

# Using drama

## THINKING POINTS

- **Acting out is OK at school. Not when you are an adult.**
- **Drama takes a lot of time to do.**
- **There aren't any drama activities in my textbook.**

'Acting out' in front of the class is something which school children normally enjoy doing, but which adult learners may find embarrassing. One problem with this activity, even if the students are enthusiastic about it, is that they may enjoy acting themselves, but be impatient when you ask them to watch and listen to other groups. Is there a value in using drama in the classroom and, if so, how can we do so most productively?

## 12.1 Dialogues

A lot of the language in textbooks is presented and practised through dialogues. Obviously, these dialogues are written around specific language points and vocabulary. However, the fact that the language is contextualised and put into the mouths of different characters helps to bring it alive. Is there anything we can do to make it come even more alive, and thus be more memorable for the learners? Is there any way of encouraging the students to read a dialogue that presents a key new language structure many times, until it is 'fixe' in their minds?

First of all, we can think about character and personality. Think of a very simple exchange, which you can find in your textbook, eg:

- A:** "What time is it?"  
**B:** "It's ten o'clock."

Ask your students to read this in pairs. It will probably not sound very interesting; their pronunciation and intonation may not be very good. Now ask them to ask and answer the same thing in their own language. The pronunciation will be fine, but it will probably still sound uninteresting. But what if you give the speakers some personality? Imagine these contexts.

- 1** A is a parent. B is an adolescent.  
B should have gone to bed at 9 o'clock ...
- 2** A and B are boyfriend and girlfriend.  
They do not want the evening to finish.
- 3** A is late for an appointment.
- 4** B is very busy and does not want to be interrupted ...

*Exploiting the  
textbook dialogues*

You can see that it is very easy to add some personality to the most basic exchange. This allows the students to use their imaginations ... and the language will come naturally to life. Pronunciation and intonation will sound much better. And the better students will probably add some of their own language. For example, the situations above might develop into something like this:

**1**

**A:** Anna, What time is it?

**B:** Oh – It's ten o'clock. Oh, Dad ...!

**2**

**A:** What time is it?

**B:** It's ten o'clock.

**A:** Oh, no!

**3**

**A:** What time is it?

**B:** It's ten o'clock.

**A:** Oh, no! ... disaster!

**4**

**A:** What time is it?

**B:** ...

**A:** What time is it?

**B:** ...

**A:** WHAT-TIME-IS-IT?

**B:** Oh – it's ten o'clock.

**A:** Thanks.

You can ask each pair of students to 'interpret' the dialogue through different characters and situations, or give several pairs the same situations. They will be amazed at how the language can appear to change in response to changes in character, atmosphere, emotion and situation.

Look at the dialogues in your textbook. There will probably be some you can use in the same way. You might want to go back to an earlier unit, so the students are using easier language. But even with the current unit, once you have presented and practised the new language items, you can easily use the dialogues for this kind of imaginative interpretation.

You can ask the students to decide the answers to these questions before they begin:

- who are you?
- what is your relationship with the other person?
- where are you (you may want to whisper, or shout)?
- what kind of mood are you in (tired, nervous, angry ...)?

If you find the students enjoy this use of the dialogues, you may want to encourage them to act them out, rather than just reading them aloud. They can add movement and gesture ... and all the time, they will be repeating and using the new language in a memorable way.

## 12.2 Cue cards

One of the problems with using the dialogues printed in the textbook is that the students can see the other person's lines. It is difficult to be surprised! In real life, we usually do not know what the other person will say to us. How can we bring some of this element of surprise into the classroom?

*Cue cards to guide  
dialogue production*

Cue cards can help. If each student in a pair has their words on a card, and cannot see the other person's words, then they will have to listen carefully and react as they would in real life. If they do not understand something, they will have to ask for repetition. They can also add the details of interpretation (character; relationships; emotion; place) which were discussed in 12.1 above.

