

10 Ways to Teach English with Plays

Plays are a natural resource for the English language classroom. They offer opportunities to visit and revisit language in action. They can reveal insights into the way speakers use fixed expressions, intonation, and gesture to convey feelings or wants, and to navigate relationships. And, importantly, producing a play can bring a motivating and much needed sense of fun to the classroom.

Here are 10 great ways to bring plays into the classroom.

1 FIND THE MESSAGE

After reading, listening to, or watching a play, have students identify the theme and the author's purpose. Provide language that can support critical thinking. Here are some examples:

- The author wants to explore the possible effects of . . .
- The author wants people to think about . . .
- The author wants to compare . . .

Have students work in groups to find support for the message in the script. Direct them to look at choices that characters make or the results of actions.

3 OTHER PEOPLE'S SHOES

Characters in a play generally face challenges in achieving goals. After reading a play, discuss these struggles. In what ways are certain characters weak? In what ways are they brave? Then set a speaking or writing prompt. Compare yourself to a character. How are you like or not like that character?

5 FIND HIDDEN MEANINGS

Look for the pragmatics in a scene by having students talk about characters' intentions. Sometimes people cannot say what they want directly, so they use implicit communication. Investigate these hidden feelings by talking about the language characters choose and discussing their motivations. What do they really want, and what language strategies do they use to communicate it? Follow up with a role play in which students try to influence each other in a new context such as employees at a work place.

7 TAKE A CHARACTER ON A DATE

Have students improvise a scene between characters that is not in the script. Set a place and a task. For example, have a brother and sister discuss her fiancée's computer gaming habits. Or have two friends at a bus stop try to decide whether to go to a Saturday math class or sneak away and go to the beach. (It's most interesting if they have different goals.)

9 EXPLORE THE ISSUES

Have students research the issues raised by the play. Have them go online to find articles or videos about the topic. For example, if the play involves a young person's dilemma about choosing a career, have students research STEM or liberal arts careers and write a career profile. If the play is about a person working in a restaurant kitchen, have them find a clip from a food show or report on a celebrity chef with a mission or even interview a restaurant owner or manager about the business.

2 GET STRESSED

Do a lesson on word or sentence stress. Then have students mark the stress in their scripts, take roles, and practice reading. As you work through the script, you can add intonation, linking, reductions and other pronunciation awareness and practice activities.

4 SPEAK BODY LANGUAGE

Write a list of gestures that reflect emotions on the board. Then demonstrate what each one looks like. Next, put students small groups to take turns performing the gestures. Instruct students to discuss what emotion the pose communicates. Extend the activity by having two students face each other and take turns gesturing and responding with a different gesture. As a final step, discuss the poses/gestures that would be appropriate for characters in the play you are working on. Or set individual actors to assign gestures to their scenes.

6 WHAT SHE SAID

Teach a grammar lesson using the content of the script. For example, have students read a scene from a play, and have another group use reported speech to summarize the scene. They can speak or write, depending on the goals for the lesson. Or stop a play mid-scene and ask students to use present perfect to describe what has happened so far. Or introduce past participle adjectives to describe characters reactions and feelings, e.g., *disgusted, frustrated, frightened, inspired, depressed, excited, surprised, pleased*.

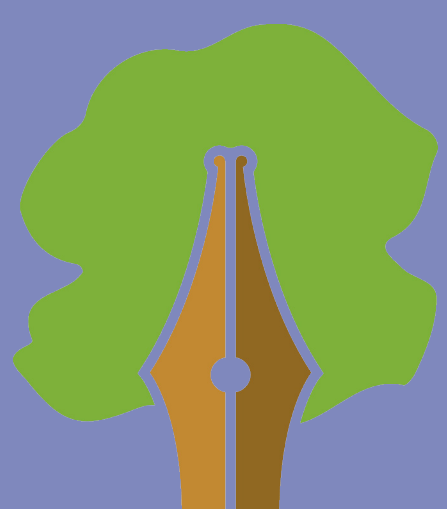
8 PLAY WITH INTONATION

Write a list of emotions such as enthusiastic, defensive, cautious, frustrated and reluctant on the board. Make sure the words reflect distinct emotions and that students understand the meanings. Then select a few lines from a script. Choose lines that reflect commonly used phrases and expressions and that can reflect different attitudes. For example, "I just want to say one last thing," "I can't help it," or, "That's hard to believe." Write the lines on the board or give students a written copy. Then put students in groups. Have them take turns delivering a line with a specific emotion. Other group members try to guess the emotion.

10 HAVE A TALKBACK

Practice and perform the play. After the play, the actors sit facing the audience. The director or a moderator also has a few prepared questions to help the conversation get started. The audience is then invited to ask questions about the play, its development, and the issues it raises. The actors respond with their interpretations. The audience may also be invited to comment on their experiences watching the play.

For plays you can use and additional activities, check out **Integrated Skills Through Drama** published by Alphabet Publishing.



Her Own Worst Enemy by Alice Savage
Only the Best Intentions by Alice Savage (in press)
Rising Water by Alice Savage (in press)

www.alphabetpublishingbooks.com