

Radio Drama for Speaking Practice

When I was teaching in Thailand, my students readily admitted that they tended to favor the receptive skills of listening and reading over the active skills of speaking and writing. In cultures where there is a danger of losing face by making a mistake, students prefer activities in which their errors may not be so apparent. According to Brown (2007, 324), “our job as teachers is to provide the kind of warm, embracing climate that encourages students to speak, however halting or broken their attempts may be.” This article illustrates a drama activity that creates the kind of “warm, embracing climate” Brown recommends for English learners—an activity that is also engaging.

In order to promote a relaxing environment, over five class periods students work in groups and have time to revise and edit their work before speaking in front of the class. With ample preparation time, students are able to practice speaking with minimal errors and embarrassment. The product of the speaking activity serves as an engaging listening activity and as a prompt for authentic speaking activities in following classes.

BACKGROUND

Early in the semester, I asked my third-year university students to record themselves speaking by using their smartphones and to send the recordings to me. When I listened to these recordings, I was surprised by the fluency I heard. Without an audience and with the ability to practice what they wanted to say, they made fewer mistakes in pronunciation and grammar than when speaking aloud in class. When I asked my students about this, they told me they were able to think more clearly when they were not subjected to the pressure

of speaking in front of their classmates. Apparently, speaking without being observed lowered the students’ affective filter, making it easier for them to articulate their thoughts.

But recording their speech alone was not enough. I wanted to encourage students to engage in reciprocal communication, which, according to Saville-Troike, “requires learners to listen as well as to speak, and to collaborate in the negotiation of meaning” (2006, 166). I wanted students to engage in a task in which they would be active participants, not merely reciters, speaking in the flat, stilted way that can be heard in English classes the world over.

In thinking of a way to create a comfortable but meaningful speaking activity, I was inspired by the *nang yai* shadow puppet shows of Thailand, where the puppeteers’ voices issue from behind the screen, accompanied by sound effects and music. Watching such a puppet show, I noticed that the sounds took some of the focus off the speaker’s voice and made the product more entertaining.

A *nang yai* puppet show is not an easy thing to duplicate, so I considered similar performance activities that would be easier to stage. I settled on the idea of a radio drama, an art form that has been resurrected by a new, podcasting generation. In a radio drama, audiences listen to the words and sounds of a story without seeing anything. The focus on speech is twofold: both the listener and the speaker are fully involved in what is being said. The listener has no visual cues to rely on, and the speaker must make his or her meaning free of ambiguities and must pay attention to pronunciation to ensure that each word and phrase is clearly articulated and comprehensible. The format does not allow for rapid or muttered speech; rather, it encourages cogent language to represent complex thoughts and actions.

Many cultures have a tradition of theater in which the voice actors are unseen and there is a heavy reliance on sound and music. The basic idea behind the radio drama was easy for my students to grasp; to practice, I asked them to perform a drama based on a short script I had written (you can write your own or find examples on the Internet, using the resources provided in this article). After performing, students understood the objective and set to work creating their own radio drama with impressive diligence and creativity.

CLASS SIZE AND MATERIALS

This activity may take several classes, over the course of a week (or two weeks, depending on class time). It works for large classes but can just as easily be adapted for smaller classes; I have done the activity with a class of 15 and a class of 50, with similar success. The students work in groups and become engaged with the creation of their own radio drama.

Materials

The activity works best when you use the following materials:

- Color cards for grouping—cards with different colors on them.
- Emotion cards—cards with emotions written on them: *anger, fear, surprise,*

boredom, etc. Pictures can be added to clarify these concepts.

- A one-page script (usually an excerpt of a larger play) students can “act out” themselves. You can write your own and tailor it to your students’ level and interests, or you can use free online sources for scripts at the upper-beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels:
 - o www.freedrama.net—monologues and plays with easy-to-follow emotional language and a few idioms
 - o www.dramanotebook.com—over 400 free children’s plays in diverse categories (fairy tales, holiday stories, folktales, Greek drama, etc.) under the “Free Stuff” heading in the navigation bar
 - o www.simplyscripts.com—massive database of public-domain scripts of classic plays in the manner of Aristophanes and Shakespeare (for advanced-level students)
- Something students can stand behind when performing. This discourages them from using body language to convey meaning, focusing the effort on the voice. Options include the following:
 - o Hanging a sheet across a corner of the room
 - o Using a whiteboard or blackboard on wheels
 - o Setting up a performance space in the back of the class while students who are listening face forward
- Hand-drawn signs to post around the room, showing Booker’s Seven Basic Plots (see Table 1)
- Various materials to produce sound effects, such as bells, whistles, paper, rice, and sand (optional)

