

# Drama Techniques in Language Learning

A resource book of  
communication activities  
for language teachers

NEW EDITION

通过表演掌握英语 [英]

*Alan Maley and Alan Duff*



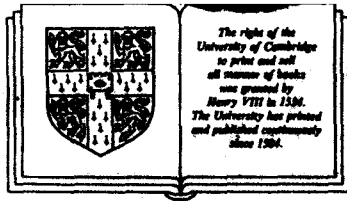
Cambridge University Press  
World Publishing Corp

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Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP  
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1978, 1982

First published 1978  
Fourth printing 1980  
Second edition 1982  
Seventh printing 1988

Library of Congress catalogue card number: 82-1191

*British Library cataloguing in publication data*

Maley, Alan

Drama techniques in language learning – 2nd ed.  
(Cambridge handbooks for language teachers)

1. Languages modern – Study and teaching
2. Drama in education

I. Title II. Duff, Alan  
418. '007 PB36

ISBN 0 521 24907 4 hard covers

ISBN 0 521 28868 1 paperback

This edition of A. Maley & A. Duff—Drama Techniques in Language Learning: A Resource Book of Communication Activities for Language Teachers is published by arrangement with Cambridge University Press, The Edinburgh Building, Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 2RU.

Licensed for sale in China only. Not for export.

Reprinted by World Publishing Corporation, Beijing, 1991

ISBN 7-5062-1060-6

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the inspiration, encouragement and advice of the following: John Allen, Martin Banham, Philip Berry, Patrick Early, John Hodgson, Michael Patterson, Elayne Phillips.

The authors and publishers are grateful to the authors, publishers and others who have given their permission for the use of copyright material identified in the text. It has not been possible to identify sources of all the material used and in such cases the publishers would welcome information from copyright holders.

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The cartoon drawings are by Nigel Paige.

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## Fresh thoughts for a new edition

If drama were dead matter, which could be fossilized forever like an insect trapped in resin, there would be no need for this new edition of *Drama techniques in language learning*. But drama is living material, and subject to change.

### What has changed?

Or, rather, what is new?

Readers familiar with the first edition of this book will find many exercises that have been retained. These are the hardy plants that have proved their resilience, and particularly their adaptability, over the past five years. Those that have been omitted have been left out not because they were *rejected* but simply to make room for 150 new ideas, all of which we felt deserved inclusion. And those ideas that have been retained are now presented with all the modifications and improvements which have been suggested by the many groups who have worked with them. In this sense, our new edition is a collective endeavour. Just as a tree in the forest produces new shoots and new branches each year, so too the ideas of the first book have grown outwards and upwards, while still drawing strength from the main stem.

Of the new ideas, many found their way naturally into the former sections on *Observation* and *Interpretation*. But there were also many which could not (or would not!) fit into the old structure. And, since drama is a living and changing material, we preferred to 'bend' the structure of the book to accommodate the new ideas, rather than 'twist' the new ideas to fit an old framework. This is why we have introduced five new sections: *Introductory exercises*, *Creation and invention*, *Word-play*, *Problem-solving*, and *The use of literary texts, poems and songs*. In addition, we have provided an outline of a typical *Day's Work*, to give a coherent idea of the kind of programme that might be devised using the material in this book.

The cross-reference system between sections is not meant to be watertight: the suggestions given are intended only as guidelines for possible links.

## **About the new sections**

### ***Introduction and warming-up***

It is easy to forget, when working with a group, that each person enters the room in a different mood: some may be elated, others despondent, some tense, others relaxed, some alert, others bored. And some – just indifferent. If the group is to work together, it needs to be in harmony. The introductory exercises, simple though they may appear, are not 'games' to distract weaker students, they are *essential* activities for preparing any group to approach the more exacting tasks later to be demanded of them. They serve the same function as 'limbering up' for an athlete or 'warming up' for a football player. Their first purpose is to help all members of the group approach the later exercises in the same frame of mind – to calm the excited and to invigorate the lethargic. Their second purpose is to direct the students' thoughts and feelings towards the exercise to follow. Thus, for instance, 1.25 *Feeling my space* would be an excellent introduction to work on the demanding exercise 7.9 *Amnesty*, and 1.56 *Childhood memories* would be particularly suitable as a prelude to 2.13 *From my album*. These exercises take little time – usually no more than five minutes – but it is time well spent, for without it the group would not be in the right frame of mind to begin work.

