Theatre techniques for ESL teachers

Dr. Jaydene Elvin\textsuperscript{1} & Alyssa Tobar\textsuperscript{2}
\textsuperscript{1}Department of Linguistics, California State University, Fresno
\textsuperscript{2}American English Institute, California State University, Fresno
A common problem among TESOL practicum students

- Students don’t know what to expect in a real classroom setting (classroom management), HOW to present lessons, or how to gauge the success of delivery.
- As a practicum student, it is very difficult to change from the role of a student to a teaching assistant.
- Essentially: Our students are either too confident or too afraid to teach in front of class.
The solution: Theatre training for practicum students!

- Drama in the ESL classroom has been used for many years.
- However there are very few programs that use it for teacher training, especially at the university level.
- Applying theatre techniques to teacher training may help students increase their confidence, improve their communication skills and have the flexibility to deal with the unexpected.
The link between theatre & teaching

• Teaching is a lot like acting on stage (Tauber & Mester, 2007)

• We must develop a teaching persona, one that is different to the way we interact with colleagues, family and friends (Carroll, 2002).

• You don’t start out with a ‘teacher-self’, it needs to be developed. This developmental path occurs by acting the role, just like in theatre (Hanning, 1984, p.33).

• Teachers can use their teacher-self to effectively present subject matter, just like performing artists and salespersons (Tauber & Mester, 2007, p.29).
Our program

• Practicum course consisting of 14 graduate and undergraduate students.
• Students paired with a mentor at Fresno State’s IEP program.
• Students complete a minimum of 15 voluntary hours at the IEP.
• Students attend “acting” seminars twice a week with TESOL practicum instructor.
• All “acting” seminars concluded with debrief and reflection.
Our program: Course modules

- **Icebreakers**: essential to ensure that students are comfortable with the instructor and each other.
- **Movement**: how to use space effectively.
- **Voice**: Voice projection.
- **Improvisation**: Develop flexibility to deal with the unexpected.
- **Classroom management**: Grouping, instructions, dealing with challenging behaviours.
- **Debrief/Reflection**: Included in every class – allows students to connect their learning with teaching.
Applying acting to teaching: Body Language & Movement

Tauber & Mester (2007, p. 36):
• The teacher’s enthusiasm, animation, non-verbal behaviour is linked to instructional effectiveness.

Justen (1984):
• Training in comfortable, expressive, physical movement helps build confidence in speaking and control over communicative situations.

Physical animation is made up of: facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, posture and general movement around the room.
Sample activity: Walk around the room as if...

• Teacher instructs students to walk around the room at a normal pace.
• Instruct students to pay attention to how they walk.
• Instruct them to walk around the room as if:
  – They are really cold
  – The are really hot
  – Late for class
  – Entering a job interview, etc.
• Have students pay attention to how they have to physically change their body in those movement scenarios.
Sample activity: How do you enter the room?

- Place a chair in the center of the classroom.
- Line up and give them an instruction of how they should enter the room. Have students act that scenario out. Debrief after.

Examples:
- You are a teacher walking into a classroom full of teenagers
- Entering your boss’ office
- Walking into an interview
- Arriving late to a movie,
- Entering a class full of kindergarteners
- Entering a class for an exam
Applying acting to teaching: Voice

- Teachers need excellent communication skills including: voice projection, rhythm, speed and clarity.
- Our voice “reflects our character, background, personality and moods” (Tauber & Meser, 2007, p.60).
- We need to use our voice to create and modify meaning.
- A moderately expressive voice correlates with more significant learning (Richmond, Gorham & McCroskey, 1987).
Sample vocal warm-up: Shei Shei Gulei

- Vocal warm-up with made up words and actions
- Students learn to play with different levels of projection (from very soft to very loud)
- Warm-up has been effective with high-school international ESL students

Lyrics
Shei shei gulei
Shei gofisa
Gofisa langa
A langa day langa
A langa dei langa!
Shei shei gulei!
(repeat as often as you want!)
Other vocal activities

- **Pairwork:** In pairs, face each other and select A and B. A is to say “I said mice” and B is to say “I said ice” say each phrase to your partner. Start closer and then move one step back each time until far away from each other, try to project voice, but don’t scream.

- **Pass the word:** How many different meanings can a word have based on how it is said? In a circle have students go around the room saying one word (e.g., hello) but change its meaning by saying it in a different way.
Applying acting to teaching: Improvisation

• The ability to adapt to any given situation is an important skill that teachers should learn.
• We don’t always get to prepare for every situation, and so we must improvise: we must think under pressure and come up with a solution.
Sample Improvisation Activity: What are you doing?

• Commonly used in ESL classes to practice wh-question formation and the present progressive tense.
• Great opportunity for students to think on the spot.
• Students form a circle, one student enters and begins miming an activity. After a few moments, the next student enters and asks “What are you doing?”. The student responds with a new action that the next student then mimes.
• Instructor can interject in order to encourage students to exaggerate or speak louder.
Applying acting to teaching: Classroom management through role-play

Tauber & Meser (2007, p.83-84)

• To role-play is to temporarily transform yourself into a different person through modifications of voice, body, etc.

• To play a role successfully you need to become someone else convincingly temporarily.

• You create your teacher persona through role play – sometimes this also requires different dress.
Applying acting to teaching: Classroom management through role-play

Role-Playing and teacher training:

- Entering the room and starting the class role-plays
- Grouping & Instruction role-plays
- Classroom management/dealing with challenging behaviours role-plays
- Teaching demonstrations
- Student debrief and reflection is an essential component of these role play activities
Sample classroom management activities:

• **Grouping students activity:**
  – Bring place cards with different traits (e.g., talks a lot, very quiet, high level student, low level student, etc.).
  – Send a student out of the room, give the remaining students a place card to display on their desk.
  – When the student returns, give them time to examine all the cards and then group students based on that knowledge.
  – Debrief.
Sample classroom management activities:

**Classroom management role-plays:** dealing with difficult students (see video).

- One student is giving a teaching demonstration.
- The rest of the class are the students.
- One or two students have been assigned to play a specific type of student (e.g., always on the phone, overenthusiastic, etc.
- Student must effectively teach class and handle student.
- Follow up with debrief and reflection.
Debrief and reflection

- Reflection is an essential component of this course.
- In order for it to work, students need to see the relation between acting and teaching.
- The instructor and students discuss each activity and how it helps them improve their teaching abilities.
- Following each classroom management role-play, students would provide feedback to the student-teacher.
- Discussion topics included the students’ strengths, weaknesses, suggestions for handling challenging behaviors, etc.
Summary: The benefits of theatre for teacher training

• Theatre is a great tool to use in ESL instruction and it is an even better tool for teacher training.
• In order for it to be effective, students need to see the connection between teaching and the theatre activities.
• This is why reflection is a fundamental component of the course.
• Students (even those who were not TESOL majors) were able to see the benefits of the course.
Want to know more?
Would you like to try it out for yourself?

Come see us at the TESOL conference in Atlanta, Georgia!

“Training TESOL practicum students using theatre”

March 14th, 2019, 11:30 AM - 1:15 PM in Grand Ballroom E at Omni

Training student-teachers using theatre
Contact: Dr. Jaydene Elvin
jaydene@mail.fresnostate.edu

2 hour, half day, full day, multiple day workshops available!

Training in movement, voice, improvisation and classroom management.