



# **Using theatre and performing arts as a tool to build English speech and language skills for people who are homeless**

---

February 2022

Byron Sowels, Community Researcher, SJOG

## **What is ESOL?**

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) covers a broad spectrum of methods and concepts based on teaching English as a second or other language to individuals fluent in other languages. Teaching ESOL is based largely around teaching English to migrants and refugees living within the UK.

In a 2019 survey of 128 ESOL learners conducted by Refugee Action, 59% of individuals involved in the survey stated that they believed they do not receive enough hours of ESOL per week, with 66% stating that they do not believe that they had a level of English that made them ready to work within the UK (Action, 2019). Within our homelessness and MDS services, the majority of the people we support require ESOL support. It is clear that there is a greater need for ESOL learning within the UK for migrants, refugees and other individuals looking for work.

Funding for ESOL in England has shrunk over the past decade, from £212.4 million in 2008 to £105 million in 2018 - a cut of almost 60%. Over the same period, there was a decline in adult participation in ESOL classes by nearly 40%. (Action, 2019)

Through the utilisation of alternative, experimental and provocative theories and alternatives to mainstream ESOL, there is potential to meet the demand for ESOL and the needs of its learners. This requires the function and form of ESOL to be expanded, so that learners simultaneously develop English skills along with self-confidence and transferable presentation skills.

## **How can drama be used to help skill development?**

As well as acting as a therapeutic tool and a form of self-expression, drama can be used as a powerful method of developing and enhancing the wellbeing, self-confidence and skills of individuals. Several programs, charities and organisations, have utilised theatrical education to help members of vulnerable groups grow and develop.

'Behind the Label' (TVO, 2018) is a creative project designed for people who have experienced homelessness and low self-esteem to share life experiences. Participants take part in drama workshops, learn theatre and life skills, and eventually create their own alternative theatre pieces, crafting narratives based on personal true-to-life stories with others on stage. Created by

Theatre Versus Oppressions, an arts organisation which has run applied theatre projects in Wales, throughout the UK and various countries in South America, Africa and Asia, Behind the Label works with people suffering with difficulties ranging from addiction, abuse and mental health issues.

The project has had a transformative effect for many of those involved - 75% of previous participants are now involved in volunteering and mentoring programmes, 60% reported a significant cut in drug/alcohol usage and 40% have re-engaged with family.

Cardboard Citizens ('What We Do', 2022) is a drama scheme and theatre company created to help those that have faced homelessness or are at risk of homelessness. Anyone that has the experiences of homelessness is able to become a member and gain access to their Information, Advice and Guidance services, as well as training in Forum Theatre, Theatre of the Oppressed, diverse creativity and self-expression training and social meet ups. These help provide psychological and creative support to people and allow individuals to express themselves and increase their self-confidence. They help connect members to other organisations that offer more specialist forms of support in order to suit individual needs.

Members are regularly offered the opportunity to take part in workshop programmes, which include training and performance activities. Within these, members are offered the chance to work with professional and experienced facilitators from Cardboard Citizens. Members are also able to lead practitioners from the wider theatre sector. Workshops are offered at a range of levels to suit members' personal experiences.

In regard to ESOL, drama can be used both as a tool of language development, providing learners with the ability to take a 'hands on' approach to learning language through writing, performing and acting, and as a way to develop the confidence of learners through the encouragement of shared self-expression and collaborative theatre. Here we explore how this can be done in practice.

### **What is Theatre of the Oppressed?**

Created by theatre director and writer, Augusto Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed (Augusto, 2013) is a form of community based education that utilises theatre as a tool for social change.



Originally developed in Boal's home country of Brazil during his work with working class people of Latin America, it is now used worldwide for social and political activism, conflict resolution, community-building, therapy and government legislation. As a school of theatre-making, it offers theatre as a tool for liberation and empowerment for people.

Theatre of the Oppressed differs from mainstream theatre through its focus on interactivity and expression, regarding the audience as active members rather than passive spectators, engaging with audience members and encouraging direct involvement.

ESOL delivery using Theatre of the Oppressed approaches has risen since funding cuts, and a revision of mainstream ESOL towards an exam focus with little support for students. Through the use of theatrical conventions and the methods of theatre-making provided by students are able to focus on self-liberation and empowerment, gaining a more thorough grasp of the English language whilst also developing self-confidence and language skills.

