

Using the Performing Arts to Enhance Oral English Learning: A Case Study in a PRC Classroom

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The author completed a one-year stint with the School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Jiaotong University (SJTU), from September 2003 to June 2003. She was given the sophomore English major Oral English classes. Of these four classes, two were English majors, meaning that they were enrolled in the English Department and would eventually graduate with a Bachelor of English. The other two classes were majors in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) from the Shanghai University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, which were required to spend the first two years of their University life at SJTU in full-time English studies, reading the same courses as the English majors.

All four classes were highly proficient in the language and generally confident of their oral ability. The English majors, in particular, had entered SJTU with remarkably high (English) scores in the National College Entrance examinations. They relished the opportunity to practise and enhance their verbal and communicative skills during Oral classes and showed great promise.

The author took her classes through one semester of language games and communication activities, as well as solo and group presentations, rounding up with a course on solo oral presentation skills. In the second semester, she introduced her students to relevant aspects of the performing arts in English (e.g., choral speaking, drama, songs, dance and movement, music, and narration) to increase their awareness of what they could do in the oral English classroom.

This article is an account of how she carried out the two-part teaching and an attempt to assess its applicability in the mainland Chinese EFL classroom.

■ Background

The School of Foreign Languages comprises the Japanese Department and two arms of the English Department, i.e., the campus-wide English proficiency unit, which prepares the non-English major student population for the National College English Test (CET) (namely, CET 4 and CET 6); and the English Department for those majoring in English. English majors sit for national examinations entitled Test for English Majors, namely, TEM 4 and TEM 8.

Apart from these national examinations, English majors sit for internal semestral examinations, and some of their taught courses, certain ones, namely the Oral and Writing courses, are taught by native-speaker foreigners. As a Singaporean, I was the first foreign expert who was not from the US, UK, Australia or New Zealand, but deemed to possess first language or native speaker's competence¹.

Their own English undergraduate course consists of a hybrid of a foreign language course (where the emphasis is on the four skills—listening, reading, speaking/oral,

writing courses) and the kind of course taken by English majors in other parts of the world, i.e., Linguistics and Literature course. In addition, they have the Translation course, which gives them the ability to translate between English and Chinese in both directions. This last, I feel, gives their graduates a distinct advantage over Singapore's English majors. (In National University of Singapore, for example, the equivalent would be a graduate of the Chinese Department, who essentially majors in his or her second language, and becomes competent in bi-directional translation, if the candidate opts for the Translation course.)²

The course structure for undergraduates enrolled in the SJTU English course is as outlined in Figure 1 on the following page.

■ Semester 1—Language Games and Presentation Skills

Games and activities

The focus of the first semester was oral communication. The objective was to get students to talk freely and with

¹ I found Hu Xiao Qiong's article 'Why China English should stand alongside British, American, and other "world Englishes" in *English Today*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (April 2004) particularly insightful. In this article, she quotes Kachru (1997) on his categorization of Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles of English speakers. In such a classification a Singaporean speaker would belong to the Outer Circle of competent first language speakers.

² In this sense, one could actually derive a more accurate comparison from a study of the differences between the Shanghai undergraduate English course for PRC students, and the Chinese Studies course in NUS for English-stream Singaporean students, rather than of their respective English departments.

Year	Skills
1	Grammar, Listening/Phonetics, Oral English, Intensive Reading and Extensive Reading
2	Grammar, Listening Comprehension, Oral English, Intensive Reading, Extensive Reading, Writing (descriptive, narrative, discursive such as cause and effect arguments and definitions)
3	Intensive Reading, Writing, Linguistics, Literature (British and American)
4	Advanced Reading, Writing (including final year thesis), Newspaper Reading, Linguistics, Literature

Figure 1 Undergraduate course structure at SJTU

increasing confidence and enjoyment. Hence I dedicated this first semester to communication activities and language games, through pair, group and class work. Class work proved to be the most popular, even though with the two English major classes, the large class size (30 students for each) actually meant group work was more appropriate. They enjoyed oral language games as a class, and relished the opportunity to present and talk in front of the whole class, rather than just practise in their small groups.

Tongue twisters, initially a “time-filler” activity, proved to be immensely popular and never failed to inspire them to enthusiastic and intense practice. They took to these oral drills with an assiduousness that continues to amaze me. Towards the end of the second semester, one class even rose to the challenge of composing its own.

One original entry that was received with much applause from the class went like this: “William was wearing a wet white wedding suit waiting for his overweight weird wife.” William was the name adopted by one of the boys in the class, arguably the most affable one among them and the subject of many of their “linguistic” innovations and applications.

Other occasional activities included class reading, which they enjoyed, especially when given the liberty to read as much or little as they wished before passing the book on to the next person.