We make no excuse for having so many introductory exercises, since they all fulfil different functions and can therefore be chosen as specifically suitable to precede one exercise rather than another. Finally, although they are described as 'introductory', there is no reason why they should not be extended into full activities if, as in the example of 1.49 *Interviews*, this proves desirable.

### ***Creation and invention***

This section contains many of the reformulated ideas from the earlier section on *Interpretation*. Much new material, however, has been added. Here we have introduced, for instance, the use of drawing and sketching, material or 'props' (such as, stones, corks, apples, etc.), and also music, fragments of written material (e.g. newspapers) and photographs. If there is a stress, it is on *transforming the real* into the imaginary. Many of the sketches or dramatic presentations will be close to fantasy (e.g. in designing machines that do not exist), but the language used in creating these 'fantasies' remains as 'down-to-earth' as the language required for any technical – or terrestrial – project.

### **Word-play**

It is here that objections are most likely to be raised. Can one play with words in a foreign language? Even if one can, does it serve any purpose? Are these not exercises which favour only the linguistically talented? Where does fooling around with words get you? And so on...

Sensitivity to language involves far more than just understanding what words mean. We must be sensitive not just to sense, but also to *sound*, and to the different ways in which the same thing may be said. Unless we have practice in *playing* with the language, we are likely to be stuck forever at a level of banality which allows for no variety of expression. The more we can experiment with different combinations of words, the better we can come to know the potential of the language we are learning. In the words of Arthur Koestler:

Rhythm and rhyme, assonance and pun are not artificial creations, but vestigial echoes of primitive phases in the development of language, and of the even more primitive pulsations of living matter; hence our particular receptiveness for messages which arrive in a rhythmic pattern. (*The Act of Creation*)

Word-play does not mean 'being clever with the language', but rather 'exploring the language'. Once again, it must be stressed that in these exercises the product (a poem, sketch, or dramatization) is not in itself all-important; it is the language used in *developing* the idea that matters most. And this language – of discussion, proposition, acceptance, rejection, correction, etc. – remains basically the same whether one is working on an improvement to the jet engine or on the definition of an imaginary word such as 'hectoplasmolysis'.

### **Problem-solving**

The utility of these exercises is self-evident. Not only do they develop accuracy of expression, they also give practice in *thinking* in the foreign language (sifting through information, following instructions, reducing many words to few, etc.). In addition, they have the advantage of being engrossing in themselves, as exercises. 6.1 Castles in the air is an excellent example. Here the students are not only working in English, but also *creating* something of their own. This engrossment in the task is important, because it deflects attention from the mechanical use of language, i.e. the students are basically practising 'formulae', such as: 'I suggest we...', 'Let's try it this way...', 'It would be better if...', 'Yes, but (it needs to be stable)', etc. To put it differently, the language is – paradoxically – less complex than the task!



### *The use of literary texts, poems and songs*

In the first edition of this book we gave no more than a cold hint of what might be done with material such as we have now introduced ('Literary texts often provide good starting-points for improvisation or dramatization'). This new section is not, however, an academic afterthought designed to palliate university lecturers. It is, rather, the working-out of ideas with a practical value of which we were aware, but which we had no time to develop.

It has never been our intention to encourage parrot-like repetition or the rote learning of words in the drama exercises. This is why in this section we do not concentrate on reproducing the written word, but rather on using the text as a stimulus to fresh thought.

