

ACT ESOL:

A Theatre of the Oppressed Language Project

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Part 1. Introduction

This report aims to capture and disseminate the creative experience of ACT ESOL — a theatre and language education project that combined Theatre of the Oppressed and participatory ESOL. The Serpentine Galleries and Implicated Theatre developed the project for migrants interested in theatre who wanted to develop their language skills.

This report is predominately aimed at ESOL practitioners who would like to incorporate the ideas of Theatre of the Oppressed into their pedagogy. Although many teachers successfully use drama techniques in their ESOL work, few are familiar with the complexity, completeness and transformational potential of Theatre of the Oppressed. The aim of this report is therefore to inspire and encourage teachers to consider incorporating theatre and performance more comprehensively into their classroom work. The ideas in the report can also be used by Theatre of the Oppressed practitioners working with language learners in their theatre groups and who want to develop a more explicit language focus in their theatre work.

The report describes the work we did during the ACT ESOL project and is therefore contingent. It is not a curriculum. The kind of creative work that combines theatre with language work is always dependent on the particular situations that arise in each context and is therefore not conducive to a set curriculum.

1.1 Political ESOL

ACT ESOL connects with recent development of more overtly political ESOL approaches. Participatory approaches to ESOL that draw on the work of Brazilian Marxist Paulo Freire have become more widespread in the UK over the last ten years and there is a growing culture of political ESOL in the UK, as well as an informal network of groups with which ACT ESOL can form natural alliances.

The work undertaken by the development charity ActionAid from 2005–2011 is of particular relevance. ActionAid's educational programme Reflect and their corresponding ESOL programme Reflect ESOL pioneered the use of participatory research tools to develop language skills alongside an overtly political ethos of action and social change. Other organisations, as well as individual practitioners, around the UK have developed this work and taken it forward — for example, English for Action, is an organisation that specifically organises its ESOL courses around campaigning for change. Other organisations have incorporated language work into existing campaigns or workplace struggles, for example, Justice for Domestic workers (J4DW) and the x:talk project, an organisation who work with migrant sex workers. Unite the Union and the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain have also been offering ESOL courses to their members for many years. These programmes are important in workplaces and industries with a high proportion of migrant workers who need English language skills as well as support with workplace struggles.

Underlying the development of political ESOL projects and organisations has been the devastating impact that cuts to funding and aggressive immigration policies have had on mainstream government funded ESOL provision since 2008. What used to be well-resourced provision, provided for free to ESOL students, is in the process of being destroyed by cuts to further and adult education. The scale of the cuts has meant that some further education colleges in inner London barely have ESOL provision left. Those that have continued to provide ESOL courses have had their provision seriously curtailed, both in terms of amount of courses and restrictions on the curriculum. The curriculum is now very exam focussed and there has been a reduction in support for students. In the context of rising unemployment, the housing crisis and benefit cuts to families, these changes have been totally devastating.

It is also important to mention Action for ESOL, a campaign group that brings ESOL teachers and students together to defend the sector against both cuts and also the imposition of immigration policy. Action for ESOL links political struggle outside the

classroom directly with political approaches to ESOL inside the classroom. The Action for ESOL Manifesto (2011) states:

The language classroom should be built on a participatory ethos. Students and teachers should collaborate in developing appropriate curricula. They should be encouraged to question and speak meaningfully, and to understand the issues that affect their lives and society in order to shape or change them.

Many in the sector understand the need for language provision that takes into account the political situation that migrants find themselves in— people who are at the mercy of both welfare and education cuts and immigration policy. The need for ESOL programmes such as ACT ESOL that combine language with a political focus for resistance has never been so great.

