Acting for EFL Students: Script Analysis and Rehearsal Techniques

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The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how students produce more authentic responses in role-play situations through the use of script analysis and rehearsal techniques for actors. This study was carried out in university classrooms in Japan and included four groups of 25 second-year university students over three sessions using the textbook *Pop Stars* by the Dramaworks team. The post-study analysis of student feedback reported that the acting techniques helped learners communicate more effectively in the second language (L2) of English by way of applying learned structures to relatable, situational contexts through role-play. Further analysis indicated that the feeling of being "in the moment" achieved in role-play allowed the learners to feel more confident in front of their classmates despite the performance pressure.

BACKGROUND

> The scenarist must know how to find and to use plastic (visually expressive) material: that is to say, he must know how to discover and how to select, from the limitless mass of material provided by life and its observation, those forms and movements that shall most clearly and vividly express in images the whole content of his idea.
>
> (Pudovkin, 1954, p. 27)

According to Forrest (1992), over the past half century the gradual but persistent shift from audio-lingual techniques toward communicative approaches to language teaching has nurtured a kind of tug-of-war in the minds of teachers. One side places emphasis on the structural aspects of language, while the other focuses on its communicative nature. The authors of this paper contend that an optimal strategy is one driven by the process of active learning in a situational, student-centered context. Students of English as a foreign language (EFL) are often asked to watch films and participate in communicative tasks such as dramatic role-plays. However, in our classrooms we have observed that these interactions often lack authenticity because dramatic analysis and relevant techniques have not adequately been applied. Thus, the purpose of this study is to determine how to aid EFL students in

producing more authentic responses in role-play situations through the use of script analysis and rehearsal techniques for actors.

Weston (1999) draws on her experiences as a renowned acting teacher to articulate the importance of understanding script and giving actors playable direction through freedom to explore and find one's direction on his or her own. She also argues that the main problem with many directors is their lack of appropriate preparation. Our study asserts that there is a correlation between these notions and the problems EFL teachers face when attempting to employ drama in the classroom. With a little preparatory work, however, teachers can take advantage of these techniques and capitalize on the film industry's potential to aid EFL students in the production of authentic language ability.

According to Wessels (1987), EFL students can participate in physical and vocal warm-up exercises similar to those used by professional actors, which are useful tools for team building and practicing pronunciation, intonation, and expressiveness. Weston's methods are a concrete example of this and are relevant in the EFL classroom. She argues that the actor's role is not made up of lines of dialogue or a pattern of behavior, but instead is made up of a series of actions or objectives. Additionally, she points out,

> An actor caught trying to have a feeling is not believable… Bad actors, as well as much of the general population, go to great lengths to make the world believe they feel something that they don't actually feel, but most of the time no one is fooled. (Weston, 1999, p. 12)

The same tendency is true for an EFL learner trying to produce new language; without proper playable objectives, their efforts tend to be shallow. Bettman (2003) elaborates on this concept further by saying,

> If an objective is playable, then as soon as the actor starts to play the objective, he will not have to think about having the emotions he is required to have in the scene. He will not be acting. He will be actually experiencing the emotions called for in the scene. He will be "in the moment"(p. 102) living as the character he is portraying.

Similar to an actor, an EFL student needs to harness emotion, be clear about his/her objectives, and use action verbs to generate an authentic response under pressure. Forrest (1992) claims that an important factor in successful improvisation is continuous action. Teacher-directors should share the responsibility of moving the scene along by prompting interactions to add focus and immediacy to the scene when they become distracted. If the interaction comes to a stop, the teacher can suggest an action or body language to help the students regain their connection. This continuous action helps the students

develop the awareness to be able to access specific objectives on the spot and stay in the moment.

When applying acting techniques to the EFL classroom role-play, it is important for the teacher to determine and demonstrate the student actor's objective in a specific scene. Alternatively, the students could determine and demonstrate said objectives themselves via group discussion. The most effective way to illicit suitable objectives is to ask the students to consider what the character wants, i.e. the character's objective. Pedagogically sound objectives are the ones that require the actor to interact in a specific way with another actor in the scene, for example, *to get something from or to do something to the other actor in the scene.* It is important that all role-play conversations are based on these kinds of actions or objectives (goals) because the activity will engage the actor and become emotionally consuming. Hence, we use action verbs to express the character's want – for example, to enquire, to encourage, to berate him, torment her, warn him, mock her, jeer at him, lecture her, bait him, cajole her, etc. and have the students achieve these objectives through applying classroom target language.

Our study attempts to show how works of drama and film can be used in the EFL classroom to achieve the objective of generating an authentic response under pressure. The project addresses all four macro-skill areas (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) as well as a wide variety of teaching and learning styles through individual work and collaboration, critical analysis and affective sharing, artistic expression, reflection, the use of technology, and other modes of learning.

