

CAPE Alumni Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk

CAPE Internet Talk was started as part of CAPE follow-up activities to continue ties with CAPE alumni and those who are interested in professional development in English teaching. It is hoped that this would increase our bond and aloha among former participants, and that the information in the TALK would help our alumni and friends/members review what they know and deepen their understanding of issues and interest in the ESL field.

“It’s certainly been nice to see you”: Using Plays to Develop Sociolinguistic Competence

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Many ESL and EFL texts on the market today include a focus on teaching learners how to use English appropriately in everyday conversation. Often these books have chapters on topics such as Greetings, Complimenting, Turn Taking, Rejoinders, and so on. Typically the chapters begin with a dialogue, provide students with useful expressions, and then include role-playing activities to help students practice a particular speech act. Using English appropriately in social situations (what is sometimes termed sociolinguistic competence) is certainly an important aspect of language learning. Central to the idea of sociolinguistic competence is Grice’s (1975) idea that speakers in a conversation typically operate under what he calls the co-operative principle, that is, in order to effectively communicate, speakers typically say things that are true, say only as much as is needed, say things that are relevant to the topic, and try to be clear. Whereas these principles are likely true in many languages and cultures, what English learners may not know is what is considered relevant or what is considered of sufficient length in some English-speaking social situations. In addition, English learners may not know what level of formality to use in particular social situations.

Unfortunately, many current approaches to teaching sociolinguistic competence often do not provide students with enough information to know what is an appropriate response in some situations (e.g., typically in English in refusing an invitation it is considered polite to offer a reason for refusing). Furthermore, students are frequently not provided with sufficient information to know when to use a particular form (e.g., “I’m sorry” as opposed to “I apologize”). Finally, many role-playing activities do not include sufficient detail for students to know what the people in the role play are like or what relationship they have with one another; hence students have little basis on which to judge what level of formality is appropriate. This article presents an alternative approach to developing students’ sociolinguistic competence, namely using plays. In order to illustrate the value of using plays to teach sociolinguistic competence, the article describes several classroom activities that can be used with plays and concludes with general principles for developing such activities.

USING PLAYS IN THE CLASSROOM

Plays versus natural conversation

Plays, of course, differ from real communication in significant ways. As Simpson (1997) points out, the most obvious difference between the two is that characters in a play are not real

people. Whereas natural communication is straightforward face-to-face conversation, in plays the communication is more complex. “This is because there are two communicative layers at work in drama discourse....On the one hand, there is interaction within a play: this is the character-to-character dialogue which is displayed on stage or in the text. On the other, there is communication between the dramatist and audience or reader” (p. 164).

Nevertheless, plays can provide a rich context for examining aspects of natural communication like the sequencing of conversations, the stated and implied meanings of the speaker, and the use of appropriate language in conversational exchanges. There are several advantages to using plays as opposed to textbook dialogues and exercises. First, playwrights, particularly those who write successful plays, are professional writers who have mastered the skill of writing natural dialogues. Second, the play itself provides a great deal of information on the setting of the interactions, the characters involved in the exchanges, and their relationship with one another. In this way, they provide a detailed context for examining the appropriateness of how something is said. And finally, plays provide an imaginative context for students to practice using English in appropriate ways. In some cases students may feel more comfortable engaging in role plays, particularly those performed in front of their classmates, when they are an imaginary character rather than when they are themselves. As a way of demonstrating these advantages to using plays, let us consider a particular one-act play.

Predicting the Script

One advantage in using a one-act play is that the list of characters involved is typically limited. Most characters are central to the play and are developed in sufficient detail that students get a clear sense of what the characters are like and hence, can make predictions about what these characters might say or do in other situations. “The Still Alarm” is a one-act play written by George S. Kaufman, a well-known American playwright. The play has five characters: Ed and Bob, (two friends), The Bellboy, and Two Firemen. The play takes place in a hotel room. Given the list of characters, the setting, and the title, the teacher might begin by having students predict what the play is about, what these five characters might say to one another, and what level of formality they might use with one another. The activity could be structured around questions like the following to be answered either individually or in pairs.

1. Based on the characters, setting, and title of the play, write a short description of what you think the play is about.
2. Based on your ideas of what the play is about, write a short exchange that you think might occur in the play. Be sure to consider the relationship of the characters in writing what the characters actually say.

The purpose of this initial activity is to highlight for students the fact that they have a sense of what conversational exchanges might occur in particular situations. As English learners, what they now need to know is how these patterns of conversation are enacted in English.