1.2 Report Structure

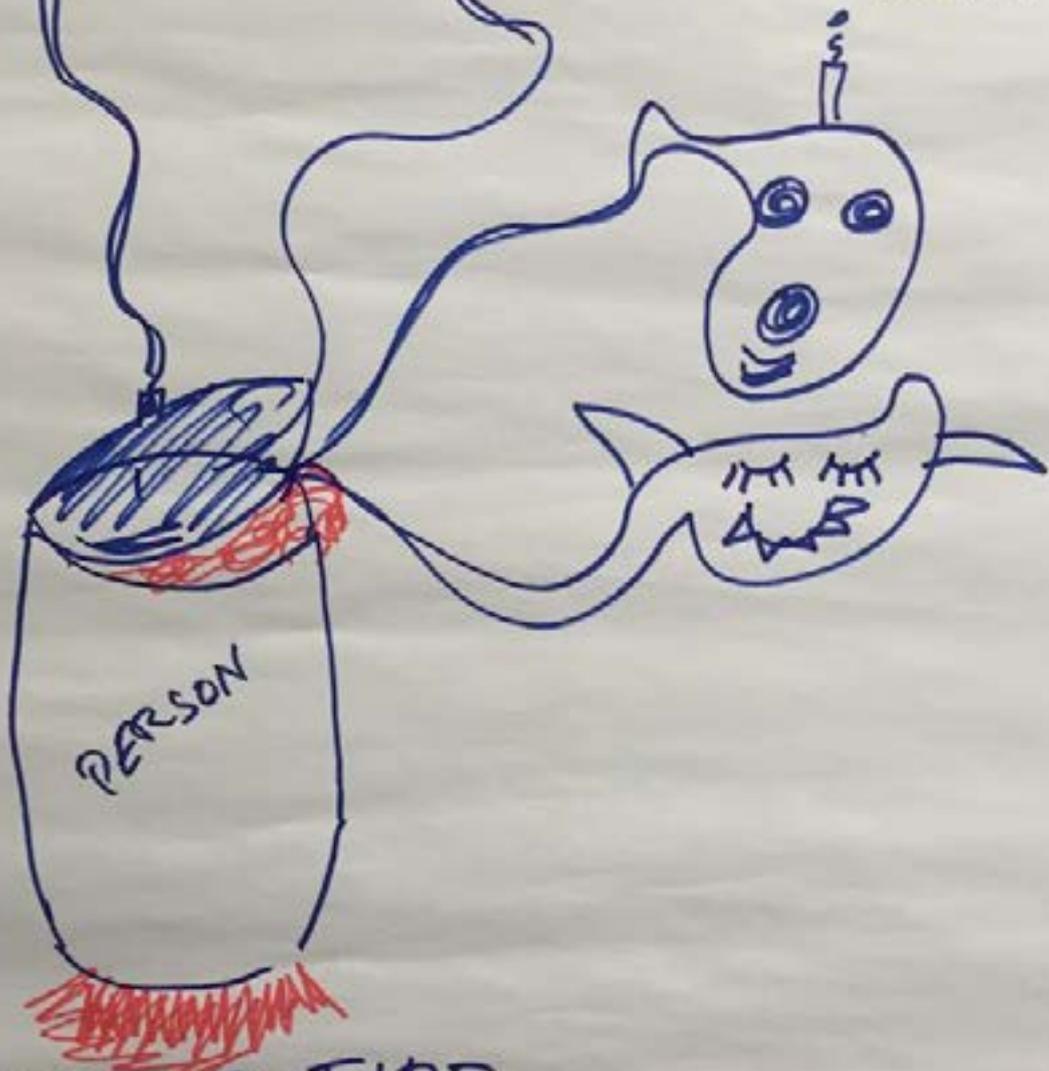
There are five sections to this report. Part 2 is a brief outline of the theoretical ideas that underpin the work we did, both in terms of theatre work and language work. Part 3 gives a brief description of the ACT ESOL project including the participants, our aims and way of working together. Part 4, the main body of the report, describes in detail the work we did together and the key elements that emerged from our collaboration. In Part 5 concludes the report and suggest ways forward for ACT ESOL.

WHAT IS AN ACTOR?

PERSONALITY



PERSONALITIES
CHARACTERS



THEATRE = FIRE

Part 2: Theoretical background

2.1 Theatre of the Oppressed

This section provides a brief introduction to the ideas of Augusto Boal, the Brazilian director who in 1970s developed Theatre of the Oppressed. Boal describes his view of theatre:

Theatre is the first human invention Theatre is born when the human being discovers that it can observe itself; when it discovers that in this act of seeing it can see itself; it can see itself – see itself in situ: see itself seeing (Jackson 1995: 13).

Boal's vision of theatre is as a creative and reflexive process through which we observe ourselves. It is a process in which performance is used as a path to change and transform an unjust and unequal society. Like Freire, Boal believed in dialogue and exploration as a means to understand and subsequently resist and overcome oppression. He envisioned theatre therefore, not as a means to deliver a political message, but as a way to collectively create that message through a process of dialogue between the actors and the audience or Spectators¹. He was greatly influenced by the work of Paulo Freire and he modelled much of his theatre work on the problem-posing model outlined by Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972). According to Freire, "problem-posing education" should begin from the participants' lived experiences of oppression. It should then analyse the root causes of that oppression, explore solutions and act to change the situation. As such,

in problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation (Freire 1972:64).

Boal's idea of theatre is similarly one of theatre as transformation, of action against oppression and injustice. The aim is to understand your oppressive situation and then act on it.

Boal developed a number of different strands to his theatre work. The techniques we drew upon in ACT ESOL were Image Theatre and Forum Theatre, supported and developed by his structure of Games and Exercises.

¹ Boal capitalised his key terminology. Thus the terms Spectators, Protagonist, Antagonist, Oppressed, Oppressor, Forum Theatre, Image Theatre will all appear as capitalised in this report.

