

## **The Importance of Dramatic Kinesthetic Arts in Higher Education ESL Communication and Conversation Classrooms**

Stephen Pottinger  
Chubu University

*Key words:* Drama, kinesthetic learning, acting, confidence development,  
warm-up, spontaneity, improvisation.

### **Introduction**

*“THE MORE REGIONS OF THE BRAIN THAT STORE DATA ABOUT A subject, the more interconnection there is. This redundancy means students will have more opportunities to pull up all of those related bits of data from their multiple storage areas in response to a single cue. This cross-referencing of data means we have learned, rather than just memorized.”* (Willis, 2008, p. 83)

The use of dramatic kinesthetic arts in the classroom can be a very effective part of a teacher's repertoire. This is particularly true when applied to the development of spontaneous thinking, creativity and self confidence in conversation. It is of the upmost importance that students not only memorize, but also learn how to easily access stored information correctly and utilize it on the fly. Dramatic kinesthetic arts, when used correctly in conjunction with other teaching methods make sure that students learn and reinforce language kinesthetically which in turn leads to cross-referencing and better storage of data.

A big issue in the Higher Education ESL classroom is getting students to execute and utilize 10 years of amassed English acquisition in a spontaneous and natural fashion.

Potential classroom challenges include students being shy, having a lack of confidence in their skills and in many cases an inability to quickly access the vault of “memorized” sentences and phrases which are stored in their brains. Standing up in front of a room full of strangers or a class of their own peers to give a presentation or simply talk about their weekend in English causes stress and worry with many students. In fact, there are many cases where language ability takes second place to natural self-confidence issues. A student may also be shy or underconfident in their own ability as a direct result of a traumatic moment caused by peers or a teacher in a past English lesson/school. These issues can also take a back seat to how the student or students feels at the time of the current class or how a particular student feels about having to talk about a certain topic or issue. Perhaps the days lesson topic is a sensitive issue for the student? The student is worn down? Too much homework? Too much “part-time” job? Too much food at lunch? Lack of sleep? Lack of Nutrition? Scared of making mistakes in general? Make-ups, breakups, squabbles between classmates or simply an unwillingness to talk about themselves and their own personal free time, make up a lot of factors that can affect the student’s performance and the classroom vibe during a communicative activity. Outside influences are brought into the classroom every day and can distract from the learning process in many ways.

This paper will give methods, reasoning, and examples of how the students, the teacher and the space (the classroom), can all interact together utilizing Kinesthetic dramatic art techniques to create a safer and more relaxed class ambience which, in turn drives spontaneous creativity and self confidence in communication and conversation.

### **What are Kinesthetic Dramatic arts?**

*“The kinesthetic arts play a powerful role as a universal language, with a symbolic way of representing the world. They let us communicate with others, demonstrate human experiences, show insights, and solve common problems. Kinesthetic arts*

*also allow us to better understand other cultures and provide for our health and emotional expression”.* (Jensen, 2001, p. 71)

Over decades, there has been much debate over different learning styles, which ones are best and, even if they (learning styles) are legitimate or not. The main different types of learning styles are Visual, Auditory, Reading/Writing, and Kinesthetic. Kinesthetics apply the use of movement to aid learning. “Kinesthetic learners” do best when taught using activities and styles that allow for body movement and “hands on” based learning exercises.

*“The kinesthetic arts can be dramatic (dance, drama, mime, theater, musicals), industrial (sculpting, auto repair, design, electronics, building, metal or wood working), or recreational (recess, classroom games, physical education, sports, active health programs).”* (Jensen, 2001, p. 71)

Kinesthetic learning is used all the time in younger education. Flash Cards, drawing, crafting, mimicking and singing are all excellent methods to aid learners in language acquisition. Drama in the form of fun, bright musical theater productions are commonplace in Elementary education. However, somewhere along the ESL education journey, all the bright colors and fun activities are replaced with black and white, small print, spoon feeding, robotic English and memory recall tests. In the realms of Higher Education, Kinesthetic techniques can be found in classes where students perform in role plays, skits, plays, short films and present in front of their peers. It may not be as good as it seems. In many cases, the students are rarely given a foundation in the core techniques, such as vocal production or acting, which are required to successfully produce the above projects to a high standard. An example of this lack of foundation would be a teacher constantly calling out “more volume please!” to the students during a presentation without first teaching the students about the basics of how to safely produce more volume and control the voice as an instrument.

