

A Practical and Effective Way to Enhance the ESL Students' Oral Competence

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This is a practical and effective way to enhance ESL students' oral competence by offering different English language settings, and having them start conversations about a certain topic.

Introduction

One of the most difficult challenges in teaching oral English is finding effective ways to help students improve their discourse fluency. Large mixed-ability classes, little exposure to the English language after class and tongue-tied students inevitably form obstacles to teaching.

How to arouse students' interest, increase students' commitment to speak English fluently and get the maximum participation has long been a headache for teachers who wants to get the students involved in class activities, and keep the class lively and dynamic. This article describes an experimental but practical way to enhance students' oral fluency. In this activity, students will be expected to interact and communicate in a comfortable way. This activity is mainly based on movies which are a rich resource for idiomatic expressions. It is far more than an attempt to create an authentic experience of practicing spoken English. It will enable the students to discuss a certain topic in various ways. It will not only offer students an opportunity to speak the target language for at least ten to fifteen minutes, but it will also make tongue-tied students want to try. The main progression of this activity is from imitation to repetition to creative use of English. I will give some examples to show how it works.

Pre-activity Work

Before class, the teacher has to make two different sets of cards.(Card A1, Card A2, Card A3 ...; Card B1, Card B2, Card B3). On the first set of cards, there will be some crucial, humorous or thought-provoking lines taken from the scripts of various movies, while on the second set of cards, there will be a brief introduction to the movies and if possible, movie reviews that are brief but to the point. On the back of each card, the teacher should prepare a glossary of new words and expressions so that the activity will flow smoothly without language interference.

The Approach

Step One

In class, divide the students into groups with an equal number of members, then give Group 1, Card A 1 in the first set and Card B 1 in the second set, and correspondingly Group 2, Card A2 and Card B2.... Have one student in each group play the tape with the dialogues. These authentic English monologues or dialogues will put the students in the right mood for this classroom activity. Also, it will create an atmosphere that makes it easier for reserved students to try. The students are supposed to recite the lines using correct pronunciation and intonation. In other words, the students are playing different "audible" roles by repeating after the tape to imitate what they have heard with the help of the scripts. In this step, the teacher should make sure that all the students in the group understand the conversation and the setting with the help of the glossary. In this step, imitation and repetition are blended with each other, laying a good foundation for the effectiveness of the conversation tasks to be constructed afterwards. Students will not have time to chat in their native language or to read aloud mechanically if in this setting. They will begin to participate in this activity willingly. It might seem hard for the students to practice English in a classroom context, but this all changes so long as their interest is aroused and they truly want to speak English and improve their oral English. Moreover, through this step, each and every student would become confident and cautious to know more about the movie and also willing to share his or her opinion of the roles with

members in the group. This step will take about fifteen minutes.

Step Two

Next, the groups will be given several minutes to read the corresponding cards (Card B1, Card B2...) After they have a general knowledge of the movie, they will have a better understanding of movie and have their own ideas of different roles, the lines, the plots and even the ending. Now it is time for a group discussion. At this time, students are expected to make creative use of the English language. The teacher must see that communication takes place, and should interfere when there is lack of communication. The teacher should pay attention to mistakes repeated by many students. Point them out after the discussion and have the students correct the mistakes themselves. If students happen to make some witty or effective remarks, the teacher can make a comment on this to encourage this type of thing.

If possible, there can be an appendix in which some icebreakers are found. For this, the teacher should take the average student's ability into account. They can be questions about the comprehension and appreciation of the movie; they can be about the interpretation of the movie; they also can be some matter-of-fact questions. On the whole, these icebreakers will serve as a guide to the students.

Material

The material for this activity can be taken from different audio books. Here I select fragments from movies that I think best suit my aims.

Card A1

Lester: My name is Lester Burnham. This is my neighborhood. This is my street. This is my life. I am 42 years old. In less than a year, I will be dead. Of course, I don't know that yet. And in a way, I'm dead already. That's my wife, Carolyn, see the way she handles those pruning shears matches her gardening clogs. Man, I get exhausted just watching her. She wasn't always like this. She used to be happy. We used to be happy. My daughter Jane. Only child. Janie's a pretty typical teenager, angry, insecure, confused. I wish I could tell her that's all going to pass, but I don't want to lie to her.

Lester: I'd always heard your entire life flashes in front of your eyes the second before you die. First of all, that one second is not a second at all. It stretches on forever like an ocean of time. For me, it was lying on my back at Boy Scout camp watching fallen stars. And yellow leaves from the maple trees that lined our street. Or my grandmother's hands and the way her skin seemed like paper. And the first time I saw my cousin Tony's brand new Firebird. And Janie. And Carolyn. I guess I could be pretty pissed off about what happened to me, but it's hard to stay mad when there is so much beauty in the world. Sometime I feel like I'm seeing it all at once and it's too much. My heart fills up like a balloon, it's about to burst. And that I remember to relax and stop trying to hold on to it. And then it flows through me like rain and I can't feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life. You have no idea what I'm talking about, I'm sure. But don't worry, you will someday.

Notes:

Pruning shears: large scissors

Gardening clogs: a kind of shoes that has a thick wooden bottom

Exhausted: tired, worn out

Insecure: anxious and unsure of oneself

Pretty: very

Be pissed off: (slang) be annoyed

Gratitude: thankfulness

Card B1

"American Beauty" is about a seemingly ordinary and happy middle class family with its neighborhood. Lester, the husband, is in a crisis: middle aged, on the verge of unemployment, indifferent to everything, exhausted from almost everything. Later, drastic changes haven taken place in the life of different family members'. Lester is infatuated by the Jane's friend; Carolyn has a love affair with the man she adores; Jane falls in love with the next-door boy. Actually, it is the broken American dream, the frustrations hid under the placid surface of their life, the dead life that could turn everyone into a lost soul. However, when a new hope in his family just swells in his heart, Lester is murdered by his neighbor, a homosexual.

The former monologue appears at the very beginning while the latter is at the end of the movie.

Conclusion

This activity may sound complicated to organize, but if the material is well chosen and well prepared, it keeps the student either speaking or listening in his or her group, and most importantly the students are able to speak .

Appendix

Some Icebreakers (Examples for the Movie *Rainman*)

- How would you react to the will if you were Charlie Rabbit?
- Do you think that there are real changes or transformation in Charlie's life? Why?
- Raymond is autistic, namely, he is suffering from an illness of mind, in which imagination becomes so important that good personal relationship cannot be found, but he is care-free and happy. What do you think about him?
- Some say that an idiot is the happiest person in the world. Do you agree with this view? Why?
- From the lines, can you infer what kind of relationship Charlie and his father have had? What about Charlie and Rayman?
- What do you think these things symbolize or stand for: such as antique car, rose bushes, pancake and maple syrup?
- Judging from the lines, you might find the two brothers' characters totally different? How?
- What are things you admire or dislike about the different roles?
- If you have seen the movie, can you tell the members of the group which is the most touching scene?
- Compared with Charlie's experience with the lawyer, what is the most ironic or sarcastic experience you have ever had in your life?

The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. IX, No. 3, March 2003

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