

## **TESL and Creative Drama**

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Once we earn our academic degrees and take our places in front of our own classes we all too often forget what we really are—children in adult's clothing. We have carefully concealed our innate desire to play under a thick veneer of facts, figures, rules, regulations, and teaching theories. The creative talents in each of us are carefully and neatly packed away. Luckily they are not dead, and from time to time they find their way to the surface with such thoughts, as, "What's wrong with my class today?" "Why isn't Johnny reading?"

### **A Pioneering Seminar**

Take heart; fear not fair maiden (or brave hero); help is on the way. That teaching can be fun and an exciting experience has been demonstrated most definitely by Dr. Eloise Hayes of the University of Hawaii's College of Education in her seminar, "Creative Drama and the English Class." This seminar was part of the East-West Center's Culture Learning Institute training program for Teacher Trainers in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. Participants in the project were professional people from colleges and universities in Asia and the Pacific Islands.

The first meeting of the six-session seminar was a mixture of embarrassment, fun, annoyance, and wonder. Dr. Hayes admits she was not prepared for such a mixed group speaking a variety of languages and with widely diverse cultural backgrounds. On the first meeting she found it necessary to reject some of her initial plans and substitute others. "I was in a state of shock most of that first session. First they came early, before we had a chance to make the dingy room a bit more cheerful, with music on the record player, flowers and some wall charts. Here we were, in a state of confusion to begin with! The ladies from Thailand spoke so softly that they were almost impossible to hear. The Japanese gentlemen spoke firmly but hardly at all. The Micronesians, and indeed everyone, eyed me with considerable reserve. I collapsed into a chair giving up my original ideal of getting acquainted through action and gasped, 'Tell me about yourselves.' Before long, however, we were on our feet in drama movement."

It is difficult for all of us to step out of the protective armor of academia, and these teachers were no exception. There were grumbles about the childishness of

sitting on the floor and being a round or angular shape, or moving in slow motion; and concern for their teacher image when they were asked to be monkeys in "The Peddler and His Caps." There were also questions about the usefulness of the seminar and whether to continue with it since attendance was not compulsory. Yet, everyone returned the next week even though the time, 7-9 on Wednesday evenings, was somewhat inconvenient for the group.

### **Five Weeks Later . . .**

Now, let's jump ahead five weeks to the final session and look at just a portion of that exciting evening. There was a circus!—and it was more than acting or playing, it was alive and real. Grown men and women replete with degrees had freed themselves to be children again. Merle Evans' Circus Band record backed up a Japanese-Korean-Micronesian herd of elephants trained by a Chinese remedial reading expert. Two lovely Thai ladies added grace, charm, and daring to the tightwire act that featured a reckless daredevil from Samoa. Two rare bald tigers went through their paces under the control of the Philippines' first female wild animal trainer, and there were clowns, and of course the audience, which each act became as it finished its performance.

"Bertha, would you read this? It's crazy, and in an educational journal, too!" If you've just made such a comment, please read on for further explanation of what took place.

Dr. Hayes had managed to crack the academic shell and release enough creativity from each individual so that he was able to recapture certain aspects of being a child again—to let his emotions and imagination soar without bounds, and then to realize that his own students could experience the same thing if given the opportunity. Help had arrived to prove that teaching could be fun and not a dull routine, and that creative activities work in any class whether it's the reading class, the history class, the geography class, or spelling.

Dr. Hayes turned this group of mature foreign teachers into an elementary school class and gave them the same activities that her ten and eleven-year-olds receive. She led them through relaxation exercises such as becoming an ice cube, a firecracker, a candle or taking giant steps about the room, and walking like a Teeny Tiny. All activities were somehow correct for each person because of their individual differences. Individuality and self-expression were fostered. On the other hand, they were taught a simple hand hula which required them to mimic the teacher. The laughter and chatter after each exercise helped transform what was a mixed group into a cohesive one, working together.

Then came the "meat" of each session in the form of a story, folk tale or poem. As a group they would play each part recalling their own past experiences and feelings: first with body talk, then with sounds and finally by adding words. The next time through, the parts were divided among the group with each choosing the part he wanted to play; then the whole story was acted out. It is of especial interest to note that Dr. Hayes always used movement and sound before spoken language because she feels that dialogue preceded by movement and sound is far more meaningful.

The last thirty or forty minutes of each two-hour session was devoted to an evaluation. The discussion produced comments such as:

"I like the absence of competition; it has really changed my views."

"Mimicking sounds seems a good way to have intonation practice."

"It's a pleasant way to learn vocabulary; sound and movement help us to understand."

"I would enjoy teaching like this."

Through their newly-won freedoms the participants were able to express themselves with facility both verbally and physically, to become real participants rather than mere observers. They lived in new situations and experienced dealing with them intuitively. They were learning through experience rather than from a textbook or a lecture.

The Circus is now in winter quarters and the performers have returned to their various countries where they have very special roles to fulfill, but in Dr. Hayes' seminar they discovered their real selves again. With this reawakening and armed with new techniques they will be able to fit that special role knowing that they are not just another copy out of the mold. Letters from the participants bear this out.

### **About the Author**

*Richard Via, highly successful as a professional stage manager on Broadway, became interested in the use of drama as a means of teaching ESL. He taught for five years in Japan, initially as a Fulbright Scholar, and, at the time of this article's publication (1972), was a fellow with the Cultural Learning Institute at The East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawaii, and on the brink of "stardom" in the field of ESL.*