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АНГЛИЙСКИЙ ЯЗЫК ЧЕРЕЗ ТЕАТР:

НОВЫЙ ВЗГЛЯД НА ОБСУЖДЕНИЕ ДОМАШНЕГО ЧТЕНИЯ

***Аннотация:** в статье описываются виды деятельности, которые можно использовать для развития у учащихся более глубокого культурного понимания изучаемого языка, посредством чтения художественной литературы, а также для улучшения грамматических умений и дальнейшего развития речевых и презентационных навыков. В статье также описано, каким образом с помощью театральных приёмов можно оживить художественный материал и поставить учащихся в ситуацию, в которой они были бы не пассивными читателями, а были активно вовлечены в работу с литературным произведением, что должно способствовать к более глубокому и осознанному пониманию.*

***Ключевые слова:** театр, домашнее чтение, англоязычная культура, речевые навыки, выражение мысли.*

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ENGLISH THROUGH DRAMA:

A NEW VIEW ON THE HOME READING DISCOURSE

***Abstract:** this article describes activities that teacher/students can use to enhance greater cultural understanding through reading fictional works as well as improving grammar skills and speaking/presentational abilities. It also shows how drama can be employed to engage and bring to life material and put students in a situation where they become not simply passive readers but actively involved in literary works.*

Through this more intimate association with a work of literature it is hoped a deeper, more meaningful understanding will result.

Key words: *drama, home reading, Anglophone culture, speaking skills, phrasing.*

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“A language is not only grammar and vocabulary. A language is a completely different lens on the world.” Igor Barca

The implication of Igor Barca’s quote is that although students may acquire greater knowledge of many practical and grammatical aspects of a language through reading the benefits do not stop there. An equal, if not greater benefit, to be accrued is the understanding of a different culture or cultures.

This short article aims to explore some activities that teacher/students may wish to use to enhance that greater cultural understanding as well as enhancing more basic grammar skills and improving speaking and presentational abilities. It also aims to show how drama can be employed to engage and bring to life material and put students in a situation where they become not simply passive readers of literature but become actively involved in those works. Through this more intimate association with a work or works of literature it is hoped that a deeper and more meaningful understanding will result.

It would also be hoped that actively engaging students in this way will inspire further reading and analysis and also (through direct dramatic techniques) allow students to grow in confidence in using an acquired language.

In summary:

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE COURSE

- to inspire reading independently
- to explore Anglophone culture
- to acquire & enlarge vocabulary
- to improve speaking confidence in a language
- to move from speaking towards writing

CHOICE OF TEXTS

The choice of texts for this course is at the discretion of the teacher but it is recommended to opt for texts that can and will engage students in debate and relate to contemporary lives and events. This does not mean to say that they must be contemporary works but it is recommended that issues and topics have some resonance in the contemporary world so that students can find a more direct (not simply literary) connection with them.

For the purposes of this article we have chosen the 1945 play *An Inspector Calls* by J.B. Priestley. It's "message" of social responsibility still resonates today in modern England where there is a lively political and social debate about the state's involvement in people's lives (very evident in opposing dialogues in electioneering taking place currently in the UK). It also allows students to discuss moral issues of responsibility as well as offers a window into the class system in the UK.

Although this is a play text any of the dramatic exercises recorded can be equally applied to the novel format and to poetry.

APPROACHING THE TEXT

For the purposes of this article we assume that the students have for some weeks:

- been reading the text
- understanding and timelining the plot
- gaining initial responses to the themes and characters in the work
- unpacking any difficult vocabulary or grammatical structures

From this students can then advance to the more specific exercises listed below.

SOME DRAMA EXERCISES TO EXAMINE TEXT

1. Word colouring.

This is a technique used in UK drama schools and voice coaches (and by some professional directors) to get actors to bring the language to life, to "flavour" it, make it their own and ultimately to enliven it and brighten voice intonation.