Inevitably, poetry proves easier to work from than prose, mainly because the context is more condensed. It would be optimistic to think that there will be no barriers to the use of poetry. Barriers there are, but they can be overcome. Let us for a moment consider the two main barriers: a) poetry is incomprehensible; b) poetry is the romantic outpouring of the soul. Both are valid descriptions – or objections. But they are no more valid than saying 'science is dry' or 'engineering is not for women'! A *poem* may be incomprehensible, or it may be a romantic outpouring of the soul, but *poetry* is not a poem. Poetry may be witty, informative, critical, impressionistic, factual (see Henry Read, 'Lessons of War'), reflective, or descriptive. A poem, suitably chosen, can often suggest more in a concentrated space than a lengthy prose text. It is with these ideas that we wish to work. The poem or song serves in much the same way as pictures do in the drama exercises – it *suggests* ideas.

If one is to work imaginatively with literature in drama activities it is necessary to overcome the preconceptions so well expressed in Roger McGough's statement: 'One must get away from poetry as something that happens where there's a glass and a bottle of water.' The purpose of these exercises is to stimulate activity which will develop in its own direction. These are drama activities, not creative-writing exercises, and the purpose is to grapple with a problem, not to produce polished prose or verse; to develop an idea, not to reproduce a text. This is by no means to suggest that the original text should be ignored, but rather that it be seen in a new context, as in 7.3 Colourful ideas or 7.9 Amnesty.

### *And to end with...*

The ideas contained in this book are drawn from many sources. Some are our 'own', insofar as they have developed from our own practical experience. Others are adapted – ideas we have seen first

used in other contexts (e.g. on radio programmes, on the stage, in business-management courses etc.) – and still others are ideas we have wittingly borrowed from other sources. Every care has been taken to acknowledge – either in the text or in the bibliography – the source of any original idea that has been incorporated in this work.

As this book may be used by different people, not only teachers, we have addressed it to an imaginary group-leader or organizer (whether or not he or she is a teacher).

The one part of the original work which remains almost unchanged is the Introduction. This is not out of laziness but simply because even now – five years later – we have no changes to make. The tree may grow new branches, but the trunk remains.

## Introduction

Let us be clear from the start what we mean by 'dramatic activities'. They are activities which give the student an opportunity to use his or her own personality in creating the material on which *part* of the language class is to be based. These activities draw on the natural ability of every person to imitate, mimic and express himself or herself through gesture. They draw, too, on the student's imagination and memory, and natural capacity to bring to life parts of his or her past experience that might never otherwise emerge. They are dramatic because they arouse our interest, which they do by drawing on the unpredictable power generated when one person is brought together with others. Each student brings a different life, a different background into the class. We would like students to be able to use this when working with others.

Before going on, let us be clear what we do *not* mean by dramatic activities. We do not mean putting on plays in front of a passive audience. The stiff, self-conscious 'dramatization' of dialogues and short sketches, as occasionally produced for distraction or language reinforcement, is not what we have in mind here. Words, other people's words, which have been mechanically memorized, can turn to ashes in the speaker's mouth. They lose their savour even before they are spoken, and this we do not want.

Nor do we want students to feel that dramatic activities are part of the preparation for some great final performance. Their value is not in what they lead up to but in what they *are*, in what they bring out right *now*. So, in describing these ideas, we have no audience in mind other than the people who are *taking part*. Nobody looks on. This does not, however exclude the performance by one group for another or even by one group for all the others, if the need is felt.

Lastly, as we see them, dramatic activities are not a substitute for the psychoanalyst's couch. They are not sessions of self-liberation (complexes and hang-ups cannot be cured through them). On the other hand, they will certainly release imagination and energy – and this is hard to do in language teaching. Indeed, this is one of the purely *educational* objectives that takes us well beyond the limitations of teaching the foreign language as a subject.

## About language

Most of us are familiar with the early stages of learning at least one foreign language. We may at certain times question, uneasily, the value of what we are learning; the language may seem irrelevant or artificial, the structures unwieldy, the vocabulary far-fetched. Yet we struggle on, saying 'Son chapeau est sur la chaise', 'The pupils are opening their books', or 'Mein Brüder hat es mir gesagt', in the belief that if the sentences are meaningful and correctly formed we must be learning something from them.