2.1.1 Image Theatre

The main principle behind Image Theatre is to work with body images without using the spoken word. According to Boal, Image Theatre allows us to use image as a way of conveying and receiving knowledge in more fluid and open ways than dialogue-based performance (Boal in Rifkin 1990& 1992). Whereas the spoken word often conveys a more fixed message, still images can be interpreted in a myriad of unexpected ways.

The process of Image Theatre is one in which participants start by making still images of an experience or an idea they have together agreed to explore. This might be an experience of power imbalance, oppression or injustice, driven by a desire to create change. These images are then developed further in a variety of ways. For example, the creator of the image becomes a 'sculptor' who 'sculpts' more complex versions using fellow participants as living 'sculptures'. The participants work silently without explaining or discussing the meanings behind the image being created. Usually the protagonist of the story is not consciously aware of the multiplicity of meanings around his or her own image, as the body communicates things that the mind cannot articulate. As Jackson (2002:xxii) points out, "our over-reliance on words can confuse or obfuscate central issues, rather than clarifying them; that images can be closer to our true feelings, even our subconscious feelings, than words".

2.1.2 Forum Theatre

Forum Theatre is the most widely used aspect of Boal's work. It creates a performance of unresolved or unsatisfactorily resolved experiences of oppression or injustice, which raise questions and many possible answers. According to Boal, the idea of Forum Theatre is to show the problem not the solution. He explains, "The Forum is the destruction by the Spectators of what has been built, i.e. a scene where someone has a problem they cannot solve". Boal defines the notion of the 'Oppressed' as the embodiment of resistance, not passivity. The oppressed person wants change but does not know how to get it.

The Antagonist, the 'Oppressor', is often the boss, the social worker or the parent but may also be the friend. Your best friend might be as obstructive as your boss if she doesn't help you to change the situation due to fear, lack of assertiveness or

just niceness!

An important aspect of Forum Theatre is the rejection of the division between actors and passive spectators in theatre. “Actors and non-actors – we all are human, we all are artists, we all are actors!” (Boal 2002:17) Forum Theatre entails the Spectators joining with the actors in the performance to explore alternative endings to the story. The Joker who is the enabler or mediator for the group conducts the whole process. The name joker indicates a capacity to encourage playfulness, to provoke, to think outside of the box and to create a safe holding frame for complex exploration.

In the Forum Theatre structure the actors devise, rehearse and perform an instance of oppression up until a moment of defeat. At this moment the Protagonist's reaction to the injustice experienced is total and pivotal and it provokes the search for alternatives by the Spectators. It is at this point the Spectators can step in and take the place of the Protagonist, changing the action each time in order to experiment with a range of different solutions. Ideally, the Spectators will have first-hand experience of the oppression depicted, or will be familiar with it, so that their suggestions are informed and valid. The task is to get out of the Spectator what she is able to give, not to compete to see who is the strongest, cleverest (Boal in Rifkin 1990 & 1992). Boal also urges us to, “try out all alternatives that are proposed, even the crazy ones” (ibid). Sometimes the crazy ones open the door to unexpected and powerful change, often with humour and irony. The act of performing the same scene over and over with different results, allows people to move away from ‘mechanical’ reactions that recreate dominant, normative discourses, opening the way for transformation and change.

However, not all instances of oppression lend themselves well to Forum Theatre and Boal gives guidelines on material that is suitable for Forum Theatre. He points out “sometimes we're in a situation where we do not know what we want. This is not a good forum situation. You need to know what you want but you don't know how to get it” (Boal in Rifkin 1990 & 1992).

2.1.3 Exercises and Games

In defining the human being as the source and embodiment of theatre, Boal proposed the notion of the theatre space as the 'aesthetic space', within which imagination and memory can explore and transform our perceptions and actions back in the daily world.

He devised a series of exercises and games aimed at developing the body and reducing reliance on speech or conscious thought. These exercises are fundamental to theatre work and should prepare Image and Forum Theatre. They are designed to liberate the body from what Boal called, "mechanical" actions. They contribute to and are influenced by a wide range of existing approaches ranging from Jacob Moreno and Meyerhold via Stanislavsky to Bertolt Brecht and Peter Brook.

They are divided into categories for guidance and clarity:

- To feel what we touch
- To listen to what we hear
- Several senses
- To see what we look at
- Memory of the senses
- Image theatre
- Character games

We all internalise reactions via multiple repetition. Repeated over and over, reactions come to seem, 'obvious' and 'normal', or, as Boal points out, 'mechanical'. In this way, mechanical reactions block personal and political transformation. As Boal asks,

What is a sectarian but a person – of the left or right – who has mechanised all their thoughts and responses?' For this reason, we must start with the 'de-mechanisation', the retuning (or detuning) of the actor, so that he may be able to take on the mechanisations of the character he is going to play. He must relearn to perceive emotions and sensations he has lost the habit of recognising (Boal 2002:30).



ACT ESOL participants doing Exercises

The games