PREPARING A RADIO DRAMA CLASS

The best way for students to understand radio drama is to present them with an example. This works best near the end of the term, when students have been exposed to enough spoken English to feel comfortable understanding fairly involved examples.

If your students are sufficiently advanced, I suggest allowing them to listen to an actual modern radio drama. Websites offering recordings of radio dramas include the following:

- thetruthpodcast.com—a podcast of original audio stories for every genre
- www.bbc.co.uk/radio/programmes/genres/drama/player—a database of classic and contemporary recordings
- finalrune.com—simple and short “stories for the ear”
- eltpodcast.com—an archive of audio dialogues in English

In addition, a search for “radio drama” on youtube.com yields numerous results. You could also search using the phrase “radio drama” and the title of a story your students are familiar with. For example, I have used Ernest Hemingway’s “Cat in the Rain” in the past, as it is relatively simple.

Admittedly, most recordings use language that is at an advanced level. The language is often fast-paced and idiomatic, the plots are complex, and the sound effects can distract students from the dialogue. Many websites for English-language learners offer conversational recordings students can listen to, though the recordings may lack dramatic flair and/or sound effects.

For intermediate students, you can either find a short script online (there are many at freedrama.net) or create your own. I like to write scripts myself so I can tailor the text to an appropriate level. Writing scripts yourself

also cuts down on the vocabulary that must be pretaught and can involve a subject students are interested in.

These scripts do not have to be of Shakespearean quality for your students to understand the concept; anything with different characters, voice direction (such as “surprised,” “tired,” “angry,” and “yawning”), and potential for sound effects will work. Limit scripts to one or two pages for comprehensibility and simplicity. Here is an example:

Sample Script for Scene 1

An office. Late afternoon. Daniella’s boss comes in to find her staring at a blank computer screen.

Boss: Is this all you’ve been doing all day?

Daniella: Well, no. I just, I, uh forgot what I was doing.

Boss: Daniella, we’ve talked about this before.

Daniella: I know. Listen, I told you, I’m not sure this job is a good fit.

(DANIELLA stops talking and turns around as a CUSTOMER comes in the door; BOSS moves out of the way.)

Including stage directions and a description of the setting, as in the above example, allows students to visualize what is *happening*. Explain that what is in parentheses is what is happening; students do not need to read it aloud, but they can sometimes use sounds to clue the audience in to the action and setting. Students should also feel that they can improvise lines. For example, in the context above, a student might say “Excuse me” to indicate the boss moving out of the way. Although improvising, or *improv*, is an entirely different activity, you can take time here to preview it, if you want. Let students know they are free to manipulate the script if they feel it is helpful to make the product their own.

This activity is beneficial because it provides an optimal occasion for introducing students to the idea of plot, which can be developed in later classes to understand stories, either written or read in class. Using a simplified Freytag's Pyramid (see Figures 1 and 2) to introduce rising action, falling action, and climax allows students to understand what makes a story universally comprehensible and entertaining.

The following activities occur over five class periods.

Class 1: Introducing Emotions

Before the first day of this activity, give students copies of the one-page script to read for homework.

In class, for a warm-up, group the students by randomly passing out color cards. Students with the same color card are in a group together. After students are in their groups, give each group an emotion card. You should prepare these cards in advance; they should include emotions that are found in the script. If your script has only a few emotions, more than one group can have the same emotion. If you write your own script, you can make sure it includes multiple emotions. Group members act out the emotion on their group's card in any way they choose, and the other groups guess what the emotion is. Tell students they can use their bodies, voices, and anything else they would like to demonstrate this emotion. Give students a few minutes to plan how they will demonstrate this emotion. Circulate while they are planning to make sure they understand the directions.

