

Learning English through Drama

Steve Muller

Thank you very much for coming here today. My name is Steve Muller. I do various things but my title really is “actor and musician”. I’m an actor because I pretend. I pretend to do things. Basically I’m a fake. I just pretend to do everything. And by pretending to do everything it makes people think that I am good at things. And by making people think that I am good at things I get invited to give lectures to teach other people how to pretend to be good at things.

Everyone can learn to pretend. Everyone can fake it. Everyone can pretend to be brilliant at something. And what we are going to learn this afternoon is how we can all learn how to pretend at being brilliant at speaking English. Because in the end that’s all it takes. It just takes us to make other people believe that we are good at speaking English and then we will start believing it for ourselves and we will start being able to communicate with other people in English without fear or shame.

The problem is in Japan people don’t like “fake”. If they have a Gucci bag, it has to be a real Gucci bag, it can’t be a fake Gucci bag. That is why even seventeen and eighteen year old Japanese girls have 2,000 dollar real Gucci bags !

Japanese people don’t like fake. Which also means that if they can’t do something really well, they don’t want to do it. And so we have a big problem in Japan with learning to speak English because many Japanese students think they are terrible at speaking English and because they think they are not good enough, they don’t speak. They don’t say any English at all and we have a situation here in Japan at the moment where many people have studied English for six or more years and yet they don’t feel confident to speak English.

After today’s lecture I hope everyone will have the confidence to know that it is OK to fake it! It’s OK to be an actor. It’s OK to pretend to be brilliant at English. And do you know what will happen? If you have the confidence to pretend to be brilliant, slowly, gradually you will be brilliant! You will be able to speak English!

Let me give you some background as to who I am and why I think the way I think and why I think Drama and using acting is very good for communication and very good for learning English.

I was born and brought up in England in an area called Cornwall, in the South West of England. Can everyone please try to say the word “Cornwall”:

(the audience mumbles something incomprehensible)

Now remember what I said about pretending. I want you pretend that you are not in a

classroom but shouting across the Grand Canyon. So on the count of three I'd like you all to say my hometown's name which is Cornwall. Ready? One, two, three....

(The audience shouts "Cornwall")

Now that is good. Now that is about the level you should always be speaking English.

I lived in Cornwall until I was about eighteen years old. I then left home and went to University, Cambridge University where I studied Theology. I also got involved in Music and Theatre but I was too shy and nervous to audition so I set up my own Musical theatre group that I didn't have to audition for! I am still a shy and nervous person. Even here in front of you. At the moment I'm faking being a confident public speaker. Drama has taught me the tools to hide my shyness and nervousness, tools that include breathing techniques and voice projection. Tools I will be teaching you this afternoon.

After I left university I became a professional Actor and Musician with the Musical Theatre company I had formed at University. There were only three of us so it was easy to manage. We did Nationwide tours and appeared regularly at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, a famous Arts Festival. We didn't make much money and after a few years the group disbanded.

Broke, I had an idea to try and make a name for myself. I had just learned how to Tap Dance so I did a marathon Tap Dance, dancing non-stop for thirty two hours that at the time was a world record. This landed me an agent, a little bit of fame for about fifteen minutes but most importantly jobs in large theatrical productions. I eventually landed a role in a successful West End Musical called "Return to the Forbidden Planet".

We brought this Musical to Japan in 1993 which was my first visit to Japan. I fell in love with Japan and later after having lived in Madrid for three years and San Francisco for two years I returned to Japan as a musician, fell in love with a Japanese woman, married and now live here. I still work as an actor/musician here staging shows and even appearing in Television commercials and Dramas. I also teach in some Universities and at the weekends put my Theology to good use by performing Christian Wedding Ceremonies. When I first started the wedding Ceremonies I couldn't speak a word of Japanese so my acting training was a great help. That is why I believe acting and Drama can be beneficial in learning a language. I learned Japanese by pretending that I could speak it fluently !!

