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Herbert Puchta Günther Gerngross and Matthew Devitt
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More information

THE PHOTOCOPIABLE RESOURCE Series

Herbert Puchta • Günter Gerngross • Matthew Devitt

Get on Stage!

21 sketches and plays for young learners and teens

HELBLING LANGUAGES

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Frontmatter
More information

Introduction

What is *Get on Stage!* all about?

We have written this book as a response to requests we have frequently heard at language teaching conferences in a variety of countries worldwide. In conversations about what materials colleagues would find useful to support their work, we have often heard requests for ready-made scripts for plays for students to act out. Teachers look for plays that students can perform for each other or in front of a 'real' audience of some sort – be it another class, a group of parents, and/or the school community, at a school fete or maybe at the end of the year. We are using the term 'play' in a generic way here – we mean a range of scripts of different lengths, genres, with different language levels and preparation required.

The plays have been carefully created for young and teenage students (see the introduction to each play). They are easy to stage as they do not require a lot of props – sometimes none at all – and they make it possible for you to involve a large number of students. The introductory notes at the beginning give further suggestions as to how extra students can take part in a play, e.g. by splitting longer roles so that two or more students can play them.

The structure of the book

Get on Stage! has four chapters. Chapter 1 has nine short humorous sketches, each of about five minutes' runtime. There is also one longer sketch (*At the Doctor's*) that has six scenes; however, each of these scenes is a short, self-contained sketch in itself, meaning that you can use the play in a very flexible way. Your students may want to act out just one of the scenes, or several, or all of them.

Chapters 2 and 3 contain plays of medium length (about five to ten minutes, depending on the production). In Chapter 2 you will find three humorous contemporary sketches, and in Chapter 3 five plays based on traditional stories.

The last chapter contains three modern teen dramas; whereas the sketches and plays in Chapters 1–3 can also be used with younger learners, these dramas are specifically for students aged 14–18.For each of the sketches and plays, you are given not only the script but also an introduction. This gives you an overview of the roles and the set and props you may want to use for the performance; then comes a brief description of the style and the synopsis of each play to help you choose the right script for your class. Although the plays are not written to present or practise any particular areas of language, you may find it useful to know roughly what language level your students would need to have acquired to be able to act out the play confidently. So, for easy reference we have given you a description of the expected language level according to the Common European Framework (e.g. Intermediate – B1). Depending on the play, and without any attempt at systematic or comprehensive coverage, we have given some brief listings of examples of, e.g., exponents from certain functional areas, grammar structures, vocabulary sets or high frequency chunks of language.

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Herbert Puchta Günther Gerngross and Matthew Devitt
Frontmatter
More information

Introduction

Finally, the introduction to each play gives you stage tips and suggestions for variations. The stage tips provide you with practical suggestions on staging a play or sketch, enabling your students to get the most out of their performance. In the variations sections you can find alternative ideas about what you might do with a sketch or play.

***Get on Stage!* comes with a DVD and an Audio CD.**

The DVD

The DVD gives you:

Tips and guidelines for staging and performing a play

The excerpt on the DVD shows Matt Devitt, co-author of *Get on Stage!* and also a theatre director, rehearsing the sketch *Being Polite* (Chapter 1, pp 56–61) with a group of teenage actors. The excerpt shows you different ways of helping your students improve their performance, and focuses on topics that are discussed on pp 18–33 of this introduction: Voice projection; Staging and 'blocking'; Concentration and focus; Building the characters to tell your story; Pace; Set, props, lights, music and sound effects; Changing scenes; and Remembering or learning lines.

We are convinced that the practical tips on the DVD will be of great help in bringing the relevant part of the introduction to life and serve as a good model for your own interventions when rehearsing a play. You may want to watch the excerpt after reading the introduction, then go back and watch it again before you start acting out a play or sketch with your students to remind you of some of the key principles of staging and performing a play. Please note that due to the live nature of the filming, the examples on the DVD do not always follow the order as shown in the introduction.

Video recordings of three sample plays

These plays are acted out on stage by British students. They are:

- *Being Polite* (a short sketch – Chapter 1, pp 56–61),
- *The Space Restaurant* (a medium-length sketch, pp 106–113),
- and *Rusty Nail Soup* (a medium-length play based on a traditional story, pp 127–132)

There is also a short example on the DVD of a 'split scene' technique, demonstrated in a short extract from *Friendship*.