Each group demonstrates the emotion on its card while the other groups guess which emotion is being presented (some, like "pensive" and "embarrassed," are not easy to demonstrate—you may want to explain this to students). After the emotions have been demonstrated and guessed, and after you make sure students clearly understand each one, ask the groups to take out their scripts—which students have read the previous day or for homework—and find the emotion they

demonstrated in an appropriate line of the script. Then ask students in each group to read this line to the class and say which words indicate this emotion. (Stage directions like "yells" and "yawns" in the script are a good way to indicate emotion and speaking style and are especially helpful to students who are not yet at an advanced level.)

After each group reads the emotion line, classmates say whether they agree or disagree with the assessment. When every group has read its emotion line (there may be more than one for some groups), tell the groups they will now deliver the line using the correct emotion. This means that students put the last two activities together: "What is the emotion?" and "Find this emotion." Tell them they can read the line any way they would like in their groups. Group members can read the line together, or some students can make sounds while one member reads the line, or the group can add improv lines. Explain that the objective is to bring the emotion and the words together. Provide several minutes for preparation.

In collectivist cultures, students might not feel comfortable expressing emotion alone, even when acting. One way to overcome this reluctance is to ask students to show emotion as a group—something they can all safely laugh about—before moving on to ask them to act alone. Even when acting, the students will still be in a group, working together, and thus feel less exposed.

After the emotional lines have been presented, allow the students to read the entire script again silently. Preteach any vocabulary or difficult constructions (one benefit of writing the script yourself is that you can use content that is neither too high nor too low for your students' level). When the class has finished reading, ask a few comprehension questions about the emotions of the characters. For example:

- How does this character feel when she says "_____”?
- Why do you think she feels that way?

Take volunteers for each role (there can be multiple readers per role). If your students are reluctant to use emotion in their reading, assign the lead role to yourself and model speech that uses emotions. Read the script aloud to the whole class.

Ask students if they noticed any new emotions during the reading. Instruct students to reread the script and to make any “emotional notes,” indicating which emotions are used. This can be done for homework.

Class 2: Reading with Emotion

For a warm-up, review the script by reading through it again as a class. Assign roles by using slips of paper with the roles written on them and have students draw the slips from a box. As the script is read, students who are not reading use their emotional notes to call out the proper emotion for the line. Allow about ten minutes for this warm-up activity.

After students have demonstrated their understanding of the emotions, they return to the groups they were in during the previous class and prepare a cold reading of the text. I explain to them that a cold reading is what actors do when they are given a script for the first time. They do not have to memorize or physically act anything out, but they must attempt to read with convincing emotion, as the class has been practicing.

Give students time to prepare a cold reading in groups and allow them to decide who will play which character and how they will read the script. Everyone should read. If there are not enough roles for each student in the group, students can share a role, with one student reading halfway through the script and then letting the other student take over. Ask the students to consider any sounds they might need to add in order to make the reading more believable. Explain that they are free to add these sounds to their reading.

With a single-page script, it is possible to allow each group to present its reading without too much repetition. The readings

will vary, depending on which student is reading and how he or she interprets the lines.

Standing (or even sitting) in front of the class, some students may find it difficult to act, and others may become shy. Because the emotions *in the voice* are the important thing, it helps if students are not visible to the class when they do their cold readings. Hang up a sheet or use a portable whiteboard or blackboard they can stand behind. Draw a radio (or headphones) on the board so students understand that they are listening to something with no visual representation. Explain to students that they need to act with their voices rather than with their bodies. This helps embolden students to speak up and the students listening to pay closer attention to the words they are hearing.

For homework, students continue reading the script, practicing the emotions and the delivery of the lines.

Class 3: Introducing Plot and Character

Before class, write the seven basic plots from Table 1 on individual sheets of paper to hang around the room. Start class by using color cards to form groups; then ask students to brainstorm how many types of stories there are and to write them down. (In class, I say “story” rather than “plot” to keep things simple.) Help students understand what you mean by “types of stories” by giving examples of stories from different genres such as comedy, horror, romance, and sci-fi and asking if they are alike. Give students three minutes to write down all the types of stories they can recall. Have them share their answers and write these on the board.