I mentioned before that as far as I was concerned I had a disability. That disability was being shy and nervous but I decided I was not going to let that disability stop me from pursuing my dream....to be an actor and musician. My dream was not to be famous, that would have been a false dream. My dream was to perform and the skills I learned as a performer helped me to control my shyness and nervousness. Those very same skills can help "shy" Japanese to speak English with confidence and energy and with confidence and energy they don't have to worry about making mistakes or being perfect but can enjoy the boundless pleasure of communicating in English both with their classmates and with foreigners.

Drama training builds confidence. In Drama we learn how to breathe to control nerves. The

same is true of Yoga and actually part of Drama training involves stretching and physical exercises. What has this got to do with speaking English as a second language you may be asking yourselves?

Everything!

You cannot communicate if you mumble or speak quietly. You cannot communicate if you don't make eye contact (especially in English) and you cannot communicate if you are too shy to use gestures. Drama training teaches you to project your voice, to express yourself through gestures and even to take on characters different to yourself if the character you were born with is too shy to talk to people. I fall into the latter category. I am your typical wall flower at a party who doesn't talk to anyone but gets quietly drunk on cheap wine. But I have learned to fake confidence. I have learned to work through nervousness and shyness by adopting a character. The confident, gesturing public speaker you see before you is one of my creations. When I leave this room I will return to my usual shy self..

Today we are going to learn some breathing techniques for voice projection, some mime for gestures and some role play for characterization. We will also look at a simple script to see how acting a simple drama piece can improve our speaking and communicating abilities.

Let's start by learning some breathing techniques for voice projection and confidence. These breathing techniques also help to control nerves. Everyone, please stand up. Your days as shy, nervous, mumbling English speakers are about to end !

1. *Start with some simple stretching exercises: touching the toes, stretching the arms and rolling the head round.*
2. *Breathe deeply through the nose. Don't raise the shoulders but expand the back and stomach muscles.*
3. *Exhale through the mouth slowly with a small hissing sound. Don't relax the muscles of the stomach or back: keep them extended. Only when all the air has left your lungs should you relax your back and stomach. It is these muscles that support your breath.*
4. *Repeat several times.*
5. *Now as you exhale hum and turn the note to an ahhh. It should sound like this: mmmm-aahhhh*
6. *Now we are going to do some singing exercises. Using the same breathing technique sing a five note exercise up and down. The first five notes of a major scale: La, la, la, la, la, la, la, la (Make sure you open your mouths as wide as possible like yawning)*
7. *Then sing me, me, me, me, me , me, me , me, me; moo, moo, moo, moo, moo, moo, moo, moo; scra, scra, scra, scra, scra, scra, scra, scra.*
8. *Now we are going to sing the opening phrase of "Somewhere over the rainbow". We take a deep breath, we expand the stomach and back muscles, we open the back of throat and we sing: "Somewhere over the Rainbow". Then we relax the muscles. Repeat.*

9. *To exercise the diaphragm, a small muscle under the lungs that helps to push out the air and thus project our voices, we just repeat as loud as we can: Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha making sure that the diaphragm is pushing out the air.*
10. *We put this all together and say our names as loudly as we can without shouting but projecting. We take the deep breath. We expand our stomach and back muscles and we push the air out with our diaphragm without relaxing the stomach and back muscles as we say our names as loudly as we can: **STEVE MULLER**. Relax.*

And there we have a basic breathing technique which if practiced will actually improve your voice projection. There are many more breathing exercises and voice exercises that can be found on the internet and if followed will not only improve your speaking but even help you in the Karaoke booth!

Now we are going to look at gesture. Communication does not need words. Silent movies starring Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton used mostly gesture to convey the story and even today script writers are taught to use the visual over the spoken word, especially in Hollywood movies.

It is possible to communicate so much with your eyes and hands and even to act out a situation if necessary with gesture alone. When I first came to Japan, I traveled around the country with no knowledge of Japanese whatsoever but I had the most incredible experiences and met the most wonderful people with whom I communicated by gesture only. Don't worry if you think your vocabulary or grammar is limited. Supplement what you don't know with gestures. The other person will often supply the word you don't know and you will soon learn the words if you gesture often enough.

We're going to create our own silent movie. I need four volunteers. Three of you will go outside. I will mime a situation to the fourth person. He or she will then copy that mime for one of the people outside who will be invited back into the classroom. That person will then copy what they see to the next person outside who will be brought in. The last person who is brought back inside has to guess what the original mime was.