Much has changed in language teaching, but it is still true that the conviction that *Vocabulary + Essential Structures = Language* lies at the base of nearly every foreign language syllabus. Teaching on these lines takes account of only one aspect of the language – the intellectual aspect. But language is not purely an intellectual matter. Our minds are attached to our bodies, and our bodies to our minds. The intellect rarely functions without an element of emotion, yet it is so often just this element that is lacking in teaching material.

Many of the skills we most need when speaking a language, foreign or not, are those which are given *least* attention in the traditional text-book: adaptability (i.e. the ability to match one's speech to the person one is talking to), speed of reaction, sensitivity to tone, insight, anticipation; in short, *appropriateness*. The people we speak to during the day are not (thank goodness!) faceless citizens with conveniently pronounceable names like Brown and Grey, who rarely state anything but the obvious, and whose opinions are so bland as to give neither offence nor pleasure. The people we meet are busy, irritable, worried, flustered, tired, headachy; their breath smells, their armpits itch, food gets stuck between their teeth; they have quirks and tics and mannerisms, they speak too slowly or too fast, repeat themselves or lose the thread. They are not necessarily interesting but they are alive. And so are we. In order to talk to these people, we need to know who they are and who we are. We need to know whether the difference in our ages matters, whether we are likely to see them again, whether it is worth trying to influence them, whether they are likely to be helpful or difficult, etc. It is all very well to be able to produce statements like 'Had we not told them, they would not have come', but the words mean nothing unless we know who 'they' are and why this was said.

Drama attempts to put back some of this forgotten emotional content into language – and to put the body back too. This does not mean that we must suddenly start leaping about the room in an exaggerated fashion, but it does imply that we need to take more account of *meaning*. Much language teaching is done through structures or so-called situations in the belief that once a sentence has been

## Introduction

correctly formulated a use can always be found for it. First comes form, then meaning. This approach can be misleading, even dangerous, because it accustoms the learner to making sentences fit into structural moulds. To use an analogy, such a learner is like an architect who designs a building before inspecting the site on which it is to be placed. There may be nothing structurally wrong with the design, but if the building is five storeys high with a stone façade, and is intended to fill the gap between two steel-and-glass skyscrapers, the architect will clearly have to put in some overtime! Practically any sentence will have an abstract meaning – a propositional or dictionary meaning – but this face value may have nothing to do with its concrete use.

Let us consider a few examples. The much maligned example that used to crop up on the first page of all language text-books, 'Is this a pen?', has now disappeared (we hope). And why? Not because it was incorrect or meaningless or useless, but because it was unnecessary and inappropriate. Try walking up to a London docker, taking a pen out of your pocket and asking him: 'Is this a pen?' If he doesn't take a swipe at you he will most likely answer, 'What the 'ell d'you take me for?' or, 'Listen, mate, if you're looking for trouble...' The question you asked was not understood as a question but as a *provocation*, which it was, for you were insulting him by suggesting he might not understand the self-evident. It is no less provoking to force the foreign language learner to go through the motions of answering inane questions simply because he or she has problems of vocabulary which the docker does not. It is not the question itself but *the reason why it was asked* that is at fault. After all, there is structurally no evident difference between 'Is this a pen?' and Macbeth's famous line, 'Is this a dagger which I see before me?' The difference lies in the feeling. Macbeth asks a question to which he knows the answer, this is true; but he asks the question because he does not want to believe what he sees. He has, then, a strong reason for speaking as he does.

Meaning, therefore, should not be confused with structure. Commands are often given in the imperative, but not always; questions are asked with question marks, but not always; continuous action in the present may be suggested by a verb ending in *-ing*, but not always. Meaning slips from one structure to another in a most elusive way. Take an innocent statement such as, 'It's eight o'clock'. This might be, variously, a substitute order ('Switch on the telly'), a concealed warning ('You'd better hurry up, they'll be here in a minute'), a form of persuasion ('Don't you think it's time we left?'), and so on. In all these examples the statement 'It's eight o'clock' takes its meaning from the intention of the speaker and his or her relation to the other person. To teach 'It's eight o'clock' as a response (and the only kind

of response) to the question 'What time is it?' is to place an unnecessary restraint on the language.

