

Stanislavski's Chart And Language Learning

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The word drama is being found more and more in the titles of convention papers and journal articles in the field of second language teaching. At last it seems that drama has arrived and is finally being accepted by the language learning community as a viable adjunct to second language pedagogy. Today when drama is discussed or written about we are not necessarily referring to the presentation of a play, but rather to the use of drama techniques in the classroom. This use of drama techniques is what is new. Clearly a few years ago drama would have referred only to the production of a play.

It was only natural that teachers turned to plays with their extended dialogues as a source of good and/or natural conversation which contained appropriate cultural insights. The students then memorized their lines and were able to recite them correctly. Audiences applauded their ability to recite with such correctness, "especially in a foreign language," but were generally bored with the performance as theatre. Students were usually glad when performances ended and their teachers felt that the students had done very well but were heard to say "it would have helped if they had put a little emotion into it." And so the use of drama for language learning continued, but it remained in the background except for the occasional daring soul who exploited drama on an on-going and consistent basis.

Language teachers and their students were not alone in the way they approached drama. Many professional actors and amateur groups fell into the same trap as language learners. The good and the great actors rose above this memorize-and-recite approach to drama and were somehow able to bring their roles to life. These few were not able to offer an explanation for how they accomplished what they did and others could not explain it either other than to attribute it to natural talent.

Konstantin Stanislavski, the great Russian director, admitted that there were people who had natural talent, but he also felt that people could be trained to be good actors. His techniques have not only worked for actors, but they also have been the basis for many of the things that those of us involved in second language teaching have used over the years. Stanislavski's approach to drama

expressed concern with the process involved more than the end result. (It is interesting to note that some ESL professionals working in the field of teaching writing have come to the same conclusion—that it is the process of writing that is important and not the final product). He felt that if the process was correct then the end result would be appropriate and convincing as a result of the process. Contrary to Stanislavski's approach the memorize-and-recite procedure was aimed strictly at the final result meanwhile ignoring the valuable learning that takes place through a proper process which ultimately makes the language real to the learner. This production of real language communicates more effectively to the listener.

Stanislavski said we cannot be anyone but ourselves. We may put on make up and costumes to change our outward appearance but we cannot change who we are. If we accept his analysis and apply it to second language learners then we are led to reject the idea of "hiding behind a mask," "pretending," and "letting the character take the responsibility for any mistake." Instead we should encourage our students to know that they are themselves, speaking another language and possibly fitting it into another cultural context. We would be sensitive to their errors and help them to understand that mistakes are a valuable part of the learning process and should not cause embarrassment. After all, they make mistakes in their native tongue. Why shouldn't they make them in a second one?

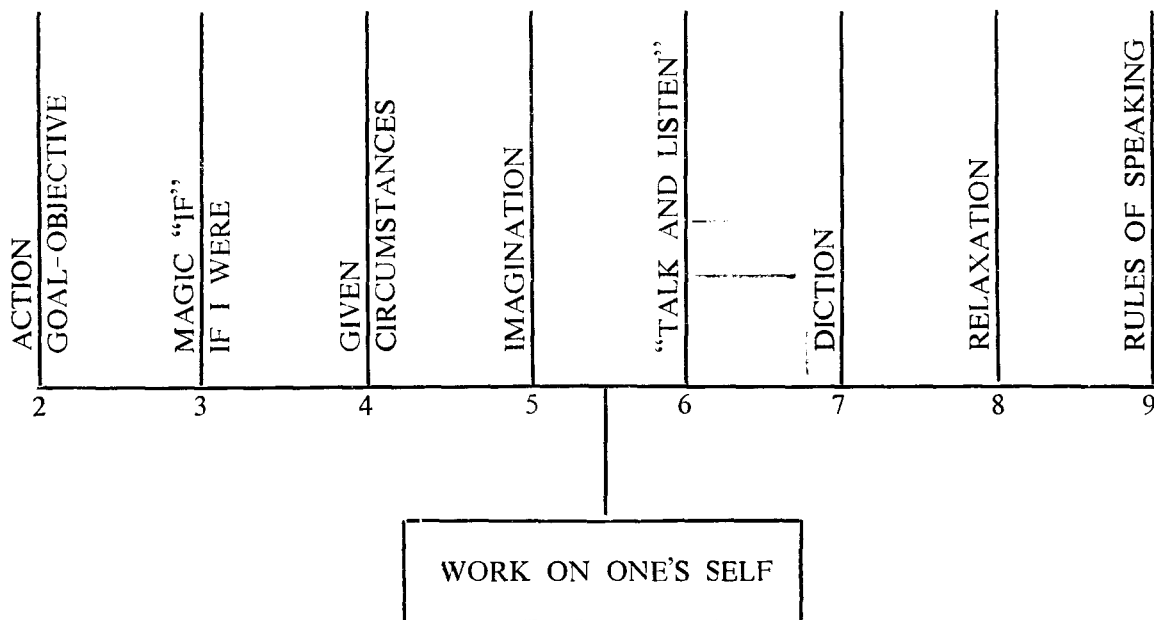
The well-known Broadway director Robert Lewis in commenting on a chart descriptive of the Stanislavski System says, "as you see, it's in the form of a pipe organ. Straight across the bottom, number ONE, is the sort of great foot pedal which says, 'Work on one's self'".