(Mimes can be changing a baby's diaper, changing a tyre on a car, performing brain or heart surgery etc.)

You can also practice gesture with a partner. With the person next to you use gesture to communicate something important for example: there's been an accident; their house has burned down; they've just won the lottery; you want a divorce etc.

Now we are going to look at using a character, in other words pretending to be someone else. One of the great ways to develop characters is by using role play. I give you a situation and you have to pretend to be the people in that situation. You need to use your imagination and whenever you can't think of the right word in English use gestures. Here are some role play situations:

Greetings:

- 1) *A blind date*
- 2) *Breaking into someone's house to steal their TV etc. The owner discovers you.*
- 3) *Meeting a celebrity: actor, musician, sportsman, President*

Shopping:

- 1) *Buying shoes, clothes etc.*
- 2) *Buying an engagement ring/wedding ring*
- 3) *Buying an expensive car and taking it on a test drive*

Confrontational Role Play:

This works best if the two people don't know what the "confrontation" or "conflict" is going to be about.

- 1) *Send two volunteers outside*
- 2) *Bring in one volunteer. Tell them they are an employee. They have five children with a baby on the way. They need a raise in salary. Send the volunteer outside.*
- 3) *Bring in the second volunteer. Tell them they are the boss of a company but the company is losing money. They need to "downsize": fire some employees. They are going to fire the first volunteer*
- 4) *Bring in the first volunteer*
- 5) *Role Play*

In the last part of this lecture we are going to perform a short piece from an actual play. A company called "Dramaworks" have produced two excellent plays for Japanese students learning English. The two plays are called "Popstars" and "Star Taxi". We are going to perform the first scene from the play "Popstars" about a young Japanese hair stylist called Nobu who goes to New York to try and become a musician. In this scene he accidentally takes the wrong bag from a subway train that belongs to an American hair stylist called Jay who works in a famous Hair Salon called "Popstars" where all the rich and famous go.

The vocabulary is easy enough for students to quickly learn the material by heart and perform the scene without books. The stage directions are clearly indicated and there is a Japanese translation at the back to ensure that the students understand exactly what they have to do. There is even a DVD showing the scenes both in a classroom situation and on location. Students throughout Japan have found this program to be highly effective in helping them to use drama in learning English.

1

THE A-TRAIN

Nobu is sitting on the A-train on his way from JFK. He is looking at a map and checking every station where the train stops. At the next stop, Jay enters the train and puts his shoulder bag above Nobu on the rack. He reaches in the bag and takes out a newspaper. He sits down next to Nobu and opens the newspaper. Both sit there bumping and moving to the movements of the train while looking at the map and newspaper. At the next stop, Nobu sees it is the station he wants. He folds the map and puts it in his pocket. He jumps up in a hurry and takes a large suitcase off the rack above and then grabs Jay's shoulder bag by mistake. Jay sees Nobu grab the wrong bag and is shocked. He watches as Nobu picks up the suitcase he had on the floor and the other one he just put there and runs out the door. Jay throws down his newspaper and grabs the bag off the rack that Nobu has left behind and jumps off the train to follow Nobu.

Dialogue

JAY

Holding Nobu's bag behind his back

Hey! What are ya doin'?'¹

NOBU

Turns around

Me?

Puts down suitcases

Nothing.

JAY

Oh yeah?

Pointing to the bag on Nobu's shoulder

What's that?

NOTES 1 See TEACHER'S NOTES page 93.

2

POPSTARS

THE A-TRAIN

Dialogue Continued

NOBU

This?

Nobu looks at bag

Oh! This isn't mine!

JAY

You got *that* right!²

NOBU

Oh wow! I'm sorry.

Holds out bag

It's yours, isn't it?

JAY

Takes bag and puts on shoulder

Yeah, it is.

I thought you were stealing it!

NOBU

Me? No!... Wait!

Where's *my* bag?

NOTES 2 See TEACHER'S NOTES page 93.

THE A-TRAIN

Dialogue Continued

JAY

Gee, I don't know...