You can show your students the sample plays on these videos for the following purposes:

1) to give them a general idea of how to act out a sketch or a play under normal conditions, i.e. in a classroom or on a school stage without using elaborate props.
2) to give them role models that you can refer to in your own rehearsals. When a student finds it difficult, for example, to project their voice so it can be heard well by the audience, it could be a good idea to play a short extract from one of the videos to the student and ask them to practise by imitating it sentence by sentence.
3) if you are planning to get your students to act out one of those three plays, you can show it to them on the DVD, to demonstrate, for example, how the actors use the

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Introduction

stage and interact with one another.

4) alternatively, you could show one or all of these plays in order to give your students some key principles of putting on a play. If you want to do that, we specially recommend *Being Polite*, as the DVD not only shows you a performance of the play by English students, but also gives you examples of how Matt Devitt works with a group of young teenagers and helps them improve their performance. There is another short scene from *Friendship* (a modern teen drama – Chapter 4, pp 172–181); the purpose of this extract is to show you the use of a 'split scene' technique that is used not only in *Friendship* itself, but also in another play in this book, *Good Girl.*

CD Track 00

The Audio CD

The Audio CD offers you:

Audio recordings of eleven plays

These plays are spoken in a studio by British children or teenagers. They are:

Track 01 *The Perfect Son*, Chapter 1 pp 36–39
Track 02 *Smart Shoppers*, Chapter 1 pp 40–42
Track 03 *A Fast-Food Stall*, Chapter 1 pp 43–47
Track 04 *Colin the Poet*, Chapter 1 pp 48–52
Track 05 *The Ticket*, Chapter 1 pp 53–55
Track 06 *Parrot Learns a Lesson*, Chapter 1 pp 62–65
Track 07 *Granddad's Birthday*, Chapter 1 pp 66–70
Track 08 *The Princess and the Ring*, Chapter 1 pp 71–76
Track 09 *On Holiday in Rome*, Chapter 2 pp 88–95
Track 10 *The Wise Woman*, Chapter 3 pp 116–121
Track 11 *Friendship*, Chapter 4 pp 172–181

You can use the audio recordings of the sample plays for the following purposes:

1) to develop your students' listening comprehension. For that purpose you might want to use the comprehension tasks that you can find on the worksheets that go with the plays. You can find these on the DVD.
2) the audio recordings can, like the video samples, be used to give students role models that you can refer to in your own rehearsals.
3) if you are planning to get your students to act out one of those plays, you can use the audio recording to help develop their pronunciation and intonation.
4) if you are planning to get your students to act out *Friendship*, you will see in the script (pp 174–181) that we recommend the use of some extracts from pop songs in order to enrich the performance. You may want to encourage your students to select the music that they think is appropriate for the play (see some ideas and also suggestions for songs in the script). Alternatively, you can use some of the short original soundtracks on the CD (tracks 12–16).

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Frontmatter
More information

Introduction

Photocopiable worksheets

In the appendix of the book you can find a wide range of worksheets. Thumbnails in the introductions to the plays give you a quick overview of the tasks, and remind you of the existence of the worksheets.

- For each of the short plays, there is one photocopiable worksheet containing three activities. These are:
  - an activity that helps students with the comprehension of the play. This can be reading or listening (the latter is possible for all those plays where there is an audio or video recording), and
  - activities for working on the language; for example, vocabulary/chunks of language and/or grammar structures from the script.
- For most of the medium and longer plays there are two pages of photocopiable worksheets giving your students practice in reading and/or listening comprehension, vocabulary, useful phrases, grammar and creative writing.

Why get young learners and teens to act out plays?

In discussions with colleagues, we have frequently heard about the motivational power of plays. We have heard beautiful stories of how parents of children proudly watch a play where their son or daughter appears on stage, and as a result develop more positive attitudes towards their child's school, their child's foreign language learning – and often their teacher as well! We have also heard that otherwise rather inactive teens can suddenly show remarkable amounts of energy when creating props, masks, or costumes, and they can be prepared to rehearse for long hours in order to get the language right. They are happy to listen time and time again to audio recordings of a play so that they can improve their own intonation and pronunciation, and they show remarkable social skills in working together on its preparation. Colleagues who get their students to act out plays have also told us that when they meet their students – sometimes years after they have left school – they often still have fond memories of the day of a special performance.

