

Drama Techniques in the EFL Classroom

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What are drama techniques?

Drama techniques are basically games that are used to help actors enhance their creativity and unlock spontaneity. They are heavily influenced by the work of Viola Spolin. She was an actor, a director, and an educator who worked with both adults and children in America. She developed a series of theater games to increase creativity and to build trust and confidence in the drama group. Originally her work was intended to develop young actors' skills, but the suitability of her techniques for EFL soon became apparent. They were later published under the name of 'Theater Games for the Classroom'. Many of the drama techniques that are used now are derived from her work with theater games.

Why use drama techniques in the EFL classroom?

Drama techniques can be used in the EFL classroom for a variety of purposes and with different educational goals in mind. They can be used to:

1. Develop students' creativity and to boost students confidence.
2. Encourage group participation and build trust and acceptance in the group.
3. Utilize cooperative, noncompetitive interaction.
4. Support learner autonomy with the teacher often taking the role of bystander or fellow participant.

Drama techniques can be used as a major component of an English course. Additionally, they can be used as 'fillers' to lift the mood of the class, for example after some demanding textbook based work or when students are starting to tire. Drama techniques are also a lifesaver when you need to fill in those spare five minutes at the end of a lesson.

Are drama techniques the same as drama?

The main difference between drama techniques and drama is that drama techniques are not intended for performance. They are spontaneous 'games' to promote group synthesis, build confidence and encourage creative thought. They require no rehearsals, costumes or scripts; nor do they have to be perfect. All they need are some participants and some ideas. With drama techniques it is the process and not the product that is important. They are also sometimes called theater games.

What activities can be used to get started?

Here are three simple warm up activities to get started. They can be used for all ages and student levels as participants will use language that is already available to them in new spontaneous ways.

Space ball (adapted from *Improvisation for the Theater* by Viola Spolin, 1999)

Aim: To explore descriptive language and develop creativity

Time: 5-10 minutes

This is a really great activity to give students and teachers an idea of what drama techniques are. First get students to stand in a circle. Pretend to take a chunk of the air in front of you and begin forming it into a ball with your hands. As you do so ask your students: “What is it?” The students will hopefully answer “It’s a ball”. Keep forming the ball and tell the students that it’s changing. It could become: larger, smaller, heavier, lighter, stickier, more slippery – the possibilities are endless. Show the students how the ball has changed through the handling of the ball and facial expressions. Encourage students to call out how the ball has changed.



Now comes the fun part; throw the ball to any student, who must catch it in an appropriate way. That is, if the teacher transformed the ball into a heavy ball, the student must catch it as though it were very, very heavy and make some appropriate comments: “Oh my goodness! It’s so heavy! I can’t lift it!” Now it is their turn to mold the ball, transforming it in some way, and then throw it to the next student. Repeat until all willing students have participated.

It’s important for students’ creative development that they don’t plan how the ball will transform in advance but rather that they allow it change organically at the moment of manipulation. Creativity is closely linked to spontaneity, therefore pre-teaching or planning will block the free flowing of creative ideas. By keeping the students’ focus on the game itself and not on thinking, judging or evaluating what to say or do next, creative, intuitive utterances are more likely to be produced.

Slow motion tag (from *Theater Games for the Classroom* by Viola Spolin, 1986)

Aim: To think about space and movement and to introduce side coaching

Time: 5 minutes

This is a wonderful activity to get students to focus on cooperation. It is particularly useful to encourage students to work well together in pair or group activities. It is played exactly the same as regular tag, except the students must move in slow motion. This means that students must stay focused and see where their movements will lead them to keep them out of ‘its’ way. The teacher will side coach (that is give students verbal instructions), cautioning students who are tempted to run or move too fast.

By making the game slow motion, the goals change. Suddenly the game becomes a cooperative, collaborative experience. Students work together to allow themselves to be caught. In this way, the game helps to bond the class and encourages them to work together: skills that are essential in communicative activities. Once the students are comfortable with the game, students can take the role of side coach. Side coaching is an important part of drama techniques and, by putting the students in a position to control the direction of the game, chances for using a lot of spontaneous language can be created.

What am I doing? (From *101 Drama Games and Activities* by David Farmer)

Aim: To focus on verbal instructions and develop quick thinking skills.

Time: 10-15 minutes.

This is a useful activity to get students up, moving, and thinking. Get the students to stand in groups of around six. The first student (Student A) will mime an action. The next student (Student B) must ask: 'What are you doing?' Here comes the tricky part: Student A must answer something different to what they are miming. For example, if they are miming talking on the telephone, then they must answer something completely different like 'I'm watching TV' or 'I'm cleaning the table.' This is often quite difficult: it takes considerable concentration to do one thing but say another. Student B will now mime Student A's answer to the next student, Student C. Student C will ask 'What are you doing?' and as before Student B must answer different to what they are miming. Additionally, they must not repeat an action that has already been said. The steps are repeated until everyone has had a turn.

Notes: If it is the first time for students to do this kind of an activity it might be a good idea to limit the actions that they can do. For example, students could be asked to focus on only hobbies or outdoor activities, things students do in the home etc.

Where can I find out more about drama techniques?

There are some great resources available for teachers who want to use drama in the EFL classroom. Here is just a brief list of books and websites to get started. There are many more available and resources aimed at drama in education can often be adapted for the EFL classroom.

Book Resources

Burke, Ann F. & O'Sullivan, Julie C. (2002). *Stage by Stage*, Heinemann
A guide to using role plays and drama with children. Recommended for children more familiar with drama.

Framer, D. (2007). *101 Drama Games and Activities*, www.dramaresource.com
A great source of quick, easy activities easily adaptable for the EFL classroom.

Maley, Alan & Duff, Alan (2005). *Drama Techniques* (3rd ed), Cambridge University Press
Aimed for adult EFL learners, but many activities can be adapted for children.

Phillips, Sarah (1999). *Drama with Children*, Oxford University Press
A good introduction to drama with EFL children with lots of activities for songs & chants and puppet work.

Spolin, Viola (1999). *Improvisation for the Theater*, Northwestern University Press
Aimed at actors in training, but many of the games can be adapted for the EFL class.

Spolin, Viola, (1986). *Theater Games for the Classroom*, Northwestern University Press
Theatre games written especially for children's drama classes. Includes songs, games and plays.

Swale, Jessica (2009). *Drama Games for Classrooms and Workshops* Nick Hern Books
101 activities to use with children aimed at theatre workshops, but work well in the EFL class too.

Wilson, Ken (2008). *Drama and Improvisation*, Oxford University Press
Aimed at adult EFL students, but many activities are suitable for children too.

Webpage Resources

Drama in the ESL classroom <http://esldrama.weebly.com/index.html>

Resources for using drama in the ESL classroom.

Drama resource <http://dramaresource.com/>

The website of David Farmer it includes lesson plans resources and information on drama in education.

Imprology <http://www.imprology.com/games/viewallgames.html>

Contains many improvisation games suitable for EFL classes.

Mantle of the Expert <http://www.mantleoftheexpert.com/>

Concentrates on the work of Dorothy Heathcote in children's education.

The English as a Foreign Language classroom is a melting pot of teachings methods and techniques. The beauty of the EFL classroom is that you have the freedom to try out whatever creative ideas you may have. Anything goes, as long as the result is effective, engaging lessons. That's why you will often see aspects of other learning subjects in EFL lessons, if they can add value to an English lesson. Why use drama in the EFL classroom? Drama techniques encourage the use of the entire body. In this way, these techniques encourage learners to "think" with their bodies, not only with their minds. It allows learners to be creative in a totally different way and it appeals to more physical learners.