As a class, look at the types of stories written on the board. Ask how they are similar or different. Arrive at a consensus for which types are the same (use deductive questions to allow students to see how types like “adventure” and “journey” might be similar). Cross out duplicates and circle the dominant types. Link the types listed by your students to Booker’s (2004) seven basic plots in Table 1, written on the signs that are posted around the room. A sentence or two of explanation for these is usually enough.

BOOKER'S SEVEN BASIC PLOTS

1. Comedy (*The hero is uncertain how to achieve his or her goal.*)
2. Tragedy (*The hero has a flaw that grows until it destroys him or her.*)
3. The Quest (*The hero seeks something that in some cases may never be attained.*)
4. Voyage and Return (*The hero travels to a different place, learns from the experience, and returns home changed, usually for the better.*)
5. Overcoming the Monster (*The hero must overcome an obstacle to attain what he or she desires.*)
6. Rags to Riches (*The hero overcomes disadvantageous beginnings.*)
7. Rebirth (*The hero overcomes a personal flaw.*)

Table 1. Booker's seven basic plots (Booker 2004)

Provide examples like those in Table 1 if students are struggling. I use the word “hero” in place of “protagonist” here.

When students understand the types of stories, ask them to decide on the story type they find most interesting. Then, on your signal, tell them to get up and go stand beneath the sign showing that story type. All seven types will probably not be filled, or one type may have nine students and another only three. This is fine, although feel free to consolidate or split the groups if you think they are too big or too small. For example, some story types are thematically similar (e.g., The Quest and Voyage and Return), and groups choosing those types can be merged fairly smoothly. You could also have a sign reading “Unsure” or “No Preference” (instead of a specific story type), and students standing beneath that sign could join smaller groups or work together to decide which type of story to select.

After the students have grouped, ask them to provide an example of the type of story to make sure they understand the concept. Tell them to write their example (or examples) on the sign, next to the story type. Sometimes, the examples my students give are unfamiliar to me; if so, I ask them to explain how their example matches the story type. Past story examples include the following:

1. Comedy—*Mr. Bean*
2. Tragedy—*Romeo and Juliet*

3. The Quest—*Lord of the Rings*
4. Voyage and Return—*Finding Nemo*
5. Overcoming the Monster—*Harry Potter*
6. Rags to Riches—*Aladdin*
7. Rebirth—*Despicable Me*

Now that the students are in a group under a story type, explain that each group needs to elect a director and a sound engineer. Explain that these roles will entail extra work (you can decide if you will give extra credit for students in these roles) and describe the duties of each role. Explain that each group needs at least one director and sound engineer, but students can also share these roles if they like.

- The director will lead the group, making sure the script is completed and advising actors on delivery of their lines and the sound engineer on sound effects.
- The sound engineer will decide on sound effects and make them at the appropriate times in the story.

Both of these important positions make the activity and performance run smoothly. Sound provides an unexpected novelty when students are listening to performances, and direction makes the students more accountable for their role in script writing.

Give students a few minutes to decide in their groups and then go around and ask who they have chosen for the director and sound engineer positions. Record the names. Then explain to students that they will write and perform their own story based on the type they selected. I then present a simplified Freytag's Pyramid (see Figure 1), and we apply the questions to a story type from earlier in the class—for example, *Aladdin* from the Rags to Riches story type.

Draw the pyramid on the board. Ask students what the hero's problem is and write that under the pyramid. Ask what the hero does in the beginning to solve that problem and write the students' response on the side sloping up. Ask what the hero does when he or she faces the problem and write the students' response on the apex of the pyramid. If you need to, refer to the problem written below the pyramid. Ask what the hero does after he or she has solved the problem and write the students' response on the downward slope. Figure 2 shows how to apply the questions to *Aladdin* from the Rags to Riches story type.

If necessary, repeat the exercise with another example. Explain that each group needs to outline its story using Freytag's Pyramid as a model. Allow groups sufficient time to discuss and brainstorm but explain that they do not have

to write out the story in detail, only the major turning points. Check the work of each group for comprehension. Each group draws a pyramid like the one on the board and writes in the major turning points of the story the group is creating.

When the pyramid is completed, the group must decide on characters. Every play needs *at least* one character per student, including the sound engineers and directors. Students can play multiple characters if they like. Students can create a character for themselves or work with the group to assign roles. At the end of the class, each student must have a character.