Boal's vision of theatre is as a creative and reflexive process through which we observe ourselves, a process in which performance is used as a path towards equality and justice. Though Theatre of The Oppressed, as a form of theatre, has a wide array of branching concepts and techniques, two particular branches have seen popularity and success in the field of ESOL - Image Theatre, and Forum Theatre.

## **Image Theatre**

The main principle behind Image Theatre is to work with body images without using the spoken word. According to Boal, Image Theatre allows us to use image as a way of conveying and receiving knowledge in more fluid and open ways than dialogue based performance.

The process of image theatre involves participants making still images of an experience or an idea that they have agreed to explore. This could be a personal, lived experience of power imbalance, oppression or injustice, driven by a desire to create change. Images are developed in a variety of ways, for example, participants can 'sculpt' other participants into 'sculptures', shaping their poses into a still image without the use of words.

Image theatre acts as a flexible tool, providing the opportunity to explore thought, emotion and attitudes to both those confident and well-versed with drama, and those with little or no prior experience with it. As it does not require 'actors' to learn lines or act in front of others, it allows individuals to present and express their own feelings and experiences in a way not limited to language with the aid of fellow actors. Through creating a foundation of drama that does not inherently require language, a stronger basis for further self-confidence development is placed, allowing a greater depth of further ESOL language to be explored.

## **Forum Theatre**

The most widely used aspect of Boal's work, Forum Theatre creates a performance of unresolved or unsatisfactory resolved experiences of oppression or injustice, which provide many possible alternative methods of engagement and resolution. A vital aspect of Forum Theatre, and one that makes it differ from other Theatre theories, is its rejection of the division of spectator and actor - both are equally involved in the plotting and performance of elements of the pieces presented.

Forum Theatre allows spectators to join with actors in the performance in order to find alternative endings to the story. An enabler or mediator for the group conducts the whole process, and encourages playfulness and the capacity to think outside the box whilst creating a safe holding frame for complex exploration.

In Forum Theatre structure the actors devise, rehearse and perform an instance of oppression, leading to a moment of defeat. At this moment the Protagonist's reaction to the injustice experiences problems and a search for alternatives by the spectators. Spectators can step in and take over the role of the protagonist, changing the action each time in order to experiment with a diverse range of alternate solutions.

Emphasis is placed on listening to and engaging with members of the audience and their suggestions for actors and scenarios. Boal suggests "try out all suggestions, even the crazy ones" (Boal in Rifkin 1990 & 1992). Sometimes the use of humour and irony can lead to unexpected moments of change or powerful events. Furthermore, by demonstrating that individuals are being listened to, and responded to appropriately, their own confidence, be it in themselves,

their theatrical ability or the people around them, can be strengthened. A focus on back-and-forth, communicative learning allows for a greater level of involvement from both audience members and actors, and can lead to more attentive and involved learners.

Within the context of ESOL, Forum Theatre can be utilised to explore the struggles of individuals and the ways that ESOL can benefit and impact their general, day to day lives. By focusing on issues they face directly, ESOL education can be focused more specifically towards language and concepts that will impact individuals - in essence, by examining the actual needs of a learner, their education can be better tailored to suit their linguistic needs. It is here where the notion of participatory ESOL can be explored.

### **What is Participatory ESOL?**

Participatory ESOL, like Theatre of the Oppressed, views learners as sources of knowledge rather than empty vessels, needing to be filled with the teacher's knowledge through a process of knowledge transfer. An emphasis is placed on dialogue and inquiry that means learners, far from being collectors of someone else's knowledge, play an active role in knowledge creation (Bryers, 2015).

There are a number of ways in which participatory ESOL differs from more mainstream ESOL and other English Language teaching. One of these is the way in which the curriculum is structured.

Traditionally, ESOL teachers have been trained to select specific topics and areas for teaching and to embed these items into interesting and relevant contexts for students. Although effective in many ways, the focus on advanced decision making or pre-empting what might be needed in a particular context has limitations. For example, advanced decision-making means that it is the teacher who controls the content of language classes, rather than a combined decision by both teacher and learner.

In contrast, with participatory projects, teachers try to reverse this by waiting to see what emerges from classroom activities before deciding the learning focus - this does not mean they consider advance planning irrelevant or unnecessary. Rather than choose language items and topics in advance. Participatory ESOL teachers tend to select and devise activities that can

generate topics and language. In subsequent lessons they develop and reflect upon the languages that students used during these activities. These activities often incorporate ways to work collaboratively with students to devise the curriculum.