### **Why Apply Kinesthetic Dramatic arts to Communication and Conversation Classes?**

By applying Dramatic Kinesthetic arts into English lessons in Higher Education one can create new learning experiences. As a tool in the teacher's repertoire, Dramatic Kinesthetic Arts, can produce students who are calm, open minded and creative thinkers. The success of many of these exercises and ideas is based on many factors and as a practitioner the teacher may craft and hone Kinesthetic Dramatic arts to any teaching style and class type. One of the biggest factors in the success of these techniques is the performance, energy and presence of the teacher. The teacher should be familiar with theater based acting practices such as character development, voice projection, gravitas, general body animation and movement in order to establish the best kinesthetic connection with the students.

### **The Roles of the Performer and the Spectator**

(Stanton B. Garner, 2018) looks at the relationship between the performers and spectators in theater. His book, *Kinesthetic Spectatorship in the Theater* deals with Cognitive Studies in Literature and Performance which yields many interesting results. He believes that movements on stage have kinesthetic effects on the spectator. He looks at how the audience become co-enactors of dramatic mimesis. In the chapter about language, speech and movement, which "explores the function of language and verbal performance in the kinesthetic interchange between actors and spectators" (Stanton B. Garner, 2018). he talks about being excited or exhausted kinesthetically after watching different actors perform. His witness and description of James Earl Jones's Troy Maxson in the 1987 Broadway production of August Wilson's *Fences* immediately resonate. He describes the performance as being both vocal and physical.

*"Jones used his basso profundo voice, imposing body, and broadly expressive face to assert his stature in the face of everything that has denied it since childhood. His words carried much of his anger, but what gave them their force was the power of his utterance – his mouth and face rounding the vowels, the consonants caressed at times and almost barked out at others, his chest, lungs, and stomach pressing the sounds out of his body like the bellows of a Renaissance organ. To watch Jones's performance – live, as I was able to do during the productions original run, or on a video screen – is to inhabit this kinesthetically eloquence."* (Stanton B. Garner, 2018, p. 192)



Teachers can draw inspiration from this experience. If an audience of spectators is moved by a performance, then surely a class of students (spectators) can be moved or not moved based on the performance of the teacher. There are many other factors and variables involved in concluding whether a class is entertained by the teacher's performance or not, however, kinesthetically, one can see a connection between great performances by great actors connecting and resonating with their audiences and teachers connecting with their students. One may imagine that if James Earl Jones in person, not even in character, armed with a good lesson plan, taught an English communication class he would most likely be able to connect with the students. Therefore, the transaction of kinesthetic energy may be of utmost importance in a classroom setting.

### **Energy Levels**

Having seen the importance of energy transfer between a player and a theater audience it is impossible to ignore that energy levels in the classroom have a direct effect on the quality of the learning. Energy levels in the classroom are dictated by many factors, however, the students and the teacher together, are responsible for the overall group's energy and attitude. Although there are times when the teacher is the performer and the student is the spectator, this relationship changes during a class with students taking on both performer and spectator roles in peer to peer activities and teachers becoming spectators when students are presenting. For now, let's look at how the teacher's energy level can directly affect a class. It requires more energy from the teacher to pull a heavy or quiet class up. On the flipside an active class with a quiet teacher can be just as troublesome. Think of a horse pulling a cart on a hill. Uphill, the cart (difficult students) maybe heavy, however the horse (the teacher) with thought and effort can pull the cart up (this is tiring). On the other side of the hill the cart is heavy (lively students) and the horse (the teacher) may have difficulties controlling and not being run over by the cart. Balance between the teacher and students is key especially when it comes to energy levels within a class. Many regard Kinesthetic learning to consist of physically based exercises in which the students are seen interacting to reinforce and practice a point. However, better results are seen when both teacher and student are working together Kinesthetically. If one applies the words of Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the theater*, 1983 to the subject of communication and conversation based English classes then interesting results can be found. Viola Spolin was and is still on the forefront of Improvisation and acting

techniques in the drama world. She lays out three main points that she believes are essential in keeping activities exciting and alive.

- 1) The importance of group response, in which players see themselves as an organic part of the whole, becoming on body through which all are directly involved in the outcome of playing. Being part of the whole generates trust and frees the player for playing, the many then acting as one.
- 2) The need for players to see themselves and others not as students and teachers but as fellow players, playing on terms of peerage, no matter what their individual ability. Eliminating the roles of teacher and student helps players get beyond the need for approval or disapproval which distracts them from experiencing themselves and solving the problem. There is no right or wrong way to solve the problem; there is only one way - the seeking – in which one learns by going through the process itself.
- 3) The need for players to get out of the head into the space, free from the restricted response of established behavior, which inhibits spontaneity, and to focus on the actual field – SPACE – upon which the playing (energy exchange) takes place between players. Getting out of the head and into the space strengthens the player's ability to perceive and sense the new with the full body. My years of working with the games have shown that this living, organic, non-authoritarian climate can inform the learning process and, in fact, is the only way in which artistic and intuitive freedom can grow. (Spolin, 1999, p. liii) Spolin, 1999, p. liii

