

Staging Musicals with ESL/EFL Students

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Introduction

Staging a musical is both process and product orientated and is highly motivational for students. Students prefer acting and singing as opposed to just acting. Performing a musical can take advantage of students' literacy in music and ability to work together as a group. Because there is memorization involved, it is a good activity for multilevel classes as it breaks down the barriers between higher and lower level students that exist with fluency based activities.

Logistics

Before a decision can be made to include a musical in the curriculum these questions need to be clarified:

- Does the school administration support this activity?
- Who will do the musical?
- Who will the audience be?
- What will the budget be?
- Where will this performance take place?
- Where will the practices take place?

After the decision has been made to go ahead with the project the following issues need to be addressed:

- Who will choose and find the text?
- How long will the performance be?
- How much practice time will there be prior to the performance?
- What are the role and responsibilities of the teachers and students?
- Who will write and rewrite parts if necessary?
- What committees are needed? (See committees below.)
- What are the roles and responsibilities of the committees?
- Will the music be performed by the students or will they sing and dance to a recording?

Committees

- choreography
- script
- costume
- music
- lighting
- posters
- props
- sound
- press
- photographers
- program
- video documentation

Text Types for Musical Performances: Scripts and Compilations

Selecting a Script

Selecting a script is the first step for staging a musical. There are two alternative texts possible as a basis for production: 1) original libretti with their musical scores, and original film screenplays, and 2) a teacher constructed compilation of vignettes, readings, poems and songs. Selection of the text may take into account a number of choices. Depending on the language and maturity level of the learners the teacher is working with and the amount of time available for developing the performance, the sophistication of the content or theme will vary as well as the degree of students involvement in the selection and development process. A particular musical may be chosen to integrate into an already existing thematic unit of work, it can be chosen as the basis of a unit of integrate classes, or it can be staged as an activity in its own right. Libretti, screenplays, musical scores, videos, and CD's can be downloaded or ordered at a number of sites on the internet.

Reworking the Texts: Libretti, Screenplay and Compilation

After the musical or eclectic compilation has been selected, it is likely that some of the reworking of the text will be necessary for second language learners. One possibility is to have higher level learners rewrite for their own production. Regardless of who is doing the rewriting, there are a number of factors to take into account. First of all, you need to decide how long the production will be. Many musicals are about two hours long and may be either too demanding or impractical for a student production. Secondly, the scripts must be comprehensible for both performers and the audience. The language can be simplified in terms of vocabulary and structure. Also nonverbal cues, dramatic devices such as actions, signs, sound effects, and costume can be built into the scripts. Finally, to make it possible to work with groups of different sizes, the script needs to be divided into sections for groups. Within these groups the division of script roles and lines may need to be adjusted to accommodate role-sharing in the case of large groups and to ensure a more equal work load for the actors. The score or sheet music with its audiotape or CD, or a student made recoding is necessary. Sometimes the score will have to be rewritten if the key is too high. The music department or club in the school may be willing to lend expertise.

Curriculum Planning

Class Division

The first step in planning the curriculum is to divide the class into groups. The class divisions are based on a specific teacher student ratio, depending on the number of teachers available and the students who will perform. If the group is small, it may be possible to allocate one role per student and have the class work together as a whole group. When the numbers are large the planned needs to decide how to divide students into groups.

Class Sequencing

The sequence of activities in individual classes is based on the need for achieving performance level by a certain date. Working back from the set performance and dress rehearsal dates, decide on due by dates for required proficiency in specific elements of the performance, for example the memorization of songs, lines, staging or dance movements. Whether the musical will be taught without integration with another skill like reading or listening, or subject as a separate course, include class time for input on background information on plot, meaning and messages. In the first class students can decide, depending on their interest and talent, which committee they want to belong to. Deadlines and schedules need to be made and responsibilities delegated.

Schedule classes for:

- assessment of songs and lines
- individual and separate group practice
- combined group and whole cast song practice

- the full cast rehearsals

Practice should start with songs, progress to smaller group scenes, and build to whole class rehearsals. If the music will be performed by the cast, schedule in the point at which the performers start using their own music rather than professionally made soundtracks. This should begin when they know the songs' melodies.

Class Methodology

Ideally learners spend time outside of class planning actions and movements. Memorizing lines and learning songs, and use class time to work and practice together in groups and to get feedback from the teacher. If this is not possible, then much of this preparation work should be scheduled into the curriculum. However learners need to make a basic commitment to memorize their lines, and this has to happen out of class time.

Within each class, the pattern of activities should be:

- song practice
- small or whole group acting practice
- committee work

Experience has shown that rather than concentrating on just one aspect of the performance in a given class, performers should begin working through all the parts they will be responsible for as soon as possible. This way they will begin to see the way that their part integrates into the whole, and can work on timing and integrating words with movements will begin to come together. The commitment of the cast, amount of time given to the curriculum, the demands on learners time outside of classes, their maturity, and dance and dramatic experience will determine the amount of learner generated staging that the teacher expects or requires. The teachers' role may change from being initially extremely directive to that of evaluator of student ideas.

Speech production is a major part of the in-class feedback a teacher will need to give L2 performers.

Factors that interfere with comprehensibility for the audience are:

- L2 learners poor pronunciation and intonation
- low volume

The expression of feeling is achieved through speaking with varying loudness, intonation, and stress on key words and phrases, in combination with body language of actions. A teacher made recording of all the lines in the songs and the musical give learners the chance to listen and mimic a comprehensible and hopefully expressive version of the text. Whole class choral practice and feedback can be given as a part of song practice. During the small group rehearsal time, individual students can be pulled from their groups and given coaching, as well as the teacher working with the entire small group. Another option is to organize out of class coaching sessions as homework assignments.

Assessment

Setting small goals that build to the final product is essential, whether a grade is assigned or not. Assessment should be used as a tool for pushing development, and the timing of the assessment tasks should be decided with this in mind. An enjoyable aspect of the performance are the songs, therefore these activities are a good starting point for assessment. One way of doing this is having learners make individual recordings of themselves singing, and the assessment criteria are memorization of lyrics and knowledge of the melody. In a later assessment, learners can sing as a group and the degree to which harmonies or variations have been developed, their movement or dance, and coordination with the group can be assessed for effectiveness. Another assessment task should be a similar memorization requirement for all role lines. This is best done as a small or whole group rehearsal in class. Both teacher and other class members can give feedback.

The speaking criteria for this are:

- memorization
- audibility
- pace
- eye contact
- pronunciation and intonation

Finally a dramatization test or trial performance for teachers where students run through their whole sections will push performers to perfect the memorization of their lines and staging. All of the above criteria apply and this is an opportunity for both teachers and fellow performers to give feedback and suggestions for improvement.

Conclusion

Staging a musical is a memorable experience for students. The nature of the project keeps participants motivated and goal orientated. It is an activity that moves beyond the study of language, giving learners opportunities to express themselves, be creative, and live the text with their whole person.

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