

Warm up exercises:

- Breathing & projection -- To project our voices, the diaphragm must expand down toward the abdomen, allowing the lungs to fill to capacity
- Relaxing the mouth -- Projecting the tongue while speaking loosens muscles around the throat and also gives ESL students practice with the 'th' sound
- Vowel sounds -- What we call the "long a, i & o" are actually diphthongs; emphasizing this facilitates correct pronunciation of these sounds
- Energy -- Acting requires energy, focus and eye contact with our stage partners. We establish eye contact, clap in harmony and pass on energy around the circle.

The Process – the creation of “The Many Meanings of ‘Excuse Me’”:

Background

Some of the theater class members have become involved in establishing a student-run resource center, as a way of sharing useful information and experience with other students in our school. As part of this process, these students solicited questions, needs and suggestions from students in other classes.

Process:

1. Choosing a topic: From this collection of “immigrant needs” the theater class students voted on the topic of interest to the most interest to them. The chosen topic was “cultural customs and differences”.

You may introduce a topic from a reading, discussion, writing assignment, video, shared experiences of problematic or humorous situations, etc. I find Easy English News: “This is your page” column and also the book by Elizabeth Claire, “American Manners and Customs” to be useful for discussion and improvisation prompts.

2. Discussion: The students worked in groups of four to share impressions related to American customs. Some behaviors they discussed were:

1. breastfeeding in public
2. eating in public places
3. manners in a train or bus
4. greetings (hugging, kissing, etc.)
5. traffic rules
6. Americans’ attachment to pets

3. Selecting an appropriate situation for improvisation: The students’ choices of situations were based predominantly on practicality and interest value. For example, they thought it would be difficult to improvise situations with pets, so this topic was discarded.

4. First improvisation: After 10-15 minutes of discussion, the groups came back together to improvise the first five topics above. It’s best to have them assign roles but not “plan out”

the interactions. Their interactions should be spontaneous (in the moment) and not planned out.

5. **Written description of situations and interactions (no dialogs):** We selected the first four improvisations, combined topics 2 and 4, and wrote brief descriptions of the three scenes. (attached)
6. **Read through the descriptions:** Students who were available for the workshop were assigned roles and they read through the scene descriptions together.
7. **The second improvisation:** The new cast of students improvised the described scenes.
8. **Write the dialogs:** Students worked together to write the dialogs for each interaction in each scene.
9. **Edit the dialogs for correctness:** I copied the handwritten dialogs and we read through them together to make any needed corrections.
10. **Read through the corrected dialogs** – to reinforce the correct English.
11. **Modify the dialogs to introduce new vocabulary, grammar, idioms, etc.** I chose to introduce a few idioms, to make the dialog more colloquial and to teach the different meanings of “excuse me”. I typed the final modifications to incorporate these items.

At this point the students began the rehearsal process with Judy Muss’ells, starting with the creation of their characters.

Character Building – to create your stage character:

- Throw away your history
- Keep your emotions
- Create a new history
 - What’s your name? (i.e. your character’s name)
 - Where are you from?
 - What do you do?
 - Are you married?
 - Do you have children?
 - What does your husband/wife do?
 - How long have you been here? Why are you here? What are your needs?

Basic stage rules:

- Don’t turn your back to the audience.
- Don’t block another actor (from view of the audience)
- Don’t walk in front of other actors (with some exceptions).
- Don’t make actions or noise to distract from the actors who are speaking.
- Speak so the audience can hear you.

Improvisation – a sample exercise:

Introduce the following situations, one by one, in sequence. Progressing from one step to the next will increase the level of anxiety experienced by the character. Actors use their own emotions as the tools of their trade. We all understand the feeling of anxiety. Actors do not attempt to “show” their feelings. They call upon their own life experiences to feel the emotions of a given situation. The situation belongs to the *character*; the emotions belong to the *actor* who is portraying that character.

1. Situation: waiting for a train
Where are you going and why are you going there? (to work? a job interview? to pick up your child?)
2. The train is late. (what will happen if you arrive late?)
3. The power goes out.
 - It's dark.
 - It's hot.
4. Someone bumps into you.
5. Someone tries to steal your wallet or handbag.

What are the students learning? These are some of their responses.

Acting skills:

- Character building
- Improvisation
- Relaxing
- Breathing
- Energy
- Focus
- Presentation skills
- Thinking on our feet when we get caught off guard

English skills:

- Improved listening comprehension
- Confidence speaking in daily situations (with landlord, boss, etc.), without fear: “I’m not afraid to speak out now, even if I make mistakes.”
- Improved fluency
- Pronunciation
- Writing, grammar, vocabulary (from script and journal writing)
- Cultures of other countries (from discussions, role play and readings)
- How people from other countries view my country