This way of thinking has been at the forefront of teaching improvisation and theater techniques within the drama world. There is a great potential to have Conversation and Communication students in Higher Education ESL tackle their challenges in the same way. Models and demonstrations may work in some cases, however in Kinesthetic Dramatic arts, students move into activities without vast explanation and without a model which allows them to learn Kinesthetically, problem-solve, trust the space, trust each other and in many cases produce better and more creative end results. Students have to work together, use intuition, problem solving parts of the brain, and discover the process instead of simply reading or copying the teacher's model. The teacher can monitor, give prompts from the side and feed individual comments such as “*don't forget to ...*” or “*great, let's try to use....*” By the end of the class the students will have stored data in

different places in the brain, accessed previously learned material quickly and conquered the challenge. They will have exceeded their own expectations. All these things become great accomplishments and lead to the release of endorphins and the feeling of success also known as the “aha” moment. Sounds too perfect to be true, right? How can this be set up? Simply put, it is essential to get off to a good start at the beginning of every class in an attempt to lock into a good physical mood and create a clear head space.

### **The importance of Warm-up**

In many aspects of life, we must undergo a ritual of warming up. In sports, there are a myriad of stretches to be performed to 1) improve performance and 2) reduce risk of injury. In Singing the voice is used lightly and carefully at first to warm up before work is done to improve or better voice production technique. One could consider a morning coffee as a warm-up for many who start the day slowly. Warmups are performed in the dramatic arts world to prepare and ready the body for physical movement or development, voice control and mind matters. There is rarely a language lesson that starts without a warm-up of some sorts. A warm-up that brings the group together and focuses the mind is a great way to start the class. In order to experience joyous rapture, we must first find calm and silence. We require both Ying and Yang to achieve balance. A breathing based focus activity gives us a chance to find calm inside the classroom. Once everyone is calm and collected, a more physical warmup can take place.

### **Let's get Physical with the brain**

From a cognitive point of view a physical warmup fires the body and brain into action more than anything else. A new exciting mystery warmup every lesson allows students to feel excitement and enthusiasm for what is to come. Physical movement, laughter and excitement are extremely important as they allow endorphins to flow.

Endorphins are the body's own natural “feel good” neurotransmitters. When people talk about the “runner's high” (which is the feeling of happiness that is felt after a bout of exercise) they are referring to the flood of endorphins to the brain. Recent studies have started to look at exercise and the release of endorphins in relation to learning. Early signs show that physical activity is essential to brain development and when students feel good, they learn more. In relation to physical exercise Dr. John J. Ratey believes that it improves learning on three levels.

*"First, it optimizes your mind-set to improve alertness, attention, and motivation; second, it prepares and encourages nerve cells to bind to one another, which is the cellular basis for logging in new information; and third, it spurs the development of new nerve cells from stem cells in the hippocampus." (Ratey, 2008, p. 53)*

A new warmup at the beginning of every lesson excites and prepares the class to learn. The important thing is to try to get some physical movement in there.

I have found out firsthand that getting a class of 20 university students to go for a run comes with a lot of challenges, does not spark joy and probably is best avoided. Feel free to try running, press ups or squats if you feel brave, however, below are some drama-based warmup ideas that have worked and are relatively easy for anyone to try. They are separated into three parts. A) Focus, B) Kinesthetic and C) Vocal. I have included vocal exercises here because they are essential to building good vocal technique, muscle and an understanding of what volume and speaking out is all about. One warm up from each area should be used to get the class off on the right foot.

### **Focus**

Deep breathing exercises may sound like they should be left in the Yoga clinic, but recent studies have shown a direct link between deep breathing and levels of a natural chemical messenger in the brain called Noradrenaline.

*"The research shows for the first time that breathing – a key element of meditation and mindfulness practices – directly affects the levels of a natural chemical messenger in the brain called noradrenaline. This chemical messenger is released when we are challenged, curious, exercised, focused or emotionally aroused, and, if produced at the right levels, helps the brain grow new connections, like a brain fertilizer. The way we breathe, in other words, directly affects the chemistry of our brains in a way that can enhance our attention and improve our brain health"* (Tyrrell, 2018, para. 3)

Deep Breathing has many names including, Diaphragmatic Breathing, abdominal breathing, belly breathing and paced respiration, but they all refer to the same style of breathing. Taking slow breaths (4-10 breaths a minute) calms emotions, reduces stress,

allows the body to relax, enhances focus and improves overall health. Sounds like the perfect way to start a class, right? It is, especially when we consider that many people these days are inundated with stress, deadlines and busy schedules. Average breathing is 10-20 times a minute which is high. Under stress a person often breaths 10-20 times a minute and the breaths are shallow and do not allow for healthy oxygenation and circulation of blood to the body. If you breathe deeply and slowly for over a minute the body and mind regain composure, reduce stress and prepare for active learning.