Rethinking the Script



The play begins with a “vital note,” which provides readers with essential information regarding the tone of the play. It reads: “It is important that the entire play should be acted calmly and politely, in the manner of an English drawing-room comedy. No actor ever raises his voice; every line must be read as though it were an invitation to a cup of tea. If this direction is disregarded the play has no point at all” (Cerf & Carmell, 1963, p. 288). Unlike many dialogue introductions, this introductory note signals to students that what follows is both imaginary and very formal. Such information is very useful in helping students assess the appropriateness of the exchanges in the play. The play opens as Ed is putting on his overcoat to leave the hotel room:

Ed. Well, Bob, it’s certainly been nice to see you again.

Bob. It was nice to see *you*.

Ed. You come to town so seldom. I hardly ever get the chance to...

Bob. Well, you know how it is. A business trip is always more or less of a bore.

Ed. Next time you’ve got to come out to the house.

Bob. I want to come out. I just had to stick around the hotel this trip.

Ed. Oh, I understand. Well, give my best to Edith. (p. 288)

Based on this opening exchange, teachers might begin by asking students what they think Ed and Bob are like and how long they have known each other. If they suggest things like middle-aged, upper-class, formal, and business acquaintances who have known each other for some time, teachers should ask students what in the exchange led them to these conclusions. Hopefully, students will point to phrases such as “It’s certainly been nice to see you,” “It was nice to see you,” and “Give my best to Edith,” all formal ways taking leave. If this is not evident to students, then the short exchange provides the context for teachers to emphasize the formality of these phrases. At this point, teachers might have students look at the script they have written and see if they would make any changes on it based on the opening scene.

The play continues when Bob remembers he wants to show Ed the blueprints for his new house. Just then, the bellboy knocks on the door to announce that the hotel is on fire. Here teachers might ask students what they would expect Bob and Ed to say given what they know of them from the opening of the play. While it is likely that there would be a variety of responses to this question, most would agree that whatever comments Bob and Ed make, their lines would reflect the formal nature of their characters. Here the teacher might give students the following lines of the play between Bob, Ed, and the bellboy and ask the students to put them in the order they occur. This activity serves two purposes. First, it demonstrates for students that they already have a good deal of knowledge about the orderliness of conversational exchanges—that questions warrant a response, that responses are relevant to the question, and so on. Second, this particular exchange would likely not meet their expectations of what they think would be said when someone announces a fire, a fact that contributes to the humor of the play.

Well! We’d better leave.

It looks pretty bad, sir.

The hotel is on fire, sir.

We think so—yes sir

Well—is it bad?



Yes, sir.
What's that?
This hotel?
The hotel is on fire.
You mean it's going to burn down.ⁱ

The playful tone of “The Still Alarm” continues when Ed asks the bellboy how bad the fire is. When the bellboy responds that it has reached the floor right underneath, Bob comments, “Still all right up above, though” and proceeds to tell the bellboy to call the fire department. Ed, however, comments:

Ed. Wait a minute. I can do better than that for you. (*To the boy*). Ring through to the Chief, and tell him that Ed Jamison told you to telephone him. (*To Bob*). We went to school together, you know.

Bob. That's fine. (*To the boy*). Now, get that right. Tell the Chief that Mr. Jaimson said to ring him.

Ed. *Ed Jamison*.

Bellboy. Yes, sir. (p. 290)

Here teachers might ask two questions: first, what makes the exchange humorous and second, what makes the situation formal. An answer to the first question helps students see that in natural conversation people expect certain things to happen. In other words, conversations are “complicated, but orderly and rule-governed” (Burton, 1982, p. 86). The answer to the second question highlights for students the point made earlier that certain forms of language reflect a particular level of formality.

The play proceeds on a playful note when Ed points out that the room is getting stuffy and calls the front desk to get some ice. Bob, on the other hand, states that he can't move hotels since he will never get his mail if he goes to another hotel. The play comes to a close when the front desk calls to ask if the firemen can come up to the room. When the firemen arrive and identify themselves, Bob replies, “A great pleasure, I assure you. Really must apologize for the condition of this room, but—“ and then adds, “May I present a friend of mine, Mr. Ed Jamison—“ Again the humor of the play rests on two factors: first that what occurs violates what one would normally expect to happen under the circumstances and second, Bob, true to his character, continues to express a highly formal greeting and apology. The play ends when Ed offers the firemen a cigar and when no match can be found to light the cigar, one of the firemen goes to the window to light the cigar. Then they all sit down and one of the firemen who brought his violin to practice since he can never play at home, plays “Keep the Home Fires Burning.” Then, as all the characters are wiping their brows from the heat of the fire, the curtain falls.

