be extremely useful at promoting an English only classroom. Once they start to 'get into' the story, students start to enjoy the challenge of communicating their ideas in English and this leaves me with little to do other than to check their grammar or expressions and to offer encouragement – and offering encouragement is always more pleasurable than always telling them to "speak English."