*Diaphragmatic Breathing.* Have all the students stand up.

- Inhale through the nose so that the stomach sticks out and the lungs get full.
- Be sure that the shoulders stay down and relaxed.
- Exhale through the mouth whilst tensing the stomach muscles to aid exhalation.
- Repeat 10 times slowly.

Telling the students that the air is colored with their favorite color helps them to visualize the air entering their bodies and going right down into their stomachs (base of their lungs). There are many variations on this exercise, but this is a basic colored air idea. If you have problems understanding the stomach sticking out during inhalation it's easy to show by lying down your back. When lying on your back the stomach will naturally rise when inhaling. Try to replicate this when standing. Slow deep breathing oxygenates the blood, improves circulation and calms nerves/reduces stress.

*Box Breathing.* Have all the students stand up. This is nearly the same as Diaphragmatic Breathing (above) except with Box Breathing there are 4 slow counts of 4 seconds.

- 4 seconds – Inhale (stomach sticks out)
  - 4 seconds – hold breath in
  - 4 seconds – Exhale
  - 4 seconds – hold breath out
- (repeat 10 times slowly)

Any slow controlled breathing exercise, over a minute, has great effects on calming and focusing the body. It is a great way to get focused and prepare the body and brain for learning. It also gives everyone a chance to focus on the class, the space and not what needs to be done after the class. Thinking about what has to be done after the class does not make the class time speed up, so I always try to remind the students softly to clear their minds and focus on their breathing. I find this helps. I also find that if I join them, close my eyes and start the exercise most students will follow and end up really appreciating the time to relax and clear the mind.

### **Kinesthetic**

*Invisible Ball Throw.* Have all the students stand up and spread out in the largest circle that the classroom can accommodate. There are variations of this game, but the basic idea is getting the class to pass/throw an imaginary ball or object to each other. The goal is to get the students to act and re-act with each other and not feel embarrassed about pretending to throw and catch an imaginary object. It is best to start with a simple imaginary object that the students all know. For example, an imaginary tennis ball. Throw the ball (in any fashion) to one of the students. The student should catch it and throw it to another student. Hopefully the students will start to play, drop the ball and get creative.



*Figure 1. Invisible Ball Throw (Chubu University, 2020).*

Variations on this game include having the ball change size and shape in the air before the next student catches it.

Encourage changes of the object's volume, mass and even mess around with gravity. The game may start slowly but as the students start "playing" it becomes quite lively. More "balls" can be added throughout the game which increases the concentration and difficulty. Having the students say vocabulary words or the color of the ball as they pass the ball can also spice up this game.

Students can practice words, conversations or phrases whilst moving their bodies and bonding with their classmates. This warmup gets everyone out of their seats and increases class energy and teamwork. It also breaks down nerves and allows students to practice and get used to body movement and acting with their peers.

*Knee Bend Conversation.* This warm-up activity is simple and can excite the students quite a lot. First have the students stand in two lines facing each other. If the students hold their arms out to the side and turn around 360 degrees, they should be able to touch their fingertips together with the person next to them and in front of them. You can make variations on this formation. The students are told to enjoy a conversation about a topic, perhaps one that has been covered many times is best, as this can get strenuous. The students sit on invisible chairs making sure that their knees are bent at 45 degrees. Start the timer and say that they have to talk in pairs for 1 minute. Change partners and repeat the activity as many times as you feel is necessary to get the heartbeat up and keep checking to make sure that students are not squatting all the way down or almost standing. The best way to judge how long to do this activity is to take part in it. When your heartbeat is racing, and your legs are numb it is time to move on.

*Mirror Partner.* Have the students stand up and make pairs. Partners can be assigned, or the students can decide for themselves. Once in pairs the students can find a space in the classroom. One student in each pair is the leader and the other student is the mirror reflection. The leader begins by moving their own body in various ways. Hands up, leg out, sitting, reaching etc. The mirror student has to follow exactly. After a couple of minutes, you can swap the leader and the mirror students' roles. This exercise usually starts off with the leader not knowing what to do and soon running out of movement repertoire. Push the time past this failing point and the students will have to think of new moves. Coach from the side, urging and encouraging the students to think "anything is ok". If this exercise is performed as a ritual at the beginning of most lessons, the students break down their feelings of embarrassment, better their ability to think on the fly (which in turn helps them with quick thinking in conversation activities) and move physically to

get the body warm and the blood flowing. As the students gain confidence over time, the movements and repertoire become rather complex which results in students enjoying and priding themselves in this activity.