The approach has enabled students to work with topics and language that would not normally appear in published ESOL materials. This aspect of participatory ESOL is particularly suited to Theatre of the Oppressed work, which uses creative exploration of group members' own lives to generate themes and contexts for theatre work and performance.

During the lifespan of one Participatory ESOL project, *'WHOSE Integration'*, (Cooke, Bryers Winstanley, 2014), researchers worked to develop a three-stage structure for their work. The first used open tools to explore students' ideas and experiences of a theme, while the second used more analytical tools to explore students' ideas further. The final stage encouraged students to understand and critique other texts relating to the same theme.

Another project, *'Emerging words, Emerging Worlds'*, (Cooke, 2016) describes how teachers began to work without a predetermined language curriculum, working instead, lesson to lesson, on 'emerging language', analysing the particular needs of language learners. In doing so, they discovered that the language produced by students was more complex and of a higher level than the designated level of the class. Students lost their anxiety about spelling, punctuation and grammar.

This method of working with language allows teachers to focus on both language that participants will need as opposed to language the teacher thinks they need and on language that is within their grasp as they themselves are striving to use it.

Participatory ESOL projects such as these have enabled students to work with topics and language that would not normally appear in published ESOL materials. This aspect of participatory ESOL is particularly suited to Theatre of the Oppressed work, which uses creative exploration of group members' own lives to generate themes and contexts for theatre work and performance.

## **How has Theatre of the Oppressed been used in ESOL?**

ACT ESOL is a project led by Serpentine Galleries based around the utilisation of Theatre of the Oppressed in conjunction with ESOL. The project, developed in 2015, worked with migrants interested in theatre and developing language skills, with the aim of exploring and showing the transformational potential of Theatre Of The Oppressed.

There were 10 participants from a range of different language backgrounds and a range of migration experiences - some struggled with their experiences as migrants especially in regards to employment and housing. Others came to the UK to work, have spouses in the UK, and others were refugees highly trained in their field but having to start from scratch in the UK. All had struggled with English in one way or another as well as with adapting to life in the UK. These experiences unified the group.

Most had no or limited theatre experience and only one had come across the ideas of Boal. Some were more interested in theatre work and others more interested in language work, but overall participants demonstrated an enthusiasm for both.

The ACT ESOL team consisted of two theatres of the oppressed specialist and two language specialists. The team worked together devising, planning and delivering the eight sessions. Collective reflection and further planning followed each session. Interviews were conducted with participants at the end of the course.

One of ACT ESOL's principal aims was to experiment with the structure and organisation model that would allow them to develop both theatre work and language work. They used a three stage structure-

1. Building a community
2. Performing themselves
3. Exploring society using forum theatre



## **Building a community**

In both Participatory ESOL and Theatre of the Oppressed, building a community of trust is a prerequisite to any work that follows. Participants inevitably work with complex and difficult issues, relating to their own lived experiences. Without a feeling of safety, the complex work would be impossible. Each workshop began with exercises to build the community, combining exercises with language work. Almost half of each workshop was dedicated to trust building and community building. ACT ESOL combined traditional Boal exercises, like Forum and Image Theatre, with language elements. This is a departure from PESOL, where language is rarely used without a real life context. However, the work revealed a potential for language not just as a communication tool but also for stimulating creative expression.

## **Performing Themselves**

Participants were invited to create images or mini-improvised performances of situations that had occurred in their lives. These situations represented problems that had occurred or situations in which they felt oppressed. Initially, group members were invited to create images of any difficult situation that had taken place when they first arrived in the UK. The storyteller silently moved the other members into an image that represented their experience.

After the image work, participants explained the story of the image to the rest of the group. Inspired by this, the group were able to work on improvising and developing their own dialogue performance. It was not a true representation of real events but a creative theatre practice, using the original story as a prompt. Using generalised universal experiences, or pluralising individual experiences, is key to theatre of the oppressed work.

In small groups participants worked on retelling stories they had performed using a basic three part narrative frame to structure the story: background, action or events, and outcome. Each mini group worked together to prepare written notes to support storytelling, then a single person from each group used their oral skills to retell the story to the other groups. This activity was a challenge but allowed the development of language skills, and crucially, enabled the participants to go away and talk about workshops in English as well as their more fluent languages. The stories produced were impressive in completeness, dramatic in content and showed a strong link between performance and rapid progress in language development.

In 'performing ourselves; ACT ESOL combined theatre and language work. Performance and language skills developed through performance and discussion.