There is also increasing evidence from cognitive research that supports the use of plays. Learning a foreign language successfully is about taking ownership of it. Our students are learning English as a *foreign language*, but we want to do everything we can to reduce the emotional distance between them and that language. Ownership is about reducing the 'foreignness' of the language to be learnt, about bringing it closer to our students' hearts, getting them to enjoy the new language as a means of expressing themselves, playing with it, and identifying its sounds and intonation patterns. Such processes of identification, imitation and creative play are part and parcel of how children acquire their mother tongue … surely no mother in the whole wide world would ever go into her child's bedroom in the morning and announce, with a big smile, 'Get up my darling – today we're doing the Present Perfect Progressive!' When we

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Frontmatter
More information

Introduction

are young, we imitate sounds, we play with words, and we act out roles – activities that help children to rehearse important social behaviour, understand how humans act and interact with one another, gain insights into their own behaviour and develop their personality.

Children naturally engage in highly sophisticated 'let's pretend' games, often getting completely absorbed in acting out all kinds of roles that are familiar to them (their mum or dad, a shopkeeper, a policeman), or that they dream up in their imagination. Acting out such roles helps the children to develop their language competences, and their imagination and creativity.

When children become teenagers they go through the challenging phase of adolescence. Now they may appear to be far less prepared to take part in spontaneous role-play activities than they were as young children. However, adolescence is a time of inner fantasy and play. It is at this time of their lives that students need to develop their sense of self – their identity – and identification with role models is part of that process. In their imagination, teens often 'become' the heroes and heroines they admire, and imitate the way they dress, talk, think and act. These heroes and heroines are often the stars of the glitz and glamour of the movie or pop industries, successful sports players or other public figures. Cool teen behaviour in fact is often about imitating others, and a way of pretending that life is anything but difficult during a time when they are often (despite their cool appearance) rather insecure.

We have quite often noticed that adolescents are more than happy to engage in role-play activities. You as a teacher can support this by making sure the atmosphere in the teen classroom is a supportive one, as ridiculing each other is unfortunately a common teen phenomenon. It is worth pointing out to students that you will give them enough time to study their lines and rehearse their performance, as it is important for teens to feel 'safe' in their roles.

The importance of good stories

What are the elements that make a story appropriate for young learners or teenagers? Kieran Egan stresses that by offering the right stories to children a teacher can contribute greatly to the development of their 'cognitive tools'. Stories can support these processes best if they offer strong emotional contrasts, e.g. good vs bad, happy vs sad, foolish vs serious, greedy vs cunning etc. The child needs such stories to be able to develop their own value system and in order to learn what is appropriate and acceptable behaviour and what isn't. As Kieran Egan points out: 'The story form is a cultural universal; everyone everywhere enjoys stories. The story, then, is not just some casual entertainment; it reflects a basic and powerful form in which we make sense of the world and experience' (*Teaching as Story Telling*, University of Chicago Press,

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Frontmatter
More information

Introduction

1998). Teachers frequently notice that although children learn fast they tend to forget even faster. Offering stories – or, in this case, plays – that are relevant to your students means that students are more likely to remember them, and consequently will also remember the language in a story or play more easily.

As Earl Stevick stresses, most of the sensory information reaching the brain is quickly forgotten. The 'deeper' a sentence is rooted in a student's brain/mind system, the higher the chances that the student will be able to use the language stored later in life. (Earl W. Stevick, *Memory, Meaning & Method*, Second Edition, Heinle & Heinle Publishers, Boston 1996 p. 196)

When students listen to, read or watch a good story, they can become totally absorbed in it, and in their imagination they often become part of the story themselves. When they're acting out a story in the form of a play, the process of identification can become even stronger; they can get so fully engaged in the play that they forget about everything else.

