

Encouraging English Expression through Script-based Improvisations

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Abstract

Dialogues, scenes and plays that approximate real communication provide a dynamic format in which language skills can be introduced and reinforced. Improvisation greatly enhances this approach. This article describes how students can create an original dramatic production starting with a "kernel" situation, scripting the opening lines of each scene and improvising a plot that adds characters until every student is included. While rehearsals reinforce the correct scripted language, the improvisation encourages students to mobilize their vocabulary, respond to grammatical and syntactical cues, develop cultural and social awareness, and gain confidence and fluency.

Introduction

Scripts have long been employed in ESL instruction because they permit students to actively acquire the vocabulary, idioms, grammar and syntax of English speech. All dramatic works--dialogues, scenes, or plays--demonstrate both the cognitive principle that information is best assimilated through more than one sensory route, and the behavioral notion that repeated action imprints knowledge upon the mind. Because they involve all aspects of language, scripts that are rehearsed in class can offer students a dynamic encounter with language that comes closest to real communication.

Recognizing the benefits of scripted dialogues, I decided to incorporate them into my curriculum--but with one additional component: improvisation. Research and experience with improvisations about conflict situations have shown that, in academic contexts, they generate complex, critical thinking and thoughtful, detailed writing. It seemed likely, then, that the momentum of an improvisation about a compelling situation would propel student "actors" to mobilize their language skills, respond to linguistic cues, and generate new speech as required by the plot. I therefore planned an improvisation that would begin with a script but evolve into an open-ended, multifaceted confrontation. My goal was to motivate the use of passive and mutually interchanged vocabulary, varied syntax and grammatical adaptation, in particular the conversion of verb tenses as dictated by the plot.

How to Set It Up

For a class of about 25 students, this activity requires about a half hour of class time twice a week for approximately four weeks. The amount of time can be increased or decreased according to the length of the script, the degree of participation and the level of performance desired by the students.

With the class:

1. Choose a dramatic life situation, such as: an immigration interview, the first day of school, a bank loan, a college interview, a first date, a new job, a new neighborhood, the school bully, work problems, trouble in a foreign country, a frightening experience, getting lost, finding something valuable, rites of passage, getting married, winning the lottery.
2. Create two characters basic to the situation. Ask for volunteer actors.
3. Using chairs, the desk and a few props, create a simple set. Block actors in place, elicit the opening dialogue from the class, introduce new and familiar vocabulary, sentence structure and verb tense. Write the opening script on the board or overhead projector. Have everyone copy it.
4. Using simple stage directions, have the two characters read and rehearse the script. As they read, have the class create new characters one at a time. As each is created, elicit an opening dialogue, write the script on the board or an overhead projector,

and have the class copy it.

5. Rehearse the play from the beginning as often as possible for three to four weeks. Be sure the scripted dialogue is repeated before the actors are allowed to improvise.
6. Integrate writing assignments as the play evolves that analyze plot, characters and themes, as well as reinforce vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure.
7. If possible, perform and videotape the completed play in an audio-visual studio before invited guests.

Tips for Avoiding Pitfalls

Be flexible. This encourages improvisation as well as language expression and experimentation. By allowing for variation, the play can more closely simulate real life communication:

1. Be flexible about roles in case they do not work out. Allow students to try each others roles until they find comfortable ones. This also enables creative ideas to germinate.
2. Be flexible about the script. Include various choices if the students suggest them.
3. Don't rehearse scenes excessively. Keep the momentum of the play going.
4. While assignments can be precise, let the improvisation stimulate expression, variation and fluency.

How We Did It

Our class chose "Job Interview," a rite of passage that everyone had either anticipated or already experienced. This situation possessed the key elements that would stimulate self-generated, adaptive language: the flexibility to include a range of characters, and the need to refer to all time planes: past, present and future.

The "kernel" plot consisted of the president of an important manufacturing company, and Mr. Jose Martinez, a job applicant. Scripting the beginning of the interview, the class immediately created a third character, the president's secretary. The scene opened with the president seated at my desk, the secretary standing nearby, and Mr. Martinez waiting outside in the hall. The class wrote the initial introductions and the questions the president would ask Mr. Martinez about his education, work experience, present circumstances, and future expectations, along with Mr. Martinez's responses. Inevitably, the script required different types of sentences, varying syntactical patterns and shifting verb tenses. To describe the position, the president required a greatly expanded vocabulary to cover its responsibilities and salary; the company's benefits (health insurance, expense accounts, bonuses, sick days and vacation time); the working environment (physical facilities, colleagues and office hierarchy); and possibilities for advancement (promotion, lateral moves, travel). After Mr. Martinez departed, the president interviewed a competing applicant. This conversation was not scripted but entirely improvised based on the previous dialogue.

Dividing into groups, the class then brainstormed for potential conflicts. After discussing their ideas, crises erupted in rapid succession: an unexpected visit from the president's angry wife whose birthday had been forgotten; desperate phone calls from their two children after a high school suspension and car accident at college; an emergency phone call from the president's brother in the company's South American factory about a violent workers' strike; a disturbing phone call from a scheming cousin demanding a share of the family business; an emotional phone call from the president's mistress, threatening to call his wife; various phone calls from meddling neighbors, concerned friends, anxious relatives and pressured business associates. At the end of the improvisation, all the characters arrived at the president's office for a climactic, full-scale confrontation.

Every student participated in the play, volunteering for roles with increasing confidence. As the plot developed, students improvised dialogue that recalled prior vocabulary and sentence patterns, and experimented with new variations. Significantly, as the drama evolved, the class began to address issues other than language; under the "cover" of their roles, they debated American social and cultural norms that differed from those of their native cultures. This aspect of the experience became an added stimulus to expression. After several weeks of rehearsal, the class videotaped the entire play in the audio-visual studio where unexpected expression on the president's part spontaneously produced a surprising end to the conflict.

During the weeks that the improvisation evolved, the class also read about jobs and working, reviewed grammar that pertained to the dialogue and wrote a variety of papers including a full "master" script of their own improvised scenes, character analyses, imagined conversations between characters, interpretations of the social, psychological and moral issues of the story from their own and their character's point of view, and descriptions of actual employment experiences that had happened to them and others they interviewed,

all of which enriched their contributions to the play.

Conclusion

Creating and performing a script-based improvisation can be a highly successful learning experience for ESL students. While it motivates them to generate imaginative and detailed ideas, greatly expand their vocabulary, actively practice language skills and attain far greater fluency, it also provides a setting in which they can explore the social values of a different culture. Finally, participating in this kind of activity strengthens students' confidence in their academic ability, an essential component of successful language acquisition.

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<http://www.aitech.ac.jp/~iteslj/>

<http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Berlinger-ScriptImprov.html>