Figure 2. Mirror Activity (Chubu University, 2020).

*Pick a Flower.* This is an exercise which focuses on visualizing your circumstances. Circumstances on the stage are the things around you, more specifically the things around you that can't be seen. Being able to visualize things that are not physically there (invisible) can help the student to move out of the classroom and into created spaces in their minds. Have the students stand up and find a space. Tell the students to close their eyes and picture a flower in their minds. Once they have seen a flower, tell them to open their eyes and visualize the flower growing from the ground in the space (the classroom). They should now go and pick the flower, hold it and then look at it closely, taking in all its beauty and detail. One by one or in groups they should show their flower to their peers and describe it aloud.





Figure 3. Flower Visualization (Chubu University, 2020).

Doing this activity with no model is a great way to see the Language level of the class. After doing the activity once I would offer side coaching such as “It doesn’t have to be a pretty flower” “Is it alive or dead?” “Look deeper” “feel it in your hands” “what does it smell like?” “ouch that stings when you touch it” “More detail” “Can you eat it?” etc. After a couple of times I may take out a plastic flower from my bag and pass it around and discuss with the group ways in which we could describe a flower in more detail.

### Vocal exercises

*Projection Tongue Twister.* Have the students stand. Be sure to coach and encourage them to stand with good posture. Practice a Tongue Twister and go over pronunciation etc. Have the students stand against the wall in a line facing the opposite wall in the classroom. The challenge is to combine a good deep breath and use the stomach muscles to project a good strong voice. Have the students start with soft voices

at first to warm Up and gradually have the students practice projecting the tongue twister in a loud voice. A trick is I like to use a metronome set slow at first to have the students stay in time with each other. Over a few minutes I will start and stop the activity, but each time I will speed up the metronome. Soon the students will be projecting, annunciating and having a great time as the speed gets faster and faster.

*Distance conversation.* Have the students make pairs and have one student from each pair lined up along one wall. The other student should be lined up against the opposite wall in the classroom. Have them facing their pair member. The students must now engage in a conversation. Deep breathing and voice projection is important in this exercise. Students will struggle to hear each other over the other students and will have to speak clearly and listen carefully. (This exercise is very difficult with masks on but still very worthwhile)

Coach from the side and make sure that teams don't give up. Encourage the teams to think of new things to convers about. Make sure that the pairs don't start creeping closer together. This activity gets the energy up and the students enjoy the experience.



Figure 4. Distance Conversation (Chubu University, 2020).

### **The importance of acting in the classroom**

There is a plethora of studies which have looked at drama as a tool in the classroom and have drawn the conclusion that drama is useful but not for everyone. A drive to force shy students into drama by making them act in front of other people can have very negative effects. In this paper the argument I put forward is not to have every student

putting on plays and reciting scenes from Shakespeare, but rather focusing on how drama and acting used in doses, can be beneficial to building confidence in students, improving on the spot thinking and developing intuition. A big challenge for many EFL students is the fear of failing and the fear of failing in front of their peers. Bringing acting into the classroom by simply handing out parts for a production of Peter Pan may not be the way forward. (especially for a communicative or conversation-based class). This is because at heart it is still a repetition exercise. The dramatically inclined teacher's focus should lie on improvisation, creativity, building safe class environments and providing feedback in a way where students feel safe to make mistakes and try new things. Going back to Viola Spolin's thoughts on a "non-authoritarian" and an organic classroom, will surely help to create a great learning environment.

I have seen skits used in the classroom before. A skit is a fun activity for sure, but without training, the students lack the skills required to write or present or act or project the voice or move on stage or see circumstances or visualize or make backstory. Students struggle with the acting side of the activity whilst talking or reading in front of the class. It can be scary and tough for shy students who are just dragged along with their group, given small roles and don't feel any benefit. For some of the confident or popular students it is a chance to try and get them interested in English class. However, more so than not the characters played by the popular and confident students, amusing as they tend to be, don't have a lot of English Speaking involved and focus more on actions. Without significant focus and time being spent on the most basic acting techniques how can we expect students and/or teachers to tackle acting in the classroom? The truth is that acting is not for everyone. Acting is a very complex beast and care must be taken when introducing students to it. So, how can we successfully use acting in the classroom? The answer is to use acting techniques and methods as tools to keep classes kinesthetically alive and exciting. Acting, when adapted and sweetened has a big place in the classroom.