Teenagers go through a phase of changes that is often characterised by a growing interest in the real world. Adolescence is usually a time of emotional turmoil as well. According to insights explained in the educational theories of Kieran Egan, teens – as cool as they may seem on the surface – often feel, deep down, threatened by the world. One reason for their insecurity is the fact that they have no answers to questions they ask themselves. Those questions are of an existentially threatening nature, basically because teens cannot find any answers to them: *Will I be successful in life? Will I be able to find a good job and earn good money one day? When will my parents die? When will I die? What happens when I do? Who will miss me when I die?* etc. Although the world of teens is fundamentally a contact culture, they hardly ever share their real fears with others, and this often leads to a feeling of loneliness and the assumption that they are the only ones in the world suffering from their problems. To them, the only way out of this situation seems to lie in trying *not* to be an individual – not an easy task given that the particular phase in their lives is also about developing their sense of self, their identity – and so they engage in copying each other: wearing the same brands of T-shirts and trainers, adoring the same kind of heroes and heroines, and finding the same kind of things either 'awesome' or 'gross' (current UK teen expressions for 'good' and 'bad'). Such behaviour, together with their choice of heroes, often seem to suggest superficiality to the adult observer. But it's anything but! When teens choose their idols, they do so because they feel intuitively connected with what they perceive as the best human qualities through their heroes, whereas for adults every single one of those stars may well be representative of a tinsel world. Why the difference? Teens project onto their heroes the qualities they believe are needed in order to successfully master the challenges of a threatening world, and whereas it may be true that some of those heroes are pretty scandalous and superficial people themselves, the qualities teens see in them are important human values: love, courage, creativity, tolerance, endurance, engagement, solidarity, passion, and

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Frontmatter
More information

Introduction

especially the ability to have got themselves into a place where they are admired and approved of by a great number of other people – something that many teens seek for themselves.

It is through projection and identification that teens get into contact with those apparently superhuman qualities, and gradually discover that they themselves have some of those qualities within them.

Taking such processes seriously and selecting content in the form of stories that support teenagers' natural search for positive human qualities and values will lead to more emotional engagement and hence higher levels of motivation in otherwise reluctant students. In addition, it helps develop the students' own cognitive tools by encouraging them to understand that all human knowledge and achievement was once just a dream in someone's mind.

Teachers of teenage students frequently notice that it is difficult to get their students to talk about things that relate to themselves – this, in spite of the fact that teachers know that personalisation is an important tool for learning a foreign language successfully. Teens, however, don't often want to talk about themselves, and as their teachers or parents we have to accept that and try to gently guide them through this insecure stage. One way of doing that is using drama activities because they offer students rich opportunities to 'hide behind a character'. They know that their audience knows that what they are saying is not what they think, and that it is someone else's lines they are acting out.

So when teens act out a role they are not talking as themselves; yet the process of identification with the role makes it possible for them to develop a feeling of ownership during the period of rehearsing and acting out a play. The modern teen dramas in *Get on Stage!* are developed to do exactly that – they give students the opportunity to 'step out' of their own situation, and to experiment, reflect on and familiarise themselves with a variety of behaviours, attitudes and beliefs as they act as someone else, yet bring to that role their own thoughts and emotions.

The content of these plays makes it easy to grab students' attention, and consequently the content of the plays becomes more memorable. When students remember the content of a play well, the chances are that the language too will stick in their long-term memory better. And finally, good plays are far more likely to trigger responses from students, enlivening lessons and creating a more positive experience all round.

How to cast a play

Teachers casting a play are frequently torn between the crucial question of whether to choose the best actors for each role so that the drama comes fully alive, or whether to use the play as an educational tool where it isn't just the performance that counts (as a means of impressing the audience), but the process that leads up to the performance. It is important to keep in mind here that acting out a play is a holistic process where

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Frontmatter
More information

Introduction

everyone taking part in it is very important to its success. The performance by a very shy student who finally manages to speak two lines in the play in a way that exceeds the student's own expectation of what they would ever be able to achieve may seem insignificant within the performance as such – but it might well be a massive step forward in the development of that particular student. You can be sure that the piece (whether a short sketch or a longer play) is written in such a way that it will work even if not every child in your class is a born actor. Most of the plays in *Get on Stage!* offer lots of opportunities for every child in your class to contribute to the play without feeling intimidated.