For homework, each student writes three paragraphs about his or her character (if students have multiple characters, they need only write about the principal one):

1. The first paragraph is a physical description (what the character looks like, what his or her voice sounds like, style of dress, mannerisms, etc.).
2. The second paragraph is a description of the character's emotions (how the character feels, which feelings are stronger and which are weaker, why the character feels this way, what he or she does about these feelings, etc.).

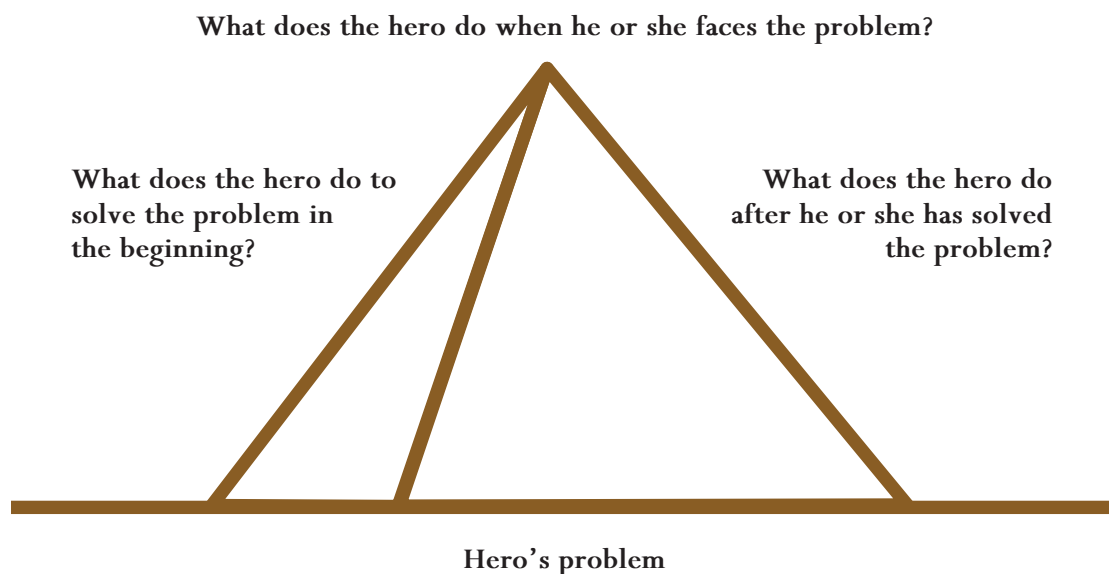


Figure 1. A basic version of Freytag's Pyramid

3. The third paragraph gives a historical background (where the character is from, what his or her childhood was like, who the character’s friends are, whether the character goes to school or work, how old the character is, etc.).

Students can also draw the character if they want.

This exercise helps students visualize their character so they understand how to act like him or her and how the character may act in a different way than they would. Many students have little experience reading English as “someone else,” and this activity allows them to think of their character as another reader, a role they must step into when reading the lines.

In addition to their character descriptions, directors must create a *logline*, something that describes the story succinctly without giving too much away—a teaser. Provide examples of loglines from movies students may already know. Tell directors these need only be a sentence long but should make the audience excited to hear their story, as this example demonstrates:

“Snow White, pursued by a jealous queen, hides with dwarfs; the queen soon learns of this and prepares to feed Snow White a poison apple.”

Sound engineers must research ways to create realistic sound effects. They will not know what sound effects they will need (as the script has not been written yet), but they can start looking into which sounds are easy to create so they can suggest those to be included in the script.

Smartphones are the obvious choice for most groups to recreate sound, and youtube.com is the easiest place to find examples. If the classroom has no Internet connectivity, students can upload sounds before class. If there is no Internet available anywhere, and no phones, students can find ways to create sounds without technology, such as snapping a piece of paper currency or similar-sized paper to imitate the sound of a helicopter or crinkling cellophane to imitate fire. Encourage students to be creative in making sounds. Explain that each sound will make the story more interesting. Many online sources offer creative ideas for making homemade sound effects, including the *Videomaker* website (Alldrin 1998).