### **The World is a Stage – Stage craft & Visualization**

Our bodies are in tune with things around us. We can sense an upset friend, an angry dog, bad news coming our way without the need for a word. Gestures and body language give us colors which play a huge part in our communication. Through acting, new colors can be discovered, honed and rehearsed to naturalize spoken language. Visualization activates multiple parts of the brain and creates opportunity for more play

in the learning arena. We all have the power to visualize and create fantasy, however, we may have forgotten about it. Think of a 4-year-old child playing with toys. Think of all the things that the child is seeing that we don't see as adult watchers. The child even goes so far as to make their own sound effects to complete the effect. At the peak of play the child has empowered themselves to be in complete control of this alternate universe. They have created, decided the rules of the game and have interacted with multiple characters, vocally, mentally and physically. When students sit at their desks with only their pencils moving, there is a missed opportunity to combine Kinesthetic body movements with language. Earlier in the paper we saw an exercise where the student described a flower. Imagine the same exercise where the student sat at the desk and just described a flower... The student misses out on connecting multiple activities to aid cognitive response. When the student stands up and performs the exercise, they are practicing basic acting techniques such as visualization, voice projection, improvisation and kinesthetic body languages and gestures. As they improve at these techniques the students become visually and verbally more interesting as English Speakers. They become confident performers.

### **Movement**

Being able to move naturally on stage is not an easy task. Students get a lot of enjoyment from walking around the class in different ways if given the opportunity to play. In reality, how one stands, walks, moves and conducts themselves physically in front of people can make or break a presentation. Body movement whilst speaking English (multi-tasking) can activate more areas of the brain, increase blood circulation and ensure active learning is taking place. A great example of a body movement exercise is to have students walk around the classroom whilst listening to a story. They must try to act out the physical aspects that they hear in the story. "In the morning I woke up because I fell out of bed. I was pretty angry, but I wandered over to the sink in the corner of the room and grabbed my toothbrush. My head really hurt and as I leaned on the corner of the sink, I brushed my teeth. The sink is a little low for me so my back hurts too etc." After the first story or throughout the second story there is a great opportunity for side coaching. "Does your back hurt?" "Are you wandering?" "What's wandering?" "How are you holding your toothbrush" With this activity you are training the students to understand, converse, visualize, see their circumstances and act spontaneously. It is important to teach the students to treat each conversation activity as a chance to play. The

benefits of reinforcing and teaching through Kinesthetic dramatic arts can easily be seen when the students are playing. To see the students getting into their imaginary worlds, whilst working together and speaking English gives off great energy and fosters great creativity. The benefits of these types of activities speak for themselves.

### **Voice Control**

The breathing exercises and vocal exercises listed above really take care of the basics of building good voice control. By running these activities every lesson, the students will grow stronger. The voice, like any other group of muscles needs training. Weekly voice exercises and good breathing will help the students project their voices better. A misconception is that a well projected voice is only useful for the stage. That is not true. It will increase confidence simply because the student will be heard when they speak and not have to deal with people asking them to repeat everything they say. Stronger vocal cords and better breath control will also allow a larger palette of vocal colors that can be accessed. Loud voice, soft voice, clear and well pronounced whispers, a serious voice and a fun voice are just a few of the colors which could be used in anything from reading to performing a monologue. Rather than expecting students just to be able to do it, a place can be given to experience, practice and develop these skills. All of these aspects of body language, voice control and a connection to what the speaker is saying are crucial blocks in building a confident English speaker.

### **The Importance of The Space**

Not all classrooms are created equal, but no matter what you have it's important to try to work with the space. A classroom is often a room with desks where the teacher is at the front and the students all face the teacher. There are ways to use the space not only as a space, but for valuing the space as something more. The space is the place where the lesson is going to happen. It is worth creating a space that can help the students and the teacher get into the mood together. There is no correct "one rules all" answer for this, but I like to move around a lot during the class and mix things up. Students can sit in a big circle if there is the space and the teacher can teach from the middle of the classroom. This makes it super easy to connect with everyone in the class and it also means that the students are naturally looking at each other. Remember Viola Spolin's idea of the teacher and students forming a class group as one. Students that look at each other are generally

more willing to connect with each other than those that are just checking out the backs of other heads. One thing that I find to be fun is to alter the light settings for different activities. Dimming the lights in the classroom can help create a warmer tone and a safer space for the group. The safer the space the more the students will extend into the activity. Talking about the space with respect during the warmup also helps the students step into a new world which you, as a team, are trying to build. The students will definitely think that your class is different as a result of these changes. That's great news because students remember more when things are different. The space can be equally powerful for keeping any Kinesthetic Dramatics separate from other methods of study. Success has been found in setting timers in order to keep changing the lessons activities to prevent stale minds, however changing the dynamics of the space will also keep the students on their toes. Students can be moved around different parts of the room based on the activities, or the light settings can be changed during the lesson to signal changes in pace. The possibilities are endless and if respecting the space and using it as a tool within the realm of Kinesthetic dramatic arts is a factor the students will appreciate it.