Brings bag from behind back and holds it in front of Nobu

Does it look like this?

NOBU

Takes bag from Jay

Oh, thank God!....

JAY

Thank God!?

What about *me*, pal?³

NOBU

Oh, man⁴, I'm sorry.

Thank you!

JAY

Forget about it.⁵

NOTES 3, 4 & 5 See TEACHER'S NOTES page 93.

1. THE A-TRAIN

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page 2-4

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JAY: (Holding Nobu's bag behind his back)
Hey! What are ya doin'?

NOBU: (Turns around) Me?
(Puts down suitcases) Nothing.

JAY: Oh yeah?
(Pointing to the bag on Nobu's shoulder)
What's that?

NOBU: This?
(Looks at bag)
Oh! This isn't mine!

JAY: You got *that* right!

NOBU: Oh wow! I'm sorry.
(Holds out bag) It's yours, isn't it?

JAY: (Takes bag and puts on shoulder)
Yeah, it is. I thought you were stealing it!

NOBU: Me? No!... Wait! Where's *my* bag?

JAY: Gee, I don't know...
(Brings bag from behind back and holds it in front of Nobu) Does it look like this?

NOBU: (Takes bag from Jay)
Oh, thank God!....

JAY: Thank God!? What about *me*, pal?

NOBU: Oh, man, I'm sorry. Thank you!

JAY: Forget about it.

JFK (ニューヨーク国際空港) からA-列車の車中にあるノブ。地図をひろげ電車(地下鉄)の停車駅をしらべている。次の駅にとまったとき、ジェイが電車に乗ってくる。ショルダーバッグをノブがいる頭の上の棚にのせ、かばんから新聞をとりだす。ノブのとなりにすわり新聞をひろげる。地図に目をやり新聞を読みふけるふたりを電車はガタンゴトン揺らしながら進んでいく。次の駅にはいったときノブはここが目的の駅だとわかる。地図をたたみポケットに押し込んで、急いで棚から大きなスーツケースをおろそうとするが、まちがってジェイのショルダーバッグをつかんでしまう。ジェイはおどろき動揺している。ノブが床に置いてあったスーツケースともうひとつの荷物を持ち上げ、ドアから走り出ていくのをじっと見ている。ジェイは新聞をほうって棚からバッグをつかみノブを追って電車をおりる。

ジェイ: (うしろからノブのかばんをつかんで)
おい、何やってんだよ、お前!

ノブ: (ふりむいて) ぼく?
(スーツケースをおいて) 何も。

ジェイ: 何だと!
(ノブの肩のバッグを指さし)
じゃこれはなんだよ?

ノブ: これ?
(バッグを見る)
ああ! これ、ぼくんじゃないよ!

ジェイ: そうだろ!

ノブ: ああ、ごめん!
(バッグを差し出して) 君のなんだ?

ジェイ: (バッグを取り肩に掛ける)
そうだよ。お前が盗んだのかと思ったよ。

ノブ: ぼくが? そんな!...あれえ! ぼくのかばんは?

ジェイ: 何が? 知るかよ...
(うしろからかばんを取ってノブの前にさしだす)
こういうのか?

ノブ: (ジェイからバッグを取り)
ああ、神様ありがとうございます。

ジェイ: 何が神様だよ! 俺はどうなんだよ、おい。

ノブ: ああ、ごめん。どうもありがとう!

ジェイ: もう、まったく!

Steve Muller

That's all we have time for I'm afraid. I hope I have been able to demonstrate how Drama can be an invaluable aid in learning and communicating in English. You can have confidence in your abilities, you can work through your shyness and nervousness, your voice can be heard. You don't have to be perfect. Faking it can actually lead to success as an English speaker. If you pretend you are brilliant you will be brilliant. I will now go back to my quiet, nervous self. Thank you and good luck.

Popstars: Tyler Warfield. Published by Dramaworks

(JALT MWSIG ISBN 4-931424-08-2 C 3482 P 1900)

Star Taxi: Theo Steckler and Ian Franklyn. Published by Dramaworks

(JALT MWSIG ISBN 4-93142-04-X C 3482)