Class 4: Writing a Radio Drama Script

Ask students to get into their groups and warm up the class by asking each group’s director to read the story’s logline to get ideas going. Because the loglines are only

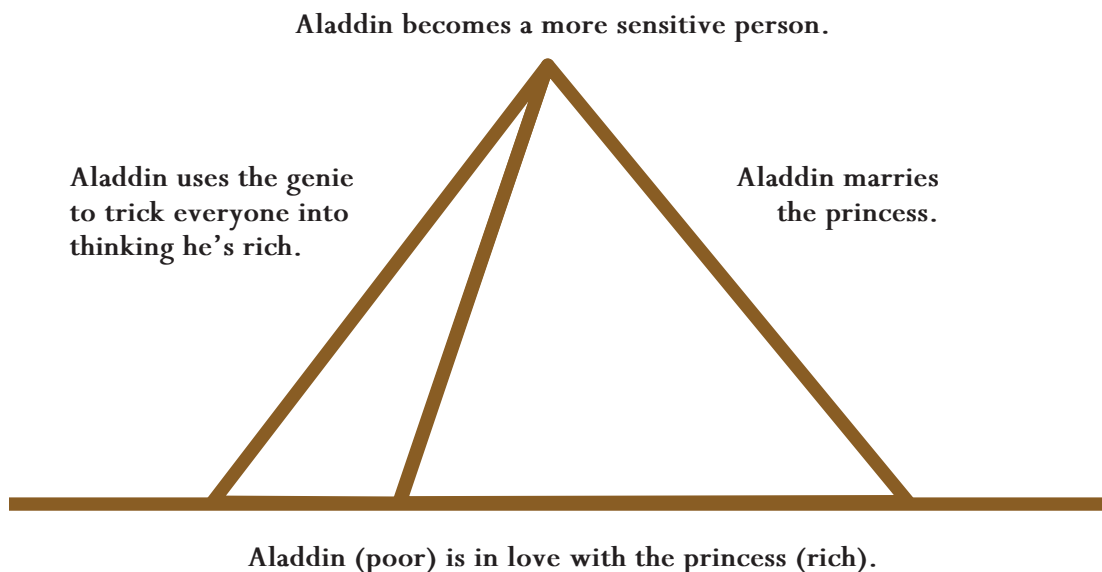


Figure 2. Freytag's Pyramid applied to *Aladdin*

a sentence long, they should not give any crucial details away, but they may inspire other groups to change the direction of their story.

Use the remainder of class to allow students to write their scripts. Each student writes his or her own lines, but students work together to make sure the dialogue flows coherently. The script that was used for the cold reading can serve as an example for both length and format. Students should understand that they have to finish a draft of the script by the end of the class. If scripts are not finished, students will have to find a time and place to continue working after class. All scripts will need to be completed for the activity in the following class.

In addition to writing their lines, directors oversee the process—editing, arranging, and negotiating. Sound engineers, meanwhile, make notes on which sounds will be needed to clarify location and emotion.

Circulate around the classroom, offering ideas and helping with scripts if needed. Give students space to create something unique but offer support and help with grammar.

Students hand in final scripts for you to check so that grammatical errors are not repeated in the upcoming performances.

For homework, students practice speaking their lines with appropriate emotions. They need not memorize their lines, but they should be ready to read with excitement, anger, boredom, or any other emotion the script calls for. Sound engineers gather materials for sound effects to bring to the following class.

Class 5: Performing Radio Dramas

If you have time on performance day, loosen students up with a high-energy speaking warm-up at the beginning of the lesson, such as “The Incredible Shrinking Dialogue” from Hodgson and Odhuu (2012).

When students are sufficiently warmed up and relaxed, pick the group names (story types or names that students have given their groups) out of a hat and instruct the students who are not performing to pretend they are listening to the story on headphones or speakers. Tell them they can close their eyes if they like, as long as they listen. Each group performs its radio drama—dialogue and sound effects—out of sight while the rest of the class listens.

