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4 Simple Drama Techniques for Teaching English

Technique 1: The Improvisational Approach (“Yes, and...”)

This approach comes to us from improvisational comedy, and has become incredibly popular in the corporate world as a way to improve the quality of brainstorming and group work. ([Here’s](#) a popular book on the subject.)

Too often when brainstorming or being creative, one person will offer an idea only to have the next person respond with some variation on “No, but...” The idea is shot down, refuted and rejected, and the creative energy in the room collapses like a deflating soufflé.

The basic idea of this approach is simple: When two actors are improvising a scene together, and the first one kicks off the action, the second always responds positively and builds on what the other has done. We call this the “**Yes, and...!**” approach, because it’s the opposite of the “No, but...” approach.

It takes practice to get students (and ourselves) working in this way. I like to make my students stand when we get started, because as I tell them, this is a “no but(t) zone,” so it would be hard to sit down.

You can try brainstorming or improvisational storytelling to practice this technique. For example, I might ask my students to suggest new, modern settings for the Shakespeare play we are reading. The rule is that if they want to respond to another idea, they must begin with the phrase “Yes, and...”.

Student A: Maybe we could set it in a coffee shop?

Student B: Yes, and the fight scenes could happen on the street outside!

It doesn’t matter what you are brainstorming—solutions to a problem, settings for a play, topics for research papers, ad campaigns for products—this technique makes the process more fun and energetic, and makes your students feel as if their ideas are heard and understood by their classmates (because too often we shoot down ideas before we have even really considered them).

Once your students have had some practice working in this way, you can ask them to use it when they approach brainstorming and small group work. And you'll know you have taught them something valuable when you find them using this approach even when you haven't required it, because they have found that it works well to elicit creative, interesting ideas.

Technique 2: Improvisation Games

Improvisation games take the “Yes, and...” approach to the next level. They are incredibly fun, and help build energy and foster creativity. They are great lead-ins to brainstorming, acting out scenes in plays and group work.

Here are a couple good examples, both of which build on the improvisational philosophy, and which give students practice embracing the ideas that others offer.

The Hitchhiker

Set up four chairs in front of the class. Two will be the front seat of the car, and two are the back seat. Put three volunteers in the car, two in the front seat and two in the back. Of course the front left person is driving the car. Ask them to drive for a few minutes, and then spot another volunteer “hitchhiking,” and pick him or her up.

When the new person gets in the car, they choose a feeling—happy, sad, tired, angry, whatever they like—and act in that way. The other students in the car should pick up and act out the feeling too. So if the person who gets in the car is acting tired, for example, the driver might start slumping in her seat, slapping her face to help herself stay awake, etc.

Let them do this for a short amount of time (thirty seconds to one minute), and then have the car stop to pick up another hitchhiker. Those already in the car should rotate seats; the driver will exit the car, the front passenger slides over, one of the back seat passengers should move up front, and the former hitchhiker slides over a seat.

The longer your class plays, the harder they'll have to work to come up with fun new ideas, but the more creative they'll get with the feelings and actions they choose.

The Strange Neighbor

The class stands in two circles, an inner circle facing outward, and an outer circle facing inward. Each student faces a partner. One of the two offers a ridiculous statement to the other, and the second must accept what they say and add on to it. For example:

Student A: Maria, I love your new pet dinosaur.

Student B: Oh yes, he's the best, except he keeps eating all the dogs in the neighborhood!

Rotate the outer circle and let them try again and again as they change partners.

There are hundreds of great improvisational games you can play. Some take just a few minutes, and others take more time to complete. The resources online are tremendous; here are a few of the best ones:

- [The improv wiki](#) offers an encyclopedia of different improvisation games, each one categorized by type. They are grouped as “exercises” and “games,” and each one has a description as well as suggestions for similar activities.
- [The improv encyclopedia](#) offers similar resources, although their activity descriptions tend to be a little shorter and less detailed.

Technique 3: Human Slideshow

This technique (as well as the next) has many uses. It's particularly good at pushing students to think about which moments in their reading are most important, and so it's a great way to work on summarizing material. You can use it to have them summarize [chapters in a book](#) or the entirety of a book, play or [short story](#).

In the Human Slideshow, we ask students to create “slides” or photographs by posing. For example, I assign each group of students one chapter from “The Joy Luck Club,” and ask them to choose the three most important moments from the chapter.

They will create a living picture to illustrate the moment, and then the narrator will explain what is happening and why it's a key moment. If you want, let them bring in props and create costumes to add to the fun of the scene.

For example, we might see one student at a piano, pretending to play, while a beaming teacher looks on happily and the audience reacts with dismay.

The narrator explains: “Here Jing-Mei plays piano at her recital, and her parents learn that she isn't the prodigy they thought she was. Her teacher, who is deaf, has no idea how bad she is! This moment is important in the chapter because...”

Technique 4: One-minute Theater

One-minute Theater, like Human Slideshow, can be used to summarize chapters, books and other reading material. It can also be used to introduce your students to the plots of challenging work, so that they can focus on understanding the writing rather than following the story.

For example, I use this technique when introducing plays by Shakespeare. If the students have a basic understanding of what will happen in the play before they begin reading, it takes some of the pressure off, and we can work together on acting out scenes and making sense of individual lines and speeches.

You can give students a summary of a full play (for example, [here's a summary of "Hamlet"](#)) or of smaller pieces of it, then ask them to read it, assign roles and put together a one-minute play that goes with the summary. Don't be a stickler for time. If their plays take 2-4 minutes, that's fine too!

Hopefully these suggestions have given you a sense of some ways you can use drama techniques in your classroom. Embrace the "Yes, and..." philosophy, and start bringing drama into your classroom!