To illustrate these techniques, we can use examples from the textbook series *Pop Stars* by Dramaworks (Steckler, 2006). The textbook is also supplemented with an intelligently produced video, which dramatizes all the scenes on location in New York. Ladau-Harjulin (1992) comments on the utility of well-planned, video-based lessons in which all events in the video can be compared with those in the learners' own culture, so that the students learn about their own cultural backgrounds, in addition to gaining an understanding of other nationalities' ways and values. This kind of peripheral learning helps to reinforce the plot points of the drama. It also gives the students culturally relevant material to work with in the practice sessions.

Pop Stars synopsis

The main character is a traveler from Japan named Nobu. He moves to New York to follow his dreams of making it big in the music industry. Upon his arrival in New York, Nobu meets a character named Jake who introduces him to the world of hairdressing. Jake promptly helps Nobu get hired at his salon (named "Pop Stars") where Nobu eventually makes connections in the music industry. Later, Nobu meets a lovely girl from New York who is also a singer that ends up changing his whole world.

The *Pop Stars* book is made up of 20 units that contain a number of short scenes. In this *Pop Stars* scene example Nobu has just met Jake on the New York subway for the first time. Shortly after, Nobu is in a panic because he realizes that he has left his bag on the train.

Nobu: Oh no!
Jay: What's the matter?
Nobu: Oh no!
Jay: What?
Nobu: I left my bag on the train.
Jay: You're kidding! Really?
Nobu: My passport was in it! And my credit cards!

Character Objectives
What does Jay want?
Jay wants **to enquire** about what is wrong with Nobu.

What does Nobu want?
Nobu wants **to lament** about his situation to Jay.

The story is suited for the millennial generation with a mixture of diverse characters that come face-to-face with real-life situations. The comprehension level is ideal for intermediate learners of English with an accompanying *Pop Star* video to keep the students interested. Also, as mentioned, the story is broken down into 20 scenes of dialogue so a teacher can set their own pace. The textbook is easy and straightforward to use, and does not require any drama experience, props, or special acting ability. It is a complete course and includes warm-ups, language activities and teachers' notes.

METHOD
This study was completed in university classrooms and included four groups of 25 second-year university students over three sessions (90 minutes each). The *Pop Stars* textbook was used as the main textbook in these sessions. To accompany the *Pop Stars* textbook we designed a simple Script Breakdown Notebook for each student (see Appendix A). It is broken down into chapters that consist of a vocabulary review and a scene breakdown page with an adjacent space to write scene objectives.

Session 1: Establishment of learning objectives
The students were divided into groups of three or four and given a vocabulary warm-up activity. It involved scanning the upcoming scenes for

unfamiliar words and writing the definitions in the space provided. This process included translating the words into Japanese, if necessary. Afterwards, we told the students to relax and played the video of the scenes without pause. Then we replayed the video and paused it on any difficult pronunciation or culturally confusing points.

Next, we got them to break the unit down into the appropriate scenes and gave feedback to ensure everyone made the same scene choices. Afterward, the students discussed and brainstormed together to decide what objectives (action verbs) fit the scene dialogue (refer to earlier scene example). After a group consensus was reached, they recorded their work in their individual script breakdown workbook. To make sure everyone was following the learning objectives accordingly, we called upon various students to come up to the board to share their chosen playable objectives (more than one answer was possible). Finally, we got the students to translate the playable objectives into Japanese and record them in a verb list section in the back of the script notebook.

Session 2: Rehearsal

At the beginning of the class we played the video of the scene again, at least two times. It served to refresh the students' memories of the material and to ease students back into a positive frame of mind for learning. Next, the class was divided into groups that consisted of two students who played the roles while the third student acted as the director by keeping the others focused on the decided objectives. The student director was also encouraged to give feedback on how authentic the performances were. Then, students switched roles. The director's focus was on how well the acting students achieved the objective, for example, *to lament.* The students constantly remained in action practicing the dialogue as much as possible. This kind of preparation made things go much smoother on filming day when we brought in the camera to record their performances.

Session 3: Action

We recorded the students' performances using the basic camera on an iPad. The main purpose of the recording was to add additional performance pressure. This is important for L2 objectives and real-world communication situations because it aids in simulating the pressure students feel when they are put on the spot to produce authentic language. In other words, practice is important but the right kind of practice is the key. We set the classroom up in a theater-style setting so everyone was focused on watching the performing students in front of the class. However, the students all remained in their respective performance groups. The student director sat up front and was tasked with following along and whispering any words or phrases that the actors forgot (actors rotate roles). The rest of the class also followed along while completing performance feedback reports that subjectively measured *emotion, eye contact,*

gestures, and *objective achievement.* At the end of each performance the reports were collected and tallied for a score out of 20 (given back at the end of class). There was also a comment section so the teacher could give feedback on the performance.

