

Using Star Taxi – a drama course for the ESL classroom

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Introduction

This paper presents methods on teaching Star Taxi, a pre-intermediate level play written by Ian Franklyn and Theo Steckler and published by Dramaworks. It aims to give teachers who are thinking of using the course ideas for constructing a syllabus, preparing classes, homework, tests, etc. It is hoped that teachers will be persuaded to take on a course which will not only improve students' English but also increase their confidence and motivation. And above all allow them to understand that "the monotony of a conventional English class can be broken" (Chauhan, 2004).

Why use drama in the ESL classroom?

Using written conversations between two or more characters are part and parcel of every oral communication class, however how often does that conversation merely remain words printed on the spoken page disconnected from both the students' emotions and physical world. Many university students will have spent at least six years looking at dialogues in this manner. So why not use drama and bring the classroom to life? Burke and O'Sullivan (2002) give the following reasons why:

- i. it increases motivation and fluency
- ii. it makes the students relaxed using the language
- iii. the language is used for true-to-life purposes
- iv. a community can be created in the classroom
- v. students remember the language better

- vi. students can work on not only linguistic features such as pronunciation and intonation, but also body language.

Other authors verify its use. El Nady (2000) gives the following reason for using drama in that “each of us learns our native language through multiple interactive experiences involving vocabulary and grammar. It is shaped both by internal processes and by social interaction.” Whereas Robinson looks at it from the cultural aspect: “drama provides cultural and language enrichment by revealing insights into the target culture and presenting language contexts that make items memorable by placing them in a realistic social and physical context”

All in all it seems that the cause for using drama in the ESL classroom is strong. However starting to do drama is a daunting process for most teachers, which is where Star Taxi comes in: a complete course that even a teacher with no drama training can undertake with ease.

What is Star Taxi?

Star Taxi is a 20-scene drama based on the story of an aspiring actor, Lucas and his relationship with a Japanese girl, Gion, who has gone to Los Angeles in search of an actor for her movie. It follows Lucas as he gets a job working as a taxi driver, only later to find out that the company being run by Tony “Gags” Gagliardi, is in fact part of the mafia. As Lucas gets further embroiled in the mafia, his blossoming relationship with Gion, who had been one of his customers, is all that can save him. Gion keeps an air of mystery about her throughout the story, and it is only in the last scene that we find out her true reason for going to the United States.

Scene breakdown	
1	Lucas meets Gags in the street
2	Gion gets Lucas' taxi at the airport
3	Gion checks into the hotel
4	Lucas bumps into Gion at the cinema
5	Lucas and Gion go for coffee
6	Lucas and Gion talking in the coffee shop
7	Shorty and Muggs rob the jewelry shop
8	Gion calls the "mystery" man in Japan
9	Gion goes to look at the house
10	Lucas calls Gion to ask for a date
11	Lucas goes to buy some clothes
12	Lucas and Gion in the restaurant
13	Lucas and Gion go to Lucas' flat for coffee
14	Lucas and Gion make the video
15	Gags gives Lucas a bonus
16	The party at Lucas' flat
17	Lucas tells Gion about his "work" for Gags
18	Lucas leaves Gion to go and do the "job"
19	The heist
20:	Lucas meets Gion at the airport to go to Japan

Each scene is written in relatively easy English in a natural style consisting of brief lines from each character. The variety of the scenes also means that the content can be applied to real-life situations.

Who is Star Taxi aimed at?

The interesting story and the fairly easy level of the script mean that Star Taxi can be used in many different situations. It has been used successfully in oral communication classes for both English majors, non-English majors and in preliminary

English courses for first year university students of any faculty. Colleagues have also used it without trouble at junior college and in high school oral communication classes, although some adaptations may be necessary for younger students, which will be discussed later.

Syllabus

The Dramaworks website suggests that the 20 scenes are taught over one academic year, using one scene per week. However this timescale does not suit universities which have 15-week semesters and classes that do not last a whole academic year. Due to this it is necessary to complete two scenes in one class, giving each scene only 45 minutes. A suggested schedule could be:

Week	Class
1	Outline of the course, making name tags, Scene 1
2	Scenes 2 & 3
3	Scenes 4 & 5
4	Scenes 6 & 7
5	Scenes 8 & 9
6	Scenes 10 & 11
7	Scenes 12 & 13
8	Scenes 14 & 15
9	Scenes 17 & 18
10	Scene 19, test information
11	Scene 20, video information
12	Test
13	No class (video making)
14	No class (video making)
15	Video premiere

How does the teacher need to prepare?