He expands on this by saying that "you are expressing yourself in the part, somehow all your reactions to life, all the ideas and feelings that you have stored up...." (Lewis 1958:28)

He suggests that we enlarge our knowledge of the world and of its people, and their characters and relationships in order that we may become better actors (in our case, better language learners).

The chart was copied down by Stella Adler when she spent several weeks with Stanislavski in 1934. Mr. Lewis comments were made in 1957. None of these people were, or are, aware that their work would eventually have influence on second language learning or English as an International Language.

I have taken the liberty of greatly simplifying the chart to make it relevant for the language teacher and learner.



To expand on the components of the chart further let's start with the base "Work on one's self." Note that Lewis said that it was number ONE (emphasis his). In other words, we need to understand ourselves—the way we relate to others and how they relate to us. We should understand as much about our culture as possible—what are our beliefs, values, why do we think and behave the way we do? We also need to continue to improve ourselves through education and travel—to learn about other cultures and to be able to function in them.

2. "Action" does not mean physical movement, but rather what you are trying to accomplish in the dialogue, skit, improvization, or play. What is your goal?

3. "Magic if" is a somewhat surprising term used by Stanislavski but one that is vital to an understanding of his technique. Since we cannot have experienced everything, in order to arrive at "truth" we use the "Magic if." "*If* I were in this situation and if I had to say these lines, how would *I* say them or how would *I* behave." This eliminates the teacher having to model everything. We each have our own way of expressing our emotions and we each have many ways of expressing the same emotion.

4. "Given circumstances" refers to all the information and the surroundings that control the way we speak. We have probably been negligent in giving enough background information to our second language students in most of our materials. Trained actors might be able to make something of a dialogue with "Two people at the airport" as their only information. They would need a great deal of time, however, to prepare. A language learner would find it almost impossible to come up with meaningful language. If, however, either group were given information such as: "Mayuri, age 49 and her husband age 55 have rushed to the airport to catch a plane back home. They have just learned that the plane will be delayed by an hour and a half. It is cold and their coats are packed in the luggage which they have checked through. Because they were rushing they failed to eat knowing they would be fed soon on the plane. They kept only enough local currency to pay for the taxi and for the airport tax. The opening line to the dialogue is "Well, here we are." Just think what a pair of second language students could then produce in the way of language.

5. "Imagination" becomes vital—to be able to see the surroundings, smell the smells, hear the sounds through imagination. This would also include finding a different way of interpreting a line or situation rather than relying on the cliché.

6. "Talk and Listen." Stanislavski stated that actors needed to really talk and really listen to each other. This is such simple advice yet many language learners fail to do this. They think the time to speak is when one's partner stops. Many an actor and language learner has signaled their partners they were not listening by starting to speak during a pause. Listening is the most important aspect of language learning. We cannot be a good conversationalist if we are not good listeners. (More on Talk and Listen can be found in the *English Teaching Forum*—April 1977).

7. "Diction." Here Stanislavski was not so concerned with pronunciation (of course we want our students to be intelligible), but rather with using what the sounds of words can give us. Sounds are beautiful, ugly, angry etc. The sounds of words can have tremendous influence on our feelings too.

8. "Relaxation" has probably caused a great deal of confusion when it has not been explained fully. To some it means being casual, indifferent or even sleepy. In the theatre and in our classrooms we want the concept of relaxation to be related to problem solving. Perhaps a clearer term would be "relaxed concentration" (Gallwey, 1974, p. 13). In other words our students should be concerned with what they are doing. Their concerns must not be fear of being up front, or standing up, or making a mistake, but in doing the task at hand—speaking, reading or writing another language. It is necessary therefore for us to have a classroom where students feel secure and unthreatened; in other words, relaxed.

9. "Rules of speaking"—includes such things as turn taking, pausing, being aware of and using punctuation, and breathing. Yes, breathing. Beginners often try to get everything out in one breath. Let's also include thinking. When we speak in our native tongue we pause—think—stretch a word as we think, we do many things to give ourselves time to think. Words do not come tumbling out the way they do when one is *reciting* a dialogue without any thought behind it.

Drama has been used since the middle ages in our profession. (Kelly 1969) Konstantin Stanislavski has given us many insights which are useful in language learning although he undoubtedly never dreamed that they would be applied to the teaching of second languages. He would be both surprised and pleased to know that his methods have gone beyond the footlights.

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