The other kind of activity that they welcomed without exception was the chance to work in small groups to “create” something and present it imaginatively to the rest of the class. This could take the form of devising a novel product/service and then role playing it as a commercial, or presenting it to an imaginary audience of would-be investors. This required them to think from two different perspectives, and not all groups were equally adept at, although all took to the first part with great excitement. Products featured ranged from multi-purpose cell phones, to all-purpose robots, to an examination scoring invention (actually a spy-all exam cheating device), among many other totally amusing and wildly imaginative items. Next to tongue twisters, this kind of

creative challenge and role play was the perennial favourite, one that brought to the surface their love of innovation.

Oral presentation skills

The last component of the first semester Oral English class was oral presentation skills³.

In the last part of the semester, I took them through solo presentation skills, beginning with preliminary techniques such as breathing and relaxing drills, and moving through all the vital aspects of good oral delivery. Broadly, they were made to bear in mind the three aspects of Content, Language, and Delivery. Within this last category, I took them through the use and control of Voice (volume, pace, pitch and inflexion, breath control), Pronunciation, Tone and Body Language (eye contact, posture, use of gestures and facial and whole body expression).

In terms of student response, the relaxation and preliminary drills met with the least enthusiastic response, perhaps due to the fact that these were older students, and also due to the physical limitations of the classroom. When they had to practise expression, most chose to apply the use of voice and inflexion to signal differing purposes rather than gestures and use of the body.

This quickness to apply and to enjoy whatever they were learning was evident when I was teaching them the nuances of intonation, and one exercise required them to say “No” in seven different tones, implying seven different meanings. One of them was how to say “No” when we mean “Yes”. At the end of the lesson, I asked if they would like to keep the handouts, to which they replied “Yes”, meaning I could have them back!

The first semester thus culminated with the examination of solo presentation skills, in the form of a three-minute presentation on any topic, incorporating the techniques learnt.

■ Semester 2—Using Aspects of the Performing Arts

I started the semester with a quick revision of the oral presentation skills covered in the previous term, and was pleasantly surprised by the students’ sharp and quick recall of what they had learnt, right down to specific lessons. As an introduction to Semester Two, I told them that I would move them from solo presentation skills to group and performing skills, such as choral speaking and reading, drama, original compositions, the use of movement and dance, music, and multi-media.

One of the most memorable lessons was the introduction to oral poetry reading. For this session, I chose two poems meant for junior high school, which were designed to be read aloud, so as to make the students sensitive to the elements of rhyme and rhythm, pace, volume and inflexion, and last but not least, emotion

³ For this, I have to thank an ex-colleague Dr Feng Anwei (who co-ordinated the SLAP Programme for the SM3 Scholars in Singapore in 2001), for the materials I used were directly borrowed from the collection he put together. SLAP stands for Special Language-in-Action Programme and SM3 Scholars are a group of Chinese senior middle school students selected by the Singapore government to study in Singapore universities.

and expression⁴. The purpose of poetry reading is to make the students sensitive to. I also introduced them to reading in duets, trios, groups and then as a class. They enjoyed these tremendously as they opened up a whole dimension of oral performance for them. They had done something similar with Chinese works, but in English, it was a novelty.

The next lesson, I used a dramatic poem without directing them how to read it⁵. The class was divided into two, so that we would have the benefit of two differing renditions of the poem. I was treated to a display of witty student initiatives. With minimal supervision, they rehearsed and gave a convincing dramatic reading of the poem. Although the poem is set against the backdrop of the Sango de Cristo mountains of New Mexico, they were still able to appreciate the description of scenery, by relating the lines to native mountain scenery. They only fumbled with the unfamiliar vocabulary such as "... the yellow flash of a mountain lion's long shoot!"⁶

In another lesson, I divided the class into different task groups. Two groups read "Men are like Cats"⁷, and composed a retort, either in poetry or prose. One of the most impressive is this short poem by one of the girls:

Women Are like Polar Lights.

Women are like polar lights.
They themselves may not realize that.
They're dressed in flowery colours,
and keep on changing every moment.
The innermost recesses of their hearts,
if you ever fix your eyes on them,
are like a serenade,
closest to the sound of heaven.

By Vivid

Another exercise was an attempt at a dramatic reading of the creation story from the book of Genesis, since they were at that point reading excerpts from Genesis in their extensive reading class with a local teacher. However, this fell flat as the language (King James Version) was totally strange to them, and severely restricted their appreciation, and thus oral reading.

In a subsequent lesson, I simplified the text, rephrasing it into modern English, and reduced the number of lines they had to read. They could appreciate this much better, and read with appropriate rhythm and pauses. It was the first time they read a text against background music, in this instance, *A Whole New World* from the Walt Disney movie *Aladdin*.

I booked the multi-media room for the next couple of sessions. My objective was two-fold—to challenge them eventually to attempt a multi-media presentation, and to expose them to professional performances, both traditional and modern, and cross-cultural too.