Correct structures do need to be taught, nobody would deny this, but can they not be taught *meaningfully* from the very start? Consider an obvious example: the present continuous tense. This is nearly always illustrated in class by the teacher performing certain actions (opening a book, closing a window) and getting the students to reply to questions. Interest soon flags, because it seems pointless to describe what is going on in front of your eyes. Yet with a slight twist, the same actions can become interesting and the questions meaningful: all that is needed is that the observer should not know in advance why the actions are being performed. This is strikingly illustrated in two simple mime exercises: 3.17 What am I doing? and 3.18 The hotel receptionist. Drama, then, can help considerably by ensuring that language is used in an appropriate context, no matter how 'fantastic' this context may seem.

We realize, of course, that like all other activities in the classroom, drama activities cannot be 'real' simply because they are subject to the constraints the classroom imposes. Unlike more familiar activities, however, which always remain external to the student because imposed from without (and largely for the convenience of the teacher, not the student), these techniques draw upon precisely those internal resources which are essential for out-of-class use of the language.

### About situation

Is it not perhaps true that the 'context' of the drama activities is simply what the text-books call 'situation' taking on a new guise? We think not. Situations, as presented in text-books, tend to take account of only one aspect of context – the physical *setting*. Once this has been established, the 'characters' are lightly sketched in and left to produce their monitored 'free dialogues'. These dialogues usually take place 'At the station', 'In the restaurant' etc. Once this setting has been fixed, the cut-out figures of Mr Brown and family are put into position. Once in position, they use two kinds of language: *situational* – words such as 'ticket', 'porter', 'timetable', which are considered indispensable when one is 'At the railway station'; *structural* – phrases which, unlike the vocabulary items, are not so much bound to the situation as enlivened by it. This is why in one book 'At the station' may serve to present the question form with WH-words ('When does the Blue Train leave?') and in another the present continuous tense ('Look, he's waving his flag!').

If one's purpose is to teach vocabulary and structure, such an

## *Introduction*

approach is probably no worse than any other. But surely, then, the text-structured dialogue presentation is unnecessary? A list of words and a few correct sentences would be enough – which is exactly what most tourist phrase-books set out to provide. These books serve a specific (often useful) function: they give the rudiments of the language necessary for operating in certain surroundings. Nothing more. But most tourists have discovered to their cost that a phrase they have learnt to produce with a semblance of fluency may bring a *response* they are quite unable to follow!

How is one to right this imbalance between the great amount of material and teaching offered to students and their apparent inability to make sensible use of it? The answer is, surely, to encourage students to look at language from a different angle, to go behind the words to the actions they are most likely to perform in the language, the patterns of behaviour that lie behind all languages (*functions* such as persuading, agreeing, accepting). To do this, they need to be aware of the total situation, which is considerably richer than the mere physical setting. It will involve, at the very least, the following elements.

### *Setting*

This is the physical environment (for example the restaurant), which may or may not directly influence the language used, as one does not talk *only* about knives, forks, and menus at a restaurant. Physical surroundings are often incidental to what is said, for example a second-hand car may be sold in a lift, a bridge designed at a birthday party. Naturally, there are occasions when physical setting prescribes language. At the dentist's it is certain that the patient's teeth will be mentioned, but what is important is not just the hole in the tooth but the nature of the person whose tooth it is. A nervous patient will need reassuring; a mistrustful patient may need convincing; an impatient patient may have to be pacified. The dentist's role, in such cases, extends far beyond the limits of the waiting-room and the reclining chair.