The key to the success of Star Taxi in the classroom is the performance of the teacher. It is likely that most EFL teachers will have had no drama training and so may approach taking on a course such as this with trepidation. However, with very little practice and a few scenes worth of experience even a novice actor can make a success of the course, such is the ease of teaching Star Taxi. In fact, the Star Taxi publishers, Dramaworks, offer training courses throughout Japan, which can be easily and cheaply attended, if the teacher should so wish.

Preparation for each class is vital. If the teacher is unprepared and/or nervous about teaching a class, this can be considerably demotivating for the students and needless to say can detract from the enjoyment of the play. Yet, preparation does not mean that the teacher should know the scenes off by heart beforehand. It is possible to make reduced versions of the text which can be held in the palm of the hand and referred to when the students themselves are practicing. Alternatively, in scenes using chairs, larger A4 versions can be made and placed on the other chair, but care must be taken that the students do not see what is written on the sheet.

Finally and above all, the instructor needs to be enthusiastic. Especially in the beginning of the course when students are still uneasy about acting themselves, it is the role of the teacher to make the atmosphere of the class conducive to drama.

How do you set up the classroom?

Having a classroom that is suitable for teaching Star Taxi is crucial. The larger the space the better: a hall of any description would be ideal. Chairs for every student are also necessary depending on the scene. The majority of scenes involving face to face dialogue can be conducted in rows down the classroom. If the number of students is over 20 we can expect to have four rows of students either standing or sitting

depending on the context.

For the telephone conversations (Scenes 8 and 10) it was found that with smaller groups the students can sit with their backs to their partners which encouraged speaking in louder voices. However in larger classes in cramped rooms it can be difficult for students to hear their partner, so it is recommended they face one another.

In these scenes the teacher can either sit at the front of the class to demonstrate if there are two rows of pairs, or sit midway down the row if there is just one. When demonstrating it is best if the teacher sits on the opposite side to those they are demonstrating to.

For scenes involving cars (Scenes 2, 7 and 10), a simple layout with four chairs can be used. At these times it is important that the teacher be at the front and easily seen by all the students.

The “sofa” scenes (9, 13, 17, and 18) are more difficult to organize. If possible a circle of two seat sofas around the room with the teacher in the middle works best. This way all the students can see the teacher and there is still room to maneuver in front and behind the sofas.

The biggest space problem occurs with Scene 9, when Gion is being shown around an apartment by an estate agent. Here once again the circular “sofa” layout can be used, with the sofa doubling for the dining room chairs and the bed. In confined space exact instructions need to be given to the students, so as to avoiding one pair invading the apartment of their neighbours. It is recommended that teachers prepare a floor plan for this scene before starting it.

Student name tags.

As has been previously mentioned doing drama in the classroom can be a great way for students to get to know one another. This however has to be reinforced and

an ideal way to do this is with name tags. Initially simple tags written by the student with the name that they wanted to be known by on the front and attached by safety pins were used.

In the beginning of the course it is useful for the teacher to hand out the tags before the start of class so as to quickly learn the names of the students. After several weeks, the teacher may give batches of tags to individual students for them to hand out instead. This, too, improves contact between in the students.

After several years of doing Star Taxi and ever-increasing class size, it was realised that the reverse of the name-tag could be used for the students to keep record of their attendance, demonstrations and homework grades. This greatly reduces the time the teacher has to spend on checking these and can be also easily collected and referred to at the end of the course. Absent students can also quickly be marked away without having to check a register, thus saving valuable class time.

The name tags can be easily made at the beginning of the first class by the students themselves.

Name (ローマ字)				(漢字)				
Weeks	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
	Demo		HWK			Demo		HWK
Scene 1				Scene 11				
Scene 2				Scene 12				
Scene 3				Scene 13				
Scene 4				Scene 14				
Scene 5				Scene 15				
Scene 6				Scene 16				
Scene 7				Scene 17				
Scene 8				Scene 18				
Scene 9				Scene 19				
Scene 10				Scene 20				

What props are needed?

Star Taxi can be performed with a minimum of props, which reduces preparation on the part of the teacher, especially in the university setting when the number of students varies greatly. Many of the scenes can be done with objects that the students have with them already. The following shows the props needed for each scene and suggested replacements. Items in the brackets are those that can be used for demonstrations and so only one set need be prepared.

Scene	Props
1	a cigarette, a business card
2,3 & 4	a bag, money (Scene 2)
5 & 6	(tray, cups, plates, table)
7	a bag (toy guns)
8	phones
9	phones
11	(shirt, jacket and trousers)
12	(table, glasses, menu)
13	(tray, mugs, photo album, boxer shorts)
14	scripts (video camera)
15	(envelope of money, cigar, toy gun)
17	(wine bottle, glass)
18	(trousers)
20:	airline tickets, bags

The cigarettes can be provided by the teacher for the first scene. Any cards or papers can be used in place of the business card, scripts and airline tickets. In the scenes where clothes are needed, cheap large sized items that can be put on over the top of normal clothes are both easy and entertaining for the students.