## **Exploring Society**

The final stage focused on Forum Theatre. The groups worked ideas developed during the second stage into a performance. ACT ESOL worked with performers to carry out alternative outcomes to the situations presented in previous stages, acting out different hypothetical situations to show what could have been done differently.

Changes were either labelled changes to the outcome, or changes to the language used. This allowed participants to be experimental with language by trying out new things. Group leaders also suggested different changes, like acting more forcefully or more subtly.

Following this process, the performers spent time reflecting on the experiences and the alternative outcomes they performed. The possibilities were split into 'could haves' and 'should haves' - the distinction is considered quite complex grammatically, but the fact it was linked to the performance meant that the participants had no trouble using the verb forms in their comments.

## **Developing drama as a tool for ESOL training at SJOG – PLAY IT!**

Recognising the opportunity that drama and creative practice can have in delivering ESOL, SJOG worked with the Lot Productions to create PLAY IT: an inclusive introduction to playwriting programme for homeless migrants, refugees & asylum seekers, delivered in collaboration with Olallo House. Olallo House delivers support to men and women who have no recourse to public funds and are street homeless.

Play it! started with the notion that everyone is a playwright and everyone can tell a story. Sessions (start it, say it, shape it, set it) were led by an actor/writer and lasted 60-90 minutes. The aim was to develop English skills and to give each person a place to explore creativity and self-expression through theatre.



A pilot workshop with 10 residents of Olallo was held. We found that each person was fully engaged with the workshop, and their confidence improved throughout the session, despite being a little nervous at the beginning. Confidence not only in writing and communicating but also in presenting themselves and having a go. It also proved a great leveller. As our colleagues sat in and participated in the sessions everyone was a novice at the start of Play it! This had the effect of developing relationships across the group and fostering a sense of fun.

The pilot lead to a revised programme of delivery, acknowledging:

- Inter-group communication: residents are diverse in first-languages spoken which leads to social isolation
- Participant-led boundaries: residents have varied backgrounds and requirements including access needs
- Variation of personal goals: residents attended the pilot for multiple reasons, all of which are worthy of addressing

The mission of PLAY IT mission is beyond creative outcomes recognising, as Homeless Link 2014 did, that this mixture of approaches leads to the following:

- Increases social inclusion
- Improves mental health/wellbeing
- Develops work skills
- Challenges prejudices

Play IT is now seeking funding so that it can be delivered with the people supported at Olallo and their local community.

## **Final thoughts**

As indicated from surveys from organisations such as Refugee Action and our own experience supporting individuals in our homeless MDS services, it is clear that there is a continued demand for ESOL.



In order to meet the growing needs of ESOL recipients, new and alternative methods should be considered. Theatre-based and Participatory ESOL offers an alternative approach to develop the skills and confidence of those within our services, and ensure that their needs are met and understood.

## **Acknowledgements**

We were able to undertake this research with the support of the Governments Kickstart Scheme which has funded 10 community researchers at SJOG Hospitaller Services from 2021 – 2022.



## References

Winstanley, B. (2016). ACT ESOL: A Theatre of the Oppressed Language Project. Retrieved from [https://serpentine-uploads.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/2020/03/act\\_esol\\_280616.pdf](https://serpentine-uploads.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/2020/03/act_esol_280616.pdf)

Action, R. (2019). Turning Words into Action. Retrieved from <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Turning-Words-into-Action.pdf>

Rifkin, F. (1990 & 1992) Boal's Theatre Oppressed Theoretical summary (Boal Verbatim 1990 & 1992)

Shraiber, Elena & Yaroslavova, Elena. (2016). DRAMA TECHNIQUES IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE TO UNIVERSITY STUDENTS. 8. 59-65. 10.14529/ped160108.

Cooke, M., Bryers, D., & Winstanley, B. (2014). Whose Integration? In D. Mallows (Ed.), Language Issues in migration and integration: perspectives from teachers and learners (pp. 19-35). The British Council.

TVO. (2018). Theatre Versus Oppression - Behind The Label. Retrieved from <https://www.wearetvo.com/projects/behind-the-label>

What We Do. (2022). Retrieved from <https://cardboardcitizens.org.uk/who-we-are/what-we-do/>

(2022). English For Action Retrieved from <https://efalondon.org/about-us/>

Our Work — 240Project | Empowering ex-homeless in West London. (2019). Retrieved from <http://www.240project.org.uk/our-work>

Augusto., B. (2013). *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Theatre Communications Group.

Cooke, M (2016) *Emergin Words, Emergin Worlds* King's College, London; Becky Winstanley, Tower Hamlets College