

Empowering English Language Learners | Elise May

AUGUST 30, 2014 BY [ELISE MAY](#)

Since 2005, I have been using theatrical voice techniques to help ESL/ELL students creatively overcome their fears of performing in English. My main program goal is to have English Language Learners become as confident expressing themselves in English as in their own native language. Theater is the perfect medium to overcome communication insecurities and build confidence. Theater games and voice exercises can also be a lot of fun, which is something I rely upon to help my ESL students build their confidence speaking in a new language.

Whereas ESL students may be confident expressing themselves in their native language, doing so in English brings a multitude of new challenges: finding the correct words, articulating sounds that may not be in their native tongue, using appropriate gestures and unfamiliar variations in pitch, and more. Every aspect of communicating becomes hard work. The simple act of raising your hand in class to answer a question can become overwhelming.



I have been fortunate to work with elementary, middle and high school ESL students and teachers. When I present professional development workshops, I start by giving a questionnaire written in a language the teachers don't know. As they stare at the unfamiliar characters, symbols or letters they realize how easy it is to forget the

frustration of trying to communicate when you don't know the language. Add to this the emotional angst of being a teenager, the desire to fit in, living in a new country with or without family, etc. and you can get students who close themselves off when not with others from their culture. Working with students from many different cultures has helped me see how similar their experiences are. It made me want to create a support system that not only crossed cultural barriers but also helped them communicate with each other.

Last year, while I was working with elementary and high school students in a creative mentorship program, the class had an interesting linguistic makeup. Although all of the students were beginners in English, all of the elementary students were of Asian descent, while all the high school students were from Latin American cultures. English was their common bond; a language they were all trying to learn which none had mastered.



The ESL teachers who were my partners in this project wanted to have the students mentor each other to build a sense of community across cultures, ages and school buildings. They included me to help the students become more confident expressing themselves in English. I loved the idea. Using a children's book entitled, *The Crayon Box That Talked* by Shane Derolf and Michael Letzig, I created a script to which the students could add their own lines. The original text lent itself to the mentorship, allowing the high school students to take on the role of the narrator, a little girl who

bought a box of crayons, while the elementary students became different color crayons that initially didn't get along. The essence of the story was learning that each crayon offered something special and should be respected and enjoyed.

In our first session, I led some icebreaking exercises and then we had a read through. Many of the high school students wouldn't speak. One had refused to attend, not getting on the bus going to the other school. The elementary students were silent or barely audible.

Enter theater voice exercises. First and foremost, breathing. Breathing exercises are unifying (hey, we all breathe!) and have the added benefit of relaxing the body and focusing the mind. Make these exercises facially silly and they warm up muscles needed for speech. They also break the ice.



Each session started with theatrical diagnostic exercises I had created to foster oral language expression, articulation and projection. With the teachers and me modelling all the exercises to the fullest, students started becoming more comfortable participating. The younger students were less inhibited which actually made the older students more willing to try. Using theater games, I created a safe place for the students

to explore the written text and their own stories. Wonderful bonds were created as the students shared more of their lives and their culture. A cohesive theatrical performance developed as well.





Throughout rehearsals, the students' confidence grew, their participation increased and they became vocally empowered. The most amazing transformation was that of the student who refused to come to the first session. After an assistant principal insisted he be part of the program, he reluctantly attended sessions. Having an elementary student look up to him and share his struggles, truly touched him. Each week he loosened up and allowed himself to feel safe and play. He became more and more enthusiastic. The icing on the cake was when, unfortunately, one of the high school students was ill the day of the performance. This once reluctant student came up to me and asked if he could perform the ill student's lines. Smiling and proud, he said he knew all the lines and really wanted to do it. I am still smiling. And that you can understand in any language!

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About Elise May

Elise May is a Teaching Artist who has performed and taught in the U.S., Canada, Bermuda and England. With degrees in Theatre and Communicative Disorders and Sciences, Elise has developed many educational programs using theater arts for vocal empowerment with mainstream, Special Education and ESL students of all ages. Creating interactive, multisensory programs with curricular and thematic connections allows Elise to work with school districts, libraries, camps and corporations on performance, communications skills and community development. Her mission is for all to be heard, be understood and be confident. www.expressive-elocution.com