How to warm-up the class

Starting a Star Taxi class, it is essential to do some warm-up activities. We should not expect our students to be able to start performing the moment they walk into the classroom especially in the beginning of the course. Maley and Duff (2005) state that warm-up activities “help put the students in a relaxed, less inhibited state, in which they are more receptive than they might otherwise be. This helps to lower the threshold of unconscious resistance to learning a foreign language, and to foster more open creative work in subsequent activities. They help to develop confidence and cooperation with others. Being aware of others and how we relate to them is an important aspect of the class bonding.” They continue to say that “many of the activities are good ways of warming up a group of students who do not yet know each other. It is important therefore that they change partners as often as possible so as to interact with a larger number of other students.”

A variety of warm-up activities can be used with Star Taxi. Maley and Duff's book gives some good examples of ice-breaking or confidence building activities that require little or no linguistic input that can be conducted easily. It should be noted however that whatever the exercise we should try to ensure that the students change partners as much as possible and in the case of Japanese classes to have the male and female students interact as much as possible, as they are notoriously prone to form single sex groups at any opportunity.

One further goal of the warm-up activity can be to decide the partners for the first scene to be taught that day. The teacher can easily manipulate this discreetly if any of the pairs that have formed will either not work well together or will be disruptive.

How is Star Taxi taught?

Star Taxi is not a usual drama in the sense of the word. Students are not given scripts and for the most part each scene consists of only two characters. The teacher is required to demonstrate the lines for the students to watch and then copy. In effect, Star Taxi is a shadowing activity on a grand scale: the students will copy not only the actions of the teacher but also the linguistic features such as intonation, rhythm and pronunciation.

Procedure for teaching the scenes is simple. The teacher will demonstrate the first line of the scene. Students copy. The teacher will then adopt the persona of the other character and give the second line. Although the language level is about pre-intermediate and the lines short, it still takes time for the students to remember them, so it is vital to keep repeating the lines already given to build up to a full dialogue. This need not be done continually to the end of the scene: there are natural breaks in most scenes and a completed sequence can be left while the next sequence is being demonstrated.

Once the teacher has demonstrated a line, students are asked to copy it. Using “Action!” to start the students works well. At this point, the teacher needs to ensure that gestures, facial expressions, and movements are being copied and not just the line itself. As the scene progresses the teacher can choose how far back they want the students to perform in the scene thus reinforcing the dialogue they have learnt so far.

After the whole scene has been completed it is important for the teacher to give the students time to polish their performance. This can be done just in pair work, or the adjacent couple can be used to watch and give help to their peers. At this time the teacher is also monitoring and helping the students.

Students find particular difficult with gestures and facial expressions. As Miccoli (2003) points out “how native speakers hold their bodies, how far they stand apart, where they look when they talk, how men shake their hands with each other, how

children talk to their parents and so on” and these “are not commonly addressed in regular conversation classes.” Harmer (2001) also says that “paralinguistic features such as tone of voice, gesture, and posture are all part of the way we communicate with each other in face-to-face encounters. When teaching we can draw our students’ attention to this.” Star Taxi provides ample practice of different gestures, expressions and postures, however students often seem to find it difficult to do some or indeed are reluctant.

Raising the eyebrows to show interest or surprise is one such problem that occurs regularly throughout the play. This is not part of the Japanese facial repertoire and so for some students even knowing what muscles to move is hard. However, practice can be set as a “fun” homework to be checked by their partners the following week which normally cures the problem.

On the whole gestures and posture are more easily copied, but they can be easily forgotten so it vital that the teacher remind the students throughout.

Special mention needs to be made of Scene 16: The party and Scene 19: The heist. There is no script for Scene 16 as it is meant as mingling activity. This scene is more difficult for the teacher since it does not follow the rigid procedure of the rest of the course. In larger, less motivated classes, it can also be a reason for using Japanese or just standing around doing nothing. The scene itself is not essential for the storyline and can be left out as the teacher sees fit.

Unlike the rest of the play, Scene 19: The heist on the Federal express truck involves many characters: Lucas, the Mafia mob (Gags, Mugs and Shorty), policemen and the truck driver and security guard. After several trials, not using the Star Taxi shadowing technique proved successful. The students are divided up into groups of about 8. Before the scene is discussed students are asked to choose a character from the list on written on the blackboard. Once characters have been decided on each group is given one script which includes cues in either English (for higher level classes) or Japanese (for lower level). The groups are then taken to different rooms to

produce their own version of the scene in isolation. After an allotted time all groups are called back to demonstrate.