### *Role and status*

As we have seen from the last example, there is an overlap between setting and role. It is most important therefore to encourage students from the start to become sensitive to the way in which our built-in views of our own roles and those of others are defined and clarified through language. Throughout the day our roles are constantly shifting. At one moment we may find ourselves in a superior position, making decisions or giving orders; at another, we may find ourselves

on the receiving end, accepting decisions and carrying out commands. To return to the dentist: at one moment he might say to the nurse, 'I want you to X-ray the lower left side', and a few seconds later to the patient, 'Would you mind putting your head back a little further?' These are both commands, but the choice of language depends on the dentist's relation to patient and nurse. This role would again change if the patient were, for example, a boy of eight, to whom the dentist would most likely say, 'Come on now, put your head back. That's right.'

If we deliberately ignore the roles, we end up teaching language in a vacuum. The very fact that we open our mouths to speak implies that someone will be listening. The listener is a person. Why ignore him or her?

### *Mood, attitude and feeling*

Even in the most formal situations, people's feelings and attitudes colour their language. For obvious reasons, this often exclamatory language is difficult to teach. Yet it is necessary from the very start to express disapproval, surprise, enthusiasm, and so on. Nothing is more difficult than to work with second-hand feelings derived from texts or dialogues, yet most students are given no more than a few innocuous exclamations ('What a pity!'... 'How nice!'...) to cover all their emotional needs in the language.

Much of our feeling, especially in English, is conveyed through intonation, and it is important for students to associate the intonation pattern with the feeling that gives rise to it. Moreover, what we say will be coloured not only by our feelings but by the mood and disposition of others. Drama techniques have the singular merit of directly engaging students' feelings and, as a result, often making them aware of the need to be able to express them appropriately.

Mood and feeling also influence the grammatical form of what we say. Take, for instance, a phrase such as 'It doesn't matter'. Depending on the sincerity of the speaker, this could emerge as 'never mind', 'don't bother', 'too bad', 'don't worry about it' (see 3.10 One-word dialogues and 3.11 Dialogue interpretation, for a development of this).

### *Shared knowledge*

An important element in any 'real-life' situation is shared knowledge. Run your mind over the conversations you have in the course of a typical day. Nearly all of them involve unspoken assumptions, unconscious prejudices, or shared knowledge, which may never be referred to (see again 3.11). This is why the language of text-books



## Introduction

often strikes us as being artificial. The early lessons in particular abound in expressions such as 'Mr Grey's house is big', 'His car is blue', 'The blue pencil is longer than the red one'. All the above remarks are possible, but only in a restricted context: they can be taken as examples of grammatical form, and learnt as such, but because they lack internal meaning, because they are immediately demonstrable and therefore self-evident, it is difficult for students to transfer what they have learnt from them to a situation in which they might conceivably be used. This brings us back to a point made earlier – that stating the obvious is not necessarily the best way of teaching 'simple' structures. Beginner's English should make as much sense as the language of advanced students. If, therefore, both you and I know that Mr Grey's house is big, there is little point in saying so. Our shared knowledge makes the remark superfluous.

All the above elements are present in a 'situation', though any one of them may predominate. A situation is a totality, and by extracting the verbal content to study it in isolation we risk losing or deforming the meaning. Drama can help us to restore this totality by reversing the learning process, that is, by beginning with meaning and moving to language from there.

## About motivation

Much head-scratching goes on over the 'problem' of how to interest students in the language they are supposed to be learning. Many techniques have been tried – some crafty, some crude – to generate interest. Certain teachers believe that the only way is to let their students do what interests them most; often they come away disheartened: 'They aren't interested in anything', or 'They're never interested in the same thing'. Others try abandoning the text-book, but then 'The students feel they aren't learning anything'.

There can be no neat solution to motivation, but the 'problem' can be partly solved by asking, honestly, what those twenty or thirty people are trying to do *together* in the room. Surely, if communication is always on a one-to-thirty basis (i.e. from teacher to students), a great number of other possibilities are being wasted. A question from the teacher to one of the students is of direct interest to only two people in the class, though it may be of indirect interest to more. Drama helps us to keep all thirty people active all the time by making use of the dormant potential in the room. And, far from making the teacher's task harder, it actually relieves him or her of the burden of trying to do the impossible: keep thirty people active at the same intensity and at the same time. For, if the class is working in, say, five groups of six, the teacher's attention is split only in five ways and not