

Playing Film Characters Dramatically
Improves Students' Speaking Performances

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International students with lower levels of English proficiency usually have low English-specific self-confidence, which deteriorates their speaking performances. Many of them speak in a low voice, with tight body language or no body language at all. Their pronunciation is neither accurate nor natural, and their intonation is usually not native-like. It is difficult to tackle all these issues at the same time, and pronunciation/intonation drills often bore students.

In 2003, when I first taught the listening and speaking section of low-level international students at the University of Southern California, I learned one precious lesson from my students. One day, I asked them to talk about their heroes. To my surprise, not only did everyone come up with a unique hero from his/her heart, but everyone's language also became more vivid and accurate. They were able to capture the exact words to describe the qualities their heroes had, like "perseverance", "patience", "able to accept himself", etc. Moreover, their bodies were relaxed and their faces were radiant with joy. It seemed to me that their heroes even helped them to speak English much better.

As an ESL teacher and learner myself, I am always curious to find out what really helps students to learn English. On my own journey, I had met a great writing teacher when I was an undergraduate English major in China. To me, she was a real hero. Inspired by her love, I was able to overcome all the obstacles and came to the States to study. After I received my master's degree from the University of Arizona in 2001, I came to USC to study for my MFA in creative writing. I also took classes in voice, acting and dancing, which all opened my eyes to different aspects of communication and

enhanced my sensitivity as a human being. The techniques I learned from these classes helped me significantly to create a real, healthy voice and a strong self-image in English.

Equipped with all these creative approaches, when I taught the same low-level class again in the fall semester of 2004, I was able to perceive clearly how the students' anxieties affected their speaking performances. For example, one student said, "I am confident about my abilities" while his hands were trembling and his voice was shaking-- he was not confident at all. Most of my students had difficulties communicating their genuine feelings and thoughts. They knew they were supposed to speak English with confidence, but their bodies often betrayed them, and their voices were usually affected by the lack of confidence.

At the beginning of the semester, I asked them to perform a monologue of their favorite film character. Although many of them were not quite sure what they were doing, I could still see the dramatic effects their heroes had on them. For example, one student performed a monologue of the Al Pacino character from "Scent of A Woman" with genuine confidence. I was excited.

Three weeks into the semester, we started to work on the film project. We had four pairs and one group of three. Each team was required to choose a film and do the following tasks: first, summarize the film in three sentences (beginning, middle and end); second, find out about the background of the film (such as the director, actors, genre of the film, etc.); third, each student will find a professional film review and summarize in his/her own words; fourth, choose a scene that the team want to perform and each student will analyze the character s/he plays and then play with each other.

It took about ten weeks to complete the whole project, but the students' interest remained high during the process. Most of them needed to do these tasks again and again to get it right. For example, the three-sentence summary of a film was no easy task for them. In class, we viewed the film "Unfaithful" (a film chosen by one team, which, by the way, was probably not a great choice for finding a hero) and I used this film as an example to show them what a three-sentence summary was.

While we were working on these tasks, I also tried different vocal exercises and acting improvisational games in order to help the students to relax and be real in their communication. For example, one vocal exercise was designed to help the students to open up in their throats to pronounce words like "wow" and "I", which the students usually had difficulty with. The acting improvisational games were awkward for the students in the beginning. For instance, they would have to look at each other silently for one minute; however, they gradually understood that silence was just as important as words and that their bodies and facial expressions communicated more eloquently than their speech.

After students invested enough time and energy in the film and especially their characters, we worked on the scene performance. During the rehearsal, we watched each scene in the film, followed by the students' performances in class. Then I gave feedback to each student, which usually focused on pronunciation, pause, stress and intonation. I asked the student to listen to the actor's lines again, paying close attention to the places I marked. In the final performance, I was very pleased to hear their improvement -- obviously these famous actors and actresses had done a good job as teaching assistants.

I also asked my students to bring in props and costumes to make the audience believe what they were doing. Most of them were very creative. For example, one student who played William Wallace in “Brave Heart” wore a red plastic Trojan helmet to show his identity as a warrior, which was simple and powerful. The students were so motivated that I rarely worried about finding sources for them; on the contrary, I was often happily surprised by their progress and creativity.

From this project, not only did the students improve their speaking performances, but they also were able to incorporate body language naturally into the speaking. On the last day, each student gave a ten-minute presentation, followed by the scene performance. It was such a joy to watch their open and confident manners and listen to their English with genuine emotions. I was deeply encouraged by my students and the heroes they portrayed from films such as “Legally Blond” and “Lord of the Ring”. Yes, learning a foreign language is a very heroic mission and we definitely need heroes in this long journey.