They watched excerpts from well-known musicals

Grease 2, *The King and I* and *Les Miserables*. The first, being set against the backdrop of American college life, provided an easy way in as it provided a ready point of comparison and contrast with their own student life and comprised scenes involving impressive solo and mass song-and-dance items. *The King and I* was a sterling lesson in cross-cultural appreciation, and the play-within-a-play structure of the stylised Thai adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was an eye-opener, something which would make its way into one of their performances later. I used *Les Miserables* to highlight what a solo performer could do, with or without body movement. I showed them Fantene's solo—a masterpiece of voice control and maximum expression, with hardly any physical movement at all. This was to prove a point to those who were rather averse to using their bodies for expression, to encourage them to master the use of their voice instead.

The next few lessons focused on the introduction to Greek drama, as I thought that though they were all familiar with modern Western drama, they were not likely to be aware of its ancient origins. The stylised acting, use of masks and the role of the Chorus were some of the aspects that I wanted to introduce to them and see them apply in their "productions". Furthermore, they could draw from their familiarity with traditional Chinese opera to see the similarities. I chose *Medea* by Euripedes for its high dramatic potential and intense display of emotion.

Medea entries

By far the most impressive adaptation of *Medea* was put on by one of the TCM classes, which had incorporated significant aspects of what they had learnt throughout the term into a version all their own, a cross between *Medea* and *The Lord of the Rings*. They named it *The Lord of the Rings*. This class also recorded the whole performance and produced a CD of it for me.

One of the most captivating scenes was the rendition of the theme song of the Chinese classic *Butterfly Lovers* in English. I had earlier on suggested that they try to translate the lyrics, and after some help with certain parts, they gave a most memorable performance of it!

They also learnt much from the Thai adaptation of the American classic *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in *The King and I* as the stylized running on one leg found its way into the play too, even with the rest of the class who were not playing leads, chorusing "Run" in one of the scenes.

At the close of the play, instead of the backdrop of the French Revolution (*à la Les Miserables*), they inserted a section about the overthrow of the Lord of the fictional Land and its replacement by Communism.

■ **Final Examination**

I designed a performance-based examination for the students' Finals held in June. They were to present an item using all or some of the performing arts techniques

⁴ "Cows" by James Reeves and "The Ant Explorer" by C.J. Dennis

⁵ "Mountain Lion" by D. H. Lawrence

⁶ "Shoot" means "leap" in here.

⁷ "Men are Like Cats" by Mary Carn

learnt during the second semester, incorporating the oral skills acquired from the first semester as well⁸.

Examination format

They had to form their own groups and present or perform an artistic item, incorporating any combination of the performing skills that they had learnt throughout the semester. However, the assessment would still be based on the oral skills. This meant that if a group put up a drama, I would assess them on the quality of the narration and the delivery of the lines (whether adopted, adapted or original), rather than the quality of the acting *per se*. Likewise, if they performed a song, I would assess them on the clarity and expression, rather than the melodiousness or pitching.

They would also be assessed on the appropriateness of their choice of material (i.e., whether they knew how to blend a suitable piece of music with a poem that they had selected to read aloud, and whether they capitalized on their individual talents and strengths (e.g., the one who read best was given the role of the narrator, while the one(s) who sang better would render a song, etc.).

In addition, they would be assessed on the effectiveness of their rendition. This referred to whether the selected piece would “come alive” when they performed it. Besides the diction, this was the crux of the performance, as it would prove whether they had grasped the whole point about performing an item with confidence.

Examination entries

A few examination entries included the recitation or dramatic reading of poems set against carefully and appropriately selected music. They had a good mix of solo, duet and group reading. Other groups decided on drama. One all-boys group re-enacted a scene from *My Fair Lady*, a highly appropriate choice since it is all about language and language training.

Other entries were movie adaptations, including one that took the form of a quiz on well-known movies delivered in typical TV game show style. This, together with audience involvement and even incentives (chocolates), was a refreshing variation. But somehow it did not receive the response that the team expected, despite the fact that the quiz masters were brave and competent.

An all-girls group decided to attempt a multi-media entry by re-enacting an entire episode from the sitcom *Friends* and producing it as a DVD, with the help of the “moviemaker” function. They took a whole week to complete it, and used a friend’s house so that it resembled the set used in the sitcom. Not content with the challenge of shooting the DVD episode, they followed up with a “live” performance of another episode, complete with a group rendition of the theme song. In fact, there was no script in sight as they had faithfully committed all the lines in both the DVD and “live” renditions to memory. Clarity was, however, compromised in the DVD version,

but the co-ordination was impressive, down to the scene breaks and the corresponding insertion of theme music.