### **Re-design the classroom virtually**

A great activity which uses the space and helps to teach the students to connect to the space and visualize other possibilities is to give the students 5 or 10 minutes to write an area specific list describing a new version of the classroom from their minds. The doors and windows of the classroom (in which the students are) must be in the same place but, anything else can be changed. Hopefully they will add trees, animals, pools and other wonderful things. Walk around and help them with one to one side coaching to try and get them to open their minds. This may be difficult, but it helps to let students know that even the wildest ideas are ok and that everyone's opinions and creative ideas are valued in the space. When the students have finished, have the students stand up and guide the class around the space pointing out the features like a guided tour. (best to warn them about the guided tour at the beginning of the activity so that they all finish preparing) Respect for the space can really help to bring the students into the world of Kinesthetic Dramatic arts right from the start. The teacher must engage in every activity with a belief that the students will come together. It can be tough when introducing these techniques to a class for the first time but once the students come on board, the other activities,

warmups and exercises that have been outlined thus far become a pleasure with students actively participating and improving in every class.

### **The importance of Improvisation**

The final part of this paper looks at Improvisation. Venturing into the unknown is the most powerful and crucial piece in the puzzle.

*“Improvisation produces an environment where the player can enter, happily into a state of play where the unknown event, situation, or relationship can be explored and discovered simultaneously by player and audience. Not knowing what will happen next is the essence of improvisation”* (Schwartz, G. 2001, para 2)

### **Why is it hard for students to Improvise?**

Students often struggle with being spontaneous in both English class and in their everyday lives. Students often get stuck thinking about ways to continue conversation, writings, and creative English projects. This is not always as a result of student willingness to participate, but down to problems with accessing interesting things to talk about or a fear of making mistakes. Schwartz (2001) states that when we are off balance, we naturally tend to want to right ourselves, pulling back from the precipice of not knowing what will happen next. That moment of off balance holds thrill, uncertainty, joy and anticipation where everything is possible.” Commonly in a communication activity, the topic is introduced, the conversation is modelled, and the students start to practice together. Many students scream off the start line and talk for a few seconds about x, y, or z. But as the gas runs out the space falls silent. This is the point when the teacher calls to change partners or brings the activity to a close. The students have been released from the amounting pressure to have to continue and converse beyond the text or model. In some cases, the student chooses to sacrifice points or grades and finishes the exercise before the allotted time in favor of having to speak for the full set time in an activity. Without pressure to push into the unknown, the brain simply gets used to not having to churn anything out. Slowly but surely the ability to think quickly on the spot becomes redundant.

**Why do students find it a challenge to venture into the unknown when speaking?**

Many here will have had the experience of standing in front of an audience, perhaps as an unfortunate actor who has forgotten their lines, or a presenter who has come to the stand totally unprepared, nevertheless that unsettling feeling is close to how a student feels when they step into the unknown. Sweaty hands, butterflies, a scrambled brain where nothing seems to come to mind, saliva in the back of the throat and beads of sweat. These reactions are mostly caused by chemicals released by the “fight or flight” system that protects our bodies in times of trauma or potential stress. It doesn’t sound good but it’s a natural chemical release, so we have to go with it. On top of that, the biggest thought that goes through the mind is “what is everyone thinking whilst I dry up on stage, I am being judged by people, and worst of all, I don’t know who they are!” The outstanding thing is the feeling of being judged. Viola Spolin talks about investigation and solving problems becoming of secondary importance next to the fear of being judged. Spolin (1983) states that Approval/disapproval grows out of authoritarianism that has changed its face over the years from that of parent to the teacher and ultimately the whole social structure. (mate, employer, family, neighbors, etc.) K.M Bailey (2003) states that speaking is harder than reading, listening, or writing for two reasons. Unlike reading or writing, speaking happens in real time; usually the person we are talking to is waiting for us to speak right then. We cannot edit or revise what we want to say. When it comes to real life conversation, there is no script, no plan and I often like to visualize it like a boxing match. Each member has trained, learned the moves, readied the vocabulary and studied the form. In a boxing match, even though there is a plan, moves are dictated by what the other person does just as much as what you want to do. The only way to gain experience is by sparring. So, in this light, we should activate the spontaneity in our students by allowing them to spar together in unplanned conversation.