Demonstrations

Once the scene has been completed and the students have had time to practice it thoroughly, there should be some time allotted for demonstrations in front of the class. Initially it can be hard to get volunteers, but if the teacher gives students a goal of at least three demonstrations for the duration of the course, students will venture to demonstrate. After several weeks, when the students are more relaxed, the number of volunteers will increase and demonstration time will become the highlight of the class, especially if some of the students are willing to ham it up a little.

Marking the demonstrations themselves can be done, however since not all of the students will demonstrate the same number of times, it can be troublesome to work out scores at the end of the course.

Homework

Homework is a necessary component of any course. Primarily writing tasks were set asking the students to predict future events, to write about the histories of the characters or give details of the relationships evolving in the play. However in a class that only meets once a week and under a heavy schedule of scenes it can be difficult to give the students the feedback they need for their homework. As a result it was decided that homework should be to write up the scenes that have been performed in class. One scene would include the dialogue plus the actors' cues in either Japanese or English depending on the level of the class. This way, every student has a written record of every scene performed and these can be used at the end of the course when they are preparing for the test and/or video.

To cut marking to a minimum the following scale was devised:

A+ (95)	Perfect
A (85)	Close to perfect but some small errors
B (75)	More errors
C (65)	Spelling mistakes
Fail (45)	Below standard

Homework can be done in the pairs if the class is overly big or the students' level low. Although this reduces marking time, the drawbacks are that not everyone will have a copy of each scene performed and the weaker student of the pair may rely on their partner to do the work.

Test

The end of term test requires students to perform one scene in pairs. The pairs are decided randomly (usually by pulling the name tags out of a bag) after Scene 19 has been finished. Each pair will then be given a list of the scenes and asked to choose which they would like to do. At this point it needs to be said that the test can either be a separate activity to the video or preparation for it. If it is to be a separate activity then having different pairs do the same scene is no problem. However if the test is to be preparation for the video, then the teacher will need to make sure that each scene is covered. In this situation, scenes can either be allotted by the teacher, chosen on a first come first served basis or again pulled out of the bag.

The test itself is done in a two tier level, which, although time-consuming, gives the weaker students more confidence. Firstly pairs are required to perform before the teacher. Scenes should include gestures, facial expressions and any props that are needed. The teacher can then use this "preparation test" to give any advice to the pair.

The next step is to conduct the tests in front of the whole class. Students are given a checklist containing all of the students' names and the characters they are playing. Students can then be asked to score each actor based on the criteria that the teacher gives, such as gesture, facial expression, volume, effort etc.

Final Video

The final video is definitely the most enjoyable part of the course for the students. As mentioned above, if the test is to be used as preparation for the video the pairs will already be decided. However if the video is to be a free standing activity then new partners have to be decided. Not including the party scene and the heist, there are 38 parts in the remaining 18 scenes. In classes with fewer students than 38, some will have to appear more than once. In classes with more, and if a second video camera is available, two videos can be made.

It was found during the making of the first video that if the teacher is present, then the students tend to rely on them for instruction. It was therefore decided that the students should be left on their own to organise the filming. When information about the video is being given to the students after the completion of the final scene, sheets can be handed out detailing what it expected but also giving guidelines on how to make a video. These can include deciding the cast and crew: who will be the editors, who will be the overall producers, etc. If there are obvious class leaders then it can be easy for the teacher to make them the producers. The guidelines also need to give pointers on filming such as camera angle, lighting and background noise.

Editing the video into one continual drama can be a time-consuming task. However if a "take" card is held up between each scene, and the students are asked to perform the scene without pause, editing time can be reduced.

In making the video students are encouraged to leave the confines of the university to increase the authenticity of the finished product. However one further

point worth mentioning is that the teacher can allow the students to change the storyline. The setting of some of the scenes, such as the final scene at the airport and on the plane would be impossible to film. In previous videos, there have been students leaving on buses and ferries, but all of these have required changes in scripts in that and previous scenes.

The last point concerning the video is that it is mandatory that the students do not watch scenes that have already been completed, so that everyone will be viewing the whole for the first time at the premiere. An abundance of video cassettes would solve this problem, but since the finished item is only about 20 minutes long, one cassette will suffice.

The premiere of the video in the last week of term is a fun way to end a productive term. Once again the teacher can prepare checklists for the students to grade performance if they wish. DVD copies of the video can be made and distributed to all those who took part.

In summary

This paper has looked at ways to teach the Star Taxi course successfully as tool not only for linguistic improvement but also increasing motivation in the classroom. In future papers, the problems that occur with Star Taxi as well as the results and student reactions will be looked at.

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Using Star Taxi – a drama course for the ESL classroom

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