The entry I considered by far the most impressive was *Alice in Wonderland*, a brilliantly creative interweaving of seven works into one. The controlling motif was the figure of Alice, who first wandered into ancient China and the world of the *Butterfly Lovers*, where the audience was treated to a highly entertaining blend of Eastern and Western elements. Against the backdrop of the *Butterfly Lovers Concerto*, the members went into character, complete with traditional costumes, improvised props using twigs and cardboard butterflies, a turban which was actually an ordinary shirt twirled into shape, and masks. In the foreground was the student who was coordinating the scene and music changes with the help of a laptop. The solitary figure of *Liang San Bo* in classic *Hamlet* pose, musing “To be or not to be”, was one of the most brilliant and entertaining moments, encapsulating the essence of cross-cultural appreciation, and a masterpiece in diction, poise, and dramatic effect, all in the spirit of fun. This was followed by a duet rendition of the theme song of the movie *Titanic*, “My Love Will Go On”, and a solo performance of the theme song of *The Sound of Music*. The masks were used for the segment on *Beauty and the Beast*, before the audience witnessed Cinderella walking through the magic mirror with Alice. Finally, Alice wandered into the land of *Aladdin* and his magic lamp and met the Genie.

Synoptic observations based on examination entries

Teamwork and originality were consistently the most highly rated. Most groups were also strong in terms of volume, pace, expression and emotion. By far the area that was most lacking was clarity in diction, compared to the other aspects. Apart from strong accents, many still did not pronounce their words clearly enough. In fact, in most cases, they were more fluent than clear.

Generally, body language, pose and confidence were satisfactory, and in some cases very evident. Eye contact was adequate, although some individuals forgot to face the audience at all times.

All the groups took obvious pride in their entries, which were highly creative and imaginative. Some had been entirely created by members, and others were adaptations of famous works. Their entries also took a great variety of forms, ranging from the single drama entry to a mix of all the forms that had been taught throughout the semester. In fact, they relished the opportunity to flaunt their ingenuity in an amazing display of all the performing skills and techniques learnt in just two semesters.

Overall Conclusions

I would say that two semesters of oral English had made all of them more fluent in the use of English. They were considerably more confident in their use of the language and in their presentations. Since they enjoyed what they were doing, there was hardly any problem with shyness

⁸ See Appendix for a copy of the examination guidelines

or reticence. Enthusiasm was never lacking, especially in the second semester. Hence, teaching of Oral English through the use of performing arts is a definite plus. It brings out hidden talents and brings their creativity and leadership to the fore, and even the quietest members relished the opportunity for teamwork and contribution. They were proud of their pieces and willing to invest extra time in practice.

In typical fashion, they were always curious about the culture of other parts of the world, in particular the Western one. Hence, they took to cross cultural information with a very open mind and applied and adapted what they imbibed in ways which displayed their intelligence and honed their oral skills, including, for instance, translating or adapting English and Chinese works and then “performing” them.

Although there was some measure of improvement in diction and accuracy, this is the area I was least satisfied with. Although they took to correction and subsequent practice very readily, somehow they were more fluent

than accurate. Perhaps more pronunciation and phonetic drills would be appropriate, although they are already very well versed in phonetics by senior middle school.

Hence I would say that the performing arts certainly have a place in the Oral English classroom. They open up some totally new aspects, while giving students the freedom and creative space to innovate and own their own performances. Those who already possessed a credible level of confidence in their own oral ability were challenged to achieve even more. Perhaps even more importantly, it gave those who were not confident the opportunity to realize what they could achieve and to take pride in the product, while enjoying the process. The teamwork and leadership that the process encourages are also notable.

In the hands of the instructor who has himself or herself been trained and involved in many aspects of performing arts, this becomes a powerful and effective tool, which is relished by both teacher and students.

APPENDIX: Final Examination (Oral) for 2nd Year English Majors

Group presentation

Grouping:	4 groups per class.	
Duration per group:	1 period of 45 minutes (including practice/warm-up)	
Duration of presentation item:	20 min	
Dates:	Tue 8 Jun	Thurs 10 Jun
	Tue 15 Jun	Thurs 17 Jun

Assessment Criteria

Individual effort: 70%
Group effort/teamwork: 30%

*Clarity (i.e. pronunciation)

*Expression and emotion

*Volume and pace

*Appropriateness of material (e.g., for poem- choral reading, choral reading against music or a dramatic adaptation of poem)

*Effectiveness of rendition (i.e., does the poem/drama/song, etc. come alive when “performed” by the group/individual?)

Note: Assessment is based on ORAL skills (if there is narration with silent drama, the quality of narration is assessed and not the acting skill; likewise, if the group chooses to perform a song, clarity and expression are assessed, but not the melodiousness).

Medium

- Choral reading in groups, with duet or solo parts
- Choral reading against music
- Song
- Song with movement/dance
- Dramatic reading
- Drama/dramatic adaptation
- Any combination of the above

Content

Poem/prose/drama script /song whether text-based, adapted or composed.