Finally, each of the four groups were asked to answer five simple survey questions at the end of the project sequence. Also, at the bottom was a space for open-ended comments so the students could offer feedback on their experiences (see Appendix B for the full survey).

RESULTS

The overall results of the survey show that the students responded and engaged with the material favorably. More specifically, 66% of the students responded with "very good" or "good" to the item about playable objectives helping them feel "in the moment" when playing their roles. Also, they commented that the playable objectives allowed them to feel more confident in front of their classmates despite the camera. However, a large portion of students (44%) responded with "poor" or "very poor" to the item about expressing the character's want, saying it was challenging to choose the correct action verbs or playable objectives to fit the scenes. Finally, the students seem to have enjoyed the experience of being a student director as 84% said that the experience was beneficial. It was noted by the instructors that a majority of the students became more enthusiastically engaged in the lessons. It was felt that since clear instructions were given and role-play objectives were brainstormed and confirmed by teachers, the path to achieving the lesson objectives was opened through an atmosphere of rigorous structured practice.

Table 1
Student survey sample to measure ability and feeling during practice/performance

Item	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor	Very Poor
1. To express the character's want	5%	27%	24%	28%	16%
2. Focus on objectives' during practice	21%	34%	35%	7%	3%
3. Benefit of being a student director	68%	16%	6%	8%	2%
4. Focus on objective during performance	32%	17%	12%	17%	22%
5. Feeling of being "in the moment"	37%	29%	16%	11%	7%

CONCLUSION

Our study provides evidence that the communicative approach can be enhanced with techniques from other disciplines such as drama. The post-study analysis of student feedback reported that the acting techniques helped learners communicate more effectively in the L2 by way of applying learned structures to relatable, situational contexts via role-play. They provide the learner with a way to generate authentic responses rather than manufacturing feelings. The medium of drama and film will also play an increased role in providing EFL instruction to students in the classroom, as well as in self-study situations. To take the techniques one step further we suggest taking a short manageable scene from classroom-friendly feature films, such as *Back to the Future* (1985) or *Spirited Away* (2001)*, and following the same procedure. However, regardless of the techniques used for practice, when they are used in a classroom the teacher's guidance is key in facilitating this medium to improve adult English language learners' communication skills.
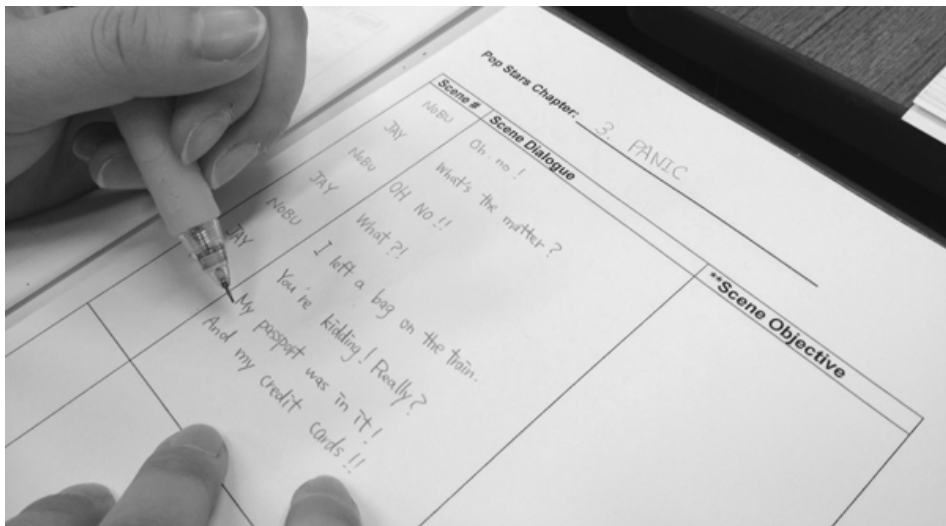
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APPENDIX A: Script Breakdown Notebook

Script Breakdown Notebook for Pop Stars

Student preparing to determine the scene objectives

APPENDIX B: Acting for EFL Survey Questions

1. My ability to use action verbs to express the character's want is best described as:

    a.   Very Good
    b.   Good
    c.   Fair
    d.   Poor
    e.   Very Poor

2. My ability to use 'objectives' during practice to get into character best can be described as:

    a.   Very Good
    b.   Good
    c.   Fair
    d.   Poor
    e.   Very Poor

3. I would describe the learning benefit of being a student director as:

    a.   Very Good
    b.   Good
    c.   Fair
    d.   Poor
    e.   Very Poor

4. My ability to focus on the objective while performing is best described as:

    a.   Very Good
    b.   Good
    c.   Fair
    d.   Poor
    e.   Very Poor

5. My feeling of being "in the moment" during the performance can be best described as:

    a.   Very Good
    b.   Good
    c.   Fair
    d.   Poor
    e.   Very Poor