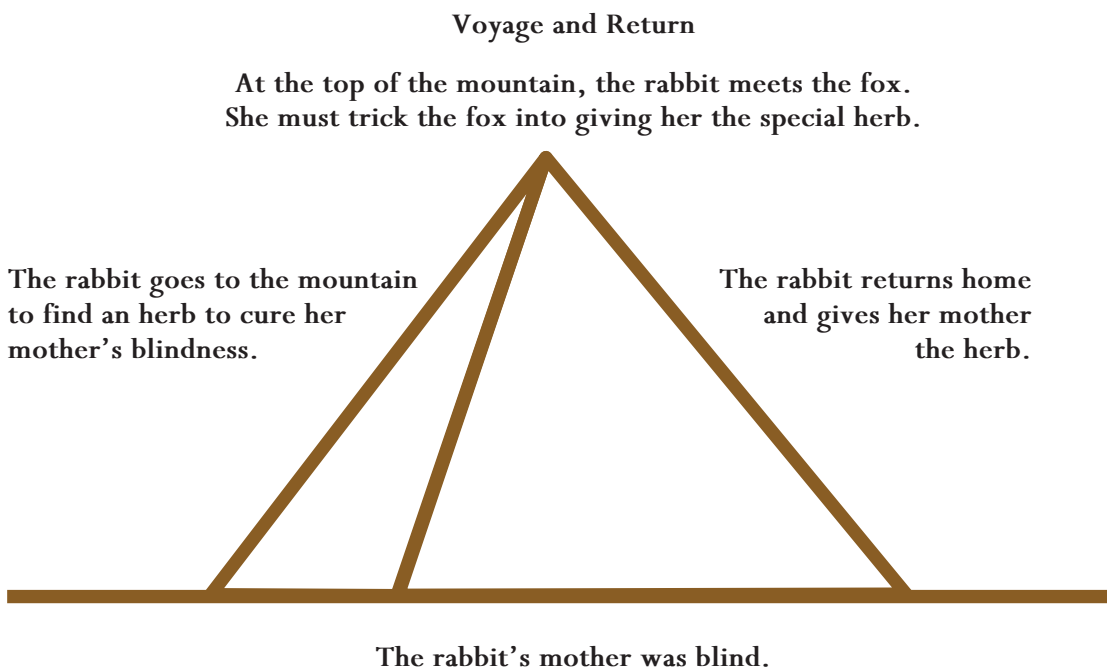


Figure 3. Freytag's Pyramid filled in with details from a student-created story

After each performance, the class fills out a simplified Freytag's Pyramid, writing the story type of the performing group at the top (see Figure 3 for an example).

Keep things moving (assign a student to help if necessary) by introducing each group and reading its logline. If you have time, after each story have students in the audience use what they have written on the pyramid to discuss the conflict and plot with the class. Ask questions about the hero's problem in the story, how the hero faced the problem, and so on.

When the performances are over, applaud all the groups for their efforts and ask students to consider their favorite part of the performances, drawing attention to where emotions were used. Collect the Freytag's Pyramids written for the performances.

VARIATIONS

Following are several ways to adapt and extend the radio-drama activity for speaking practice.

- If you feel the seven basic plots are not culturally relevant, or if you think they are too broad for your students, you can ask students to write sequels to stories they already know, using the same characters.
- Repetition is a great way to focus on language-learning challenges. I do this activity toward the end of the semester, when I know my students' common errors. I often ask students to include certain phrases and tenses in their scripts.
- If your students have smartphones and Internet connections, they can record their radio dramas and submit them online. Using an online learning platform like Edmodo.com allows students to listen to the radio dramas submitted by their class and others.
- After students have completed their radio dramas, they can reflect on the process and say what they enjoyed or found difficult.

Any recorded radio dramas can be saved and used as examples for the future.

- With enough time, this activity can be extended into a larger presentation. Students can take more time to study their roles and change their lines, and performances can be extended. Keep in mind that in most cases, the more time students have to practice, the more interesting their performances will be to listen to.
- Following the activity, you can stage a radio drama event and have students perform their radio dramas before a larger audience of peers, teachers, and parents.

CONCLUSION

The speaking skill is challenging for language learners, necessitating activities that support oral interaction in the classroom. The adaptable radio drama activities presented in this article promote student collaboration in a low-stress environment that encourages speaking and integrates reading, writing, and listening skills as well.

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Jonathan Maiullo has taught ESL in Armenia as a Peace Corps volunteer and, more recently, in Paraguay and Thailand as an English Language Fellow. He began incorporating drama into his classes after a year performing with the ESL theater troupe "The Performers" in Argentina.