Firstly, a number of onomatopoeic words are presented – *bang, crack, pop, crackle, plop*. Students are encouraged to say them with as much imitation of the meaning as they can.

(Students can sometime be initially reluctant as it takes them out of a more traditional classroom setting but gentle coaxing and encouraging is rewarded once students allow themselves to step out of their comfort zone step by step). Once confidence is gained students are encouraged to find an action to accompany the saying of the word. This energises and dramatises their speaking and is a rudimentary start to enhancing intonation skills.

Next, less obviously onomatopoeic words can be used – *slap, splash, thump, wriggle, press*. The same exercises above are employed on using these words.

Then, non-onomatopoeic words are used but students must find expression and get the way they say the word to match the meaning. Here again they must be encouraged to be as expressive as possible going so far as physicalising the words. Word examples are too numerous to list (and can be at the teacher's or even student's discretion) but often offering opposites – *love, hate, loud, quiet, strong, weak, hope, despair* – or “near” synonyms – *hope, desire, strong, tough, old, ancient* – are good because in the former case students can exaggerate the difference and in the latter students will need to find subtle differences in the words meaning and thus how they express it.

This develops into taking a section of text chosen by either teacher or student. This need only be a half page or so and is best when the chosen text contains a good deal of vocabulary action, that is to say a wide use of adjectives and verb action words. The example below is from our chosen text, *An Inspector Calls*.

Why, a friend of mine went over this new liner last week – the Titanic – she sails next week – forty-six thousand eight hundred tons – New York in five days – and every luxury – and unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable. That's what you've got to keep your eye on, facts like that, progress like that – and not a

few German officers taking nonsense and a few scaremongers here making a fuss about nothing. Now you three young people, just listen to this – and remember what I’m telling you now. In twenty or thirty year’s time – let’s say, in 1940 – you may be giving a little party like this – your son or daughter might be getting engaged – and I tell you, by that time you’ll be living in a world that’ll have forgotten all these capital versus labour agitations and all these silly little war scares. There’ll be peace and prosperity and rapid progress everywhere ...

This is a speech by Mr Birling the family patriarch and a successful self-made man lecturing his wife, children and future son-in-law of the benefits of living in Britain in 1912.

Just as in the previous exercises students take a word each as the text goes around the group. Some will get definite or indefinite articles, prepositions or linking words or repetition but they still need to find some stress on these which may be dictated by the context – eg *twenty* is soon followed by *thirty* (not repetition as such but) a cue to emphasis the word *thirty* in the context.

The final development of this exercise is to get students to take larger and larger sections (two words, to four words etc.) until they can finally take the whole section and deliver it (text in hand if necessary) as a delivered speech. If they have worked on this exercise their intonation and engagement with the meaning and emotion of the text should enable them to now deliver a convincing and nuanced oral piece of work.

2. Phrasing

In this section students learn how to use tone, pace and volume to enrich speaking intonation. Similarly to word colouring students are encouraged to suit the use of phrasing to the meaning of the text.

Tone is similar also to word colouring as it is the “colour” or mood of the text, pace is how fast or slow you speak and volume can vary from whisper to full voice.

Students work in small groups and take a section of text and initially take a sentence each. The first student speaks with whichever tone, pace or volume they choose. The next student has to then speak the following sentence but change the tone, pace and volume so it contrasts with what has gone before. At this stage they do not have to marry any of the three requirements to meaning in the meaning but simply explore and contrast.

The next exercise requires some creative thought and writing from students in that they must (in groups of three) compose three short news articles. These can be completely made up but should be contrasting in content – eg the first article may be some news about a new discovery in science combatting a disease, second tragic news of deaths in some part of the world due to flooding or some other natural catastrophe and a final article may relate to a sports event such as who scored the winning goal for a particular team in a final. Each need be no more than 4 or 5 sentences, whatever is enough to tell a short story. Each student takes one article and recites it matching tone, pace and volume to the meaning of the text. Each subsequent student does the same with the next article. There should be clear differences between each so that, for example, the student relaying the sad news of the natural disaster will have a respectful tone with a slow pace of delivery and more hushed volume which then leads into a more upbeat in tone, pace and volume recounting of successful sporting news. Once the work has been completed by a group of 3 each student then recites/reads the text by themselves maintaining the variations in phrasing that was achieved as a group. At all stage students must be reminded and encouraged to remember and employ the skills they learned from the word colouring exercise above.

