

## **THE CLASSROOM IS A STAGE**

**(Workshop based on the ideas of Carlos Gontow – author of the book by the same name)**

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### **Introduction**

Theater is an excellent way to help students to learn English. It can bring life, creativity, and fun to the teaching of English. It is also motivating. The language used in theater is very similar to that used in real conversations. Students feel they are really communicating in English and that there is a reason for learning English: to be able to perform well a play/sketch in English in order to amuse the other students, teachers, their parents, and themselves.

#### **- Why to use theater to teach English?**

Lots of students love to read aloud, to dramatize dialogs, and to present school tasks (even in other subjects) in theater form. This year at Colégio Militar de Curitiba, the students from the second year of high school should present their reading and understanding of the book “O Pagador de Promessas” in groups, in the Portuguese class. The majority of them presented it as a little play. It was fun for both the students performing it and for the students who watched it. And they all learned a lot. That can also be done in History classes, Science, etc.

#### **- What are the advantages of using theater to learn English?**

Theater recreates life, and the language used in theater is very close to the language used in real life. In real life we hesitate, make mistakes, forget words, are interrupted by others, etc. The language in textbooks is “too perfect”. There are no interruptions; there are only correct sentences and expressions, the right/formal vocabulary all the time. It’s kind of an “artificial language”.

In theater, we have a script to follow, but while performing we can change words, use a synonym, say the same thing in a different way. Students have to improvise, just like in real life. So, theater prepares them for real life situations, as they have to improvise and paraphrase. They have to deal with interruptions, words they don’t remember, etc. Besides, in theater as in real life, people use gestures, facial expressions, body language, and many other features of communication.

On the other hand, in textbooks, students read dialogs looking at the book, sitting still, they don’t really communicate to each other, they sometimes do it mechanically. That’s why it’s kind of artificial.

#### **- Theater can increase students’ motivation. Students learn English much faster when they are motivated.**

Most students learn English because their parents want them to learn it. Most students never get the chance to put what they’ve learnt into practice. So, they ask themselves, “Why do I have to learn and study English?” and they listen from their parents and teacher, “Because it’s important for your future!” However, for teenagers and children the future is too far away and they’re interested in today! They are unable to relate an objective at the present moment to something so distant from them as their future is!

On the other hand, when they’re rehearsing to present a play, all they have in mind is

the presentation of the play, and so they think, “ I have to study English, I have to learn my speeches well, I have to interact and communicate with the other students in the play, so that we’ll present it well and we’ll have fun!” And they really look forward to presenting it.

- **Theater is fun. It’s fun to pretend to be someone else and say and do many things that you don’t do and say in your everyday life!**

We can always say to our students that being an actor or actress, you don’t have to be afraid of the ridiculous. You can be and say ridiculous things because you are not yourself! You are the character you are performing.

- **Students can learn both grammar and vocabulary with theater.**

Theater is really helpful for students to learn structures and new words. Before acting, we can do some brainstorm exercises to describe the characters, such as asking, “What kind of person is he/she?”, “What’s his/her voice like?”, “What kind of clothes does he/she wear?” and work all this vocabulary with them. When they’re acting they don’t think about grammar, they just worry about saying their lines and acting, so they end up by acquiring lots of grammar structures and vocabulary,

- **You don’t need a theater to use sketches. Your classroom as a stage:**
  - have small groups.
  - ask them to read the sketch aloud, dramatizing it.
  - make students look at each other while reading (look up and say technique).
  - remind them they can say the same thing with other words.
  - have students present it in front of the class.

Teachers can simply have the students read the play aloud, with the correct pronunciation and intonation, using different tones and types of voice, if they feel comfortable to. Or the students can present it in front of the class later. If teachers have more time, they can ask students to read a play and write a different version of the same story. Students can write it at home.

### **Our own experience at the Military School with our drama class group:**

Last year, our drama group presented twice. It was our première as well. The first one was at the Rosa Cruz Theater. We presented two sketches which were adapted to a simpler language so that both students and the audience would find it easier to understand. They were the “Army sketch” and “The Bank”.

Then, still talking about last year’s group, at the Guaíra theater performance, we should mention the Second World War because the show was celebrating our “Força Expedicionária Brasileira”. Therefore, I adapted a sketch called “The Restaurant” so that it would take place in the forties. It was the story of four young Londoners who were tired of listening to war news and decided to do something different. They went to a French restaurant called Trattoria Romana. Funny and unexpected events happened there.

Our drama class group rewrote their version of two sketches this year. We were supposed to present a play at the Guaíra Theater. There should be Santos Dumont on the play because the school presentation was celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of aviation. The students made a research about Santos Dumont, got two sketches they had worked before in our extra-classes, which were the ones they liked most, and rewrote a new story in which Santos Dumont was a character. The two sketches were “The Doctor”, which we found on the internet at onestopenglish.com and “The Butler”, which we have in one of our reference books. It tells the story of an absent-minded doctor, who gives the same “universal remedy” to heal all his patients. Santos Dumont happens to be one of them; he has a backache after an accident with his airplane “The Demoiselle”. Funny events take place in the doctor’s office.

- **Suggestions for teachers who want to put on a play with their students:**
  - Practice it many times.
  - Show them their position on stage.
  - At the end of each rehearsal, make them do the whole play without any interruptions. It creates confidence.
  - Tell them to continue even if they make a mistake because mistakes happen to everyone, they have to be ready to improvise.
  - When they are presenting on stage, don’t help them, don’t stay there with them. The teacher should go to the audience and watch them; if you stay there you’re sending the message, “I don’t think you can do it.” You have to trust your students and make them feel confident.
  - When the rehearsal is over, after they’ve performed without any interruptions, make comments like, “You forgot to say this: ...”, “You have to speak louder.”, “You’ve mispronounced this word.”, “ You have to stand a little bit to the left.”, “Never give your back to the audience.”, etc.
  - Tell your students that it’s ok to make mistakes. The audience doesn’t know what they’re supposed to say or do. Therefore, they won’t notice any mistake.
  - Try to speak English all the time when you are rehearsing the play, and ask your students to do the same. This will also help your students to be more fluent and ready for improvisations.
  - You can and should use very simple scenery.

**Where you can find material to use and work with your students:**

**Books:** “The Classroom is a Stage.”, by Carlos Gontow – Disal Editors  
“The Butler Did it – and other plays”, by Bill Bowler – Oxford University Press  
“A Ghost in Love and other plays”, by Michael Dean – Oxford University Press  
“Six Sketches”, by Leslie Dunkling – Penguin Readers – Longman

**Sites on the Internet:** [onestopenglish.com](http://onestopenglish.com)