There are several options you can use if you want to cast a play:

1) **Let the individual students choose.**
   If you want to leave it to your students to choose what roles they want to play, you could work first on the comprehension of the script and do some language work with the worksheets at the end of the book, and then simply ask who would like to act out which role. This is a very 'democratic' process, but it may not be ideal for the shyer students, especially in an adolescent class. They may not want to step forward and ask for a role, much as they might like to be part of the cast. In this context, it would not be unusual for those students who tend to be more extrovert to get all the roles.
2) **The decisions are made by you.**
   Choosing the roles beforehand without asking your students allows you to find a match between what you think would be the right role for each of your students and what would be best for the performance in general.
   You can also use the performance of a play as an opportunity for your students to grow personally, by selecting students because you believe it would be good for their personal development. By telling a shy student 'I'd like you to play this part because I think you'll be good', you may be putting pressure on them – but this may be the gentle push needed by that student to make the next important step in their own development and hence be the right thing to do sometimes. On the other hand, you may feel that a student is not yet ready to appear on the stage. There is no point in forcing a student to take part in a performance if they are not at all keen. If you come across a student who refuses to play a role you have selected, it could be a good idea to ask them questions (in a non-judgemental way) about their reasons. It may then turn out that giving that student another task – whether it is about making props, being responsible for the lights during the performance or something else – is the right thing to go for, and this would be an entirely valid pedagogical decision, as that student can still contribute something useful and valuable to the success of the play.
   One way to involve a student linguistically without forcing them into performing is for them to act as 'prompt' during rehearsals and performances. This means they follow the script whilst the other students are rehearsing and, when a line is

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Frontmatter
More information

forgotten, they provide the prompt and read out the forgotten line. This task could be shared from rehearsal to rehearsal. Accepted protocol for this requires that the prompter only prompts when they hear the struggling actor say 'line' – this is in order to avoid a situation where an actor, pausing for dramatic effect, has their 'moment' ruined by an over-zealous prompter bellowing out the next line before being asked!

3) **Let the class decide.**
This third option is one that requires a fairly high level of maturity within your students. It will be suitable if you have a very good rapport with your class and, if the students themselves have a good rapport with each other – a classroom culture that usually needs to be developed. By showing your students that the selection process should not just be a matter of who makes themselves heard first and loudest when you ask who wants to play which role, the process of choosing roles can gradually become a valuable experience for your students in which they learn to make informed decisions and reflect on what are to become their rather than your choices.
You could start such a process by brainstorming criteria for the selection with your students, and writing them on the board, e.g. *Who **didn't** get a part the last time round when the class acted out a play? Who would you like to suggest for a role because you think it would be a good experience for **them**? Who has never had a part in a play?* etc. In order to avoid the more extrovert students always getting the roles they want, you could then ask students to write on a piece of paper which role they would like to play. One student collects all the names, and writes them alphabetically on the board – underneath the name of the character they want to act out. The choice is then up to the students, and they need to decide in group or whole-class discussions. This process will require more time, discipline and the ability to reflect on decision making and choice on the part of your students – but it is in itself a very valuable activity if carried out in the foreign language.

How to choose a play for your class

While you know best what kind of play is likely to be most suitable for your class, *Get on Stage!* gives you quite a bit of information about each one, supporting you in making appropriate choices. In the introduction for each play, you will find information about the estimated runtime, the props required, and the language level that a particular play is for. You will also see – indicated by the icons in the margin – whether there is an audio or video recording of the play you are thinking of choosing, and see thumbnails of the worksheets to aid comprehension and support the language work you are planning to do.
You will want to make yourself familiar with the content of the plays before choosing. You can use the synopses to pre-select the plays to shortlist for your class. The age of

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Frontmatter
More information

your students is another important criterion; younger students may love to act out a humorous sketch, while a teenage class may be keener on acting out a play based on a traditional story – or may prefer the dramatic, soap-opera-like quality of one of the modern teen plays, with the dilemmas they present. If you teach a rather buoyant class you may want to pick a more serious piece in order to get them into a more reflective mood. If you have a quiet class, you may want to pick a more humorous piece that helps to bring the fun out in your students and raise the energy level in your class. Again, depending on the level of maturity of your students, you may decide to involve them in the decision-making process. You could, for example, give them photocopies of several plays to read and choose from, or you could read out the synopses of various plays and ask them for their preferences. Thinking about which play they themselves would love to do most and which would be best for the audience is valuable practice in thinking ahead. Seeing the play through the eyes of whoever the audience is going to be helps develop students' empathic skills.

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