**Improvisation in the classroom.**

Improvisation in a Dramatic sense is the key to opening a person’s creativity and their ability to be spontaneous. These skills can be called upon when students under-take real life conversations. Fauzen (2014) states that Language is creative and we cannot plan all the words and sentences that we are going to say an hour from now. Speaking happens spontaneously. Students must learn key techniques such as listening, multitasking, spontaneous thinking, control and respect. The student must develop listening skills for



they have to understand the current conversation in order to keep moving forward. Multi-tasking is required and because they must also construct multiple possible directions for the conversation to move in, a certain degree of forward planning is necessary. They must think spontaneously (as a boxer must) in order to assist in the conversation and must learn that they too have control over where the dialogue can go. Respect is key, because it allows all the members to move forward together and develop empathy. As long as the students have empathy they work as a team by drawing on individual strengths to come together as one and thus producing fantastic conversation. In an improvisation exercise the students are given a couple of directions. These are constructed to give the students a common start-point. The next direction is the students must resolve the problem somehow. The students must end the improvisation by reaching the goal. Simply put, the students have to work together to solve a problem.

There is only one rule. Students must not be negative when their partners move the story forward. A little like a “yes man” clause, the students must move forwards positively. In general, as little direction and guide should be given before the exercise. This gives the students maximum control to think creatively. Allow the students to fend for themselves in the activity, even in bouts of silence. In bouts of silence side coaching can be a very powerful tool and it prevents the students giving up and helps them to continue being creative. Notes can also be given at the end of the activity. Side Coaching during the improvisation is a great way to help the students get as much as they can out of the experience. It is important not to criticize their choice of direction but to help them run with it if they get stuck. This allows the students to feel empowered and gives them more opportunity to feel good about what they have accomplished. Building confidence to step into the unknown is key. Students need lots of nurturing, positive feedback and care must be taken not to knock the student down from their efforts, but to coax them into making more dialog and forming longer scenarios. The attitude of the teacher is crucial to the success of improvisation-based learning. The teacher must watch closely, and make sure that the players don’t get panicked. Panic invariably leads to the students falling back to their well-rehearsed bag of “phrases and tricks”. The goal is to, over time, have the students become so involved that they experience true and pure improvisation. Witnessing a group of students speaking English and hitting this point is perhaps, the greatest gift of all. Building activities around drama-based is a fantastic way to train the

mind and hone techniques that are of utmost importance in having confident everyday conversations.

### **Conclusion**

The methods that I have outlined in this paper can form a foundation for Kinesthetic Dramatic Art as a tool in the communication-based ESL classroom. I have learned that students must be told that these techniques will help them improve their English ability and boost their confidence, otherwise they may be confused. When applying these techniques in varying quantities over the last few years I have found the reaction to be positive. Students are excited to try new things and are keen to learn the strategies involved with using drama to benefit their language ability. Another point of great importance is to realize that the teacher becomes the spark plug at the beginning of every lesson. The teacher's energy and eagerness to jump into the dramatic arts will guide the students through the processes until the students begin to take the ball and run with it by themselves. Without the teacher's "spark" and energy the engine cannot really run successfully. Therefore, energy and passion are key in order to gain the full benefits of Kinesthetic Dramatic arts in the classroom. As a tool in the teacher's repertoire, Kinesthetic Dramatic arts that stimulate multiple parts of the brain, promote spontaneity and involve body movement are not only fun but are vital to the learning process in higher education.

## REFERENCES

- Jensen, E. (2001). *Arts with the brain in mind*. ASCD.
- Spolin, V. (1999). *Improvisation for the theater. Theatre direction and production*. Northwestern University Press.
- Stanton B. Garner, J. (2018). *Kinesthetic spectatorship in the theatre*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Schwartz, G. (2012). *What does it mean to improvise?* Retrieved from Improv Odyssey: <https://improv-odyssey.com/what-does-it-mean-to-improvise/>
- Ratey, J. (2008). *Spark: The revolutionary new science of exercise and the brain*. Little, Brown and Company.
- Tyrell, F. (2020). *Relaxation techniques: Breath control helps quell errant Stress response*. Retrieved from Harvard Health Publishing: <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/relaxation-techniques-breath-control-helps-quell-errant-stress-response>
- Tyrrell, F. (2018). *Meditation and breathing exercises can sharpen your mind*. Retrieved from Neuroscience News.com: <https://neurosciencenews.com/cognition-meditation-breathing-9026/#:~:text=Summary%3A%20Trinity%20College%20Dublin%20researchers,and%20improve%20overall%20brain%20health>.
- Willis, J. (2008). *Brain-based teaching strategies for improving students' memory, learning, and test-taking success*. ERIC.
- Fauzen, U. (2014). The use of improvisation techniques to improve the speaking ability of EFL students. *Dinamika Ilmu*, 14, 266.

**About the Author**

**Stephen Pottinger** is an English teacher at Chubu University. He was born in Aichi and grew up in England. He received his BA (in Education) from University of York. Stephen has almost 20 years of experience in English language teaching, and throughout his career, he has been very keen to apply Kinesthetic dramatic arts methods to English language teaching. The ideas introduced in this paper are examples of such practice.

*E-mail:* sdp2146@gs4e.chubu.ac.jp