Students then go back to the text of their chosen book and practice on a section from it. So if using the speech above from *An Inspector Calls* students would now be expected to recite/read a section and bring it to life using all their intonation skills learned from the two exercises. If successful students

should now be speaking with much richer intonation that equally enhances communication, gives a sense of authenticity and engages the listener.

3. Hot seating

This is a theatre exercise much used in actor training as well as by professional theatre directors when exploring character and text. It can be used for similar results with language students and should also provide a much more intimate involvement with the text.

Each student is assigned a character from the text. This can be decided partly by student choice and a teacher's need to cover as many characters in the text as possible. If one character is covered by more than one student it is not a problem and could in fact serve as a bonus as by contrasting and comparing their explorations new discoveries of text and character may result.

Once a character has been chosen the student has a homework task of following the character through the story. This can be observing their plot line, the things they do and say and also what other people say about them. They can take notes but in essence the student needs to get an intuitive feeling for the character.

Back in class the hot seating can then take place. A chair is put in front of the class and students told that as soon as they sit on that chair they must become the character in the fiction. They should even think about how the character would sit and respond vocally. Questions are then fielded from the other students. These should start from a general base, so, for example the student/character could be asked "*What's your favourite colour*" or "*favourite dessert*" or "*where do you like to go on vacation*". Students will initially protest, well, it doesn't say in the text and this is where their imagination and intuition needs to be engaged. They must find their answers from what they feel the character would like and it gets them into an area where they are thinking creatively and intimately about their chosen character. Questions can then grow more specific to the text – why did you do this, what do you think of so and so etc. Students will break out of character from time to time but the

longer that they can be encouraged to stay in character the more fulfilling is the student's exploration.

There should be a post exercise reflection and discussion time where students can compare and contrast notes and put into context what discoveries on text and character they have made.

Through all of the three exercises above there can be accompanying grammar exercises that organically emerge and can be addressed by the teacher.

Together these exercises cover grammar skills, speaking and presentational skills as well as allowing students to take a more in depth and intimate look at the text.

WRITTEN FOLLOW UP EXERCISE TO EXAMINE TEXT CONTENT

In order to develop further students' language skills it is advisable to finalise the work on the literary piece with a written task. The task must be a creative piece of writing related to the text studied in the classroom and thoroughly discussed. It can be written in any appropriate text type – diary, blog, dramatic scene, newspaper interview, speech etc. - and introduces a good basis for the teacher to explain different written forms and types. More imaginative students can benefit from such creative tasks as writing a letter or a diary on behalf of one of the characters or composing an interview with a character.

The work should be accompanied by a rationale of around 150 words in which they state their aims, areas of investigation and how they have accomplished their aims. The whole task should display a student's deeper understanding of the text or explore some cultural aspect in the work. So, for example, a student working on our selected text of *An Inspector Calls* may have an aim of exploring how the class structure in Britain affects attitudes between people from different classes. This could be accomplished by having one character write a letter to another character in the play displaying their attitude/s to other characters within the work.

The teacher can determine the task more specifically, assigning the format, the length of the written work and the time to complete the task. In this respect, the task can be a final assessment of the work done in class (during a half or

whole semester) as it should demonstrate the deep understanding of the text and its cultural context. It enables students to summarise all the knowledge gained and the skills developed.

Together all the above exercises cover grammar skills, speaking, writing and presentational skills as well as allowing students to take a more in depth and intimate look at the text.

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