If the textbook has a unit on "Telephoning and giving invitations", you may find a dialogue which looks something like this:

- A:** Hello?  
**R:** Hi! This is Rod!  
Can I speak to Ana, please?  
**A:** Hi, Rod. This is Ana.  
**R:** Oh, hi, Ana. What are you doing this evening?  
Can you come to the cinema?  
**A:** Oh – I'm sorry. I can't.  
I have to help mum at home.  
**R:** Well, what about tomorrow?  
Are you free tomorrow?  
**A:** Well ... I'm not sure.  
**R:** There's a great film on. Or we could play tennis.  
**A:** Mm ... I'd rather play tennis.  
Look, I'll call you tomorrow. OK?  
**R:** OK. Bye, Ana.  
**A:** Bye.

The easiest way is to simply write the dialogue physically on two cards:

**A:** Hello?  
**R:** ...  
  
**A:** Hi, Rod. This is Ana.  
**R:** ...  
  
**A:** Oh – I'm sorry. I can't.  
I have to help mum at home.  
**R:** ...  
  
**A:** Well ... I'm not sure.  
**R:** ...  
  
**A:** Mm ... I'd rather play tennis.  
Look – I'll call you tomorrow.  
OK?  
**R:** ...  
**A:** Bye.

**A:** ...  
**R:** Hi! This is Rod!  
Can I speak to Ana, please?  
**A:** ...  
**R:** Oh, hi, Ana. What are you  
doing this evening? Can you  
come to the cinema?  
**A:** ...  
**R:** Well, what about tomorrow?  
Are you free tomorrow?  
**A:** ...  
**R:** There's a great film on. Or we  
could play tennis.  
**A:** ...  
  
**R:** OK. Bye, Ana.  
**A:** ...

If you want to give the students less controlled practice, you could use cue cards like this:

**A:** Answer the phone.

**B:** ...

**A:** Identify yourself.

**B:** ...

**A:** Refuse politely.

Make an excuse.

**B:** ...

**A:** Accept or refuse.

**B:** ...

**A:** End the conversation.

**B:** ...

**A:** ...

**B:** Ask to speak to A.

**A:** ...

**B:** Identify yourself.

Invite A to do something.

**A:** ...

**B:** Give a different invitation.

**A:** ...

**B:** Respond.

**A:** ...

**B:** End the conversation.

*Supporting the slower learners – challenging the faster ones.*

Here, with these cue cards, the learners are not told the exact words to use, but they are given a kind of recipe for the conversation. This is a useful 'next step' after they have practised a textbook dialogue. If you can then reduce it to these kinds of suggestions, then they will be able to use it for flexible language production. The slower students will probably simply reproduce what was in the original dialogue; the quicker ones may add imaginative details and extra language of their own. But all of them can think about the characters and the relationship, even if they are just reading the original text. Perhaps Ana does not like Rod; perhaps she does not want to see him. Or perhaps she thinks he is wonderful, and is genuinely sorry that she is not free! Your learners will think of lots of variations, and have a lot of good ideas. And, because these ideas will come from them, they will be even more motivated and enthusiastic.

### 12.3 Disappearing dialogues

This is a way of getting the students to repeat a dialogue several times, and to have fun! Write the whole dialogue on the board. Ask the students to volunteer to read it. Each time, erase part of the dialogue (perhaps everything except the key words). It becomes more and more difficult – until finally the board is blank. You can then ask them to write it again from memory.

### 12.4 Mime

Mime – action without words – can also be used in the language classroom if the students enjoy it. It can be used for guessing activities: one student mimes a person or an action, and the others have to guess who they are, or what they are doing, using 'yes/no' questions.

*Mime and storytelling.*

Mime can also be used with storytelling. A group of students can make up a story, or a sequence of actions, and mime it to the rest of the class. The class can then tell the story orally. They can ask the actors questions, if there are some details which are not clear. Or, perhaps, they can write the story which they have 'seen'. Or they can make up the dialogue for a simple mime story.