Re-writing the script

At this point, reading the play has hopefully achieved several objectives. First, it has engaged learners in a pleasurable and imaginative experience. Second, it has required students to make predictions about conversations in English involving both what might be said in particular

situations and how it might be said by specific people. Ideally, this activity has convinced students that they already have a sense of what to expect in particular social situations. What they may lack, however, is the knowledge of how to undertake these conversations in English in ways that are considered appropriate in particular situations among specific individuals. It is here that teachers can use the play to further develop students' sociolinguistic competence.

To begin, the teacher could have students write a short script between Ed and Bob that might take place in a sequel to the play—perhaps Bob and Ed's meeting several months later in another hotel. Unlike some dialogue writing activities that occur in traditional textbooks, students in this case have a good sense of what Bob and Ed are like. They know, for example, that they would likely say unconventional things and would do so in a formal manner. Such an activity would encourage students to draw on their knowledge of formal expressions of conversational English. Another alternative would be for students to take the same script and to change the characters of Bob and Ed to young, middle-class men or women and have students modify what they think these characters might say in specific passages in the play. For example, students might rewrite the leave taking at the opening of the play as it might occur if Bob and Ed were younger characters. Another possibility would be for students to rewrite parts of the script so that they were more in keeping with what they would typically expect to happen in a particular context. For example, students might rewrite the passage of the play when the bellboy comes to tell Bob and Ed that the hotel is on fire. The culmination of all of these script-writing activities could be for students to role play their script for the class.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Certainly many teachers share the belief that in order for their students to be competent users of English, students need to develop their sociolinguistic competence. Plays offer several benefits to reaching this goal. To begin, plays provide an extended context of interaction. Hence, students are provided with a good deal of relevant information to make generalization about what is appropriate language use in English conversations. Second, as has been shown in this article, plays can be used to develop a variety of during-reading and post-reading activities that can extend students' sociolinguistic awareness in terms of such things as the sequencing of conversations, relevant and expected responses, and levels of formality in spoken English. Perhaps, most importantly plays provide students with an imaginary context in which to practice conversational exchanges in English.

In designing activities to accompany the use of plays in the classroom, the most important factor to keep in mind is that students already come to the classroom with an understanding that conversations are orderly and patterned exchanges. Based on their first language competence, they know that how conversations are enacted depends on the purpose of the exchange and the role relationship of the participants. What they now need to learn is how these patterns might differ in English. As extended discourse, plays provide students with a great detail of evidence to form generalizations about English conversations. Examining these extended conversations in the classroom will hopefully help students gain a better understanding of what "It's certainly been nice to see you" communicates about the speaker, his age, formality and relationship with his friend.

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Cerf, B. & Carmell, V. H. (Ed.) (1963). 24 favorite one-act plays. New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc.

Grice, H.P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (Eds.), Syntax and semantics 3: Speech acts. (pp. 41-58) New York: Academic Press.

Simpson, P. (1997). Language through literature. London: Routledge.

RESOURCES

For ideas on various ways of using plays in the language classroom, see the chapters on using plays in the following books.

Collie, J. & Slater, S. (1987). Literature in the language classroom. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lazar, G. (1993). Literature and language teaching. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

For sources of one-act plays, see the following collections.

Cerf, B. & Carmell, V. H. (Ed.) (1963). 24 favorite one-act plays. New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc.

Halpern, D. (Ed.) (1997). Plays in one act. New York: Ecco Press.

Kozelka, P. (Ed.) (1997). Fifteen American one-act plays. New York: Pocket Books.

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ⁱ The script in the play reads as follows.
Bellboy. The hotel is on fire, sir.
Bob. What's that?
Bellboy. The hotel is on fire.
Ed. This hotel?



Bellboy. Yes, sir

Bob. Well—is it bad?

Bellboy. It looks pretty bad, sir.

Ed. You mean it's going to burn down?

Bellboy. We think so—yes, sir.

Bob. Well! We'd better leave.

ESL Classroom Games For Beginner English Class. A list of English games for kids which are perfect for children who are beginner English speakers and still learning the basics of the language. 1: Warm up games with Total Physical Response (get up and move). Pick an English song your class has been practicing and use that to stop and play the music, this is reinforcement of what you have already been learning in the classroom. You can also find a list of recommended nursery rhymes and songs for beginners here. If you have a large English class, have the students alternate by changing kids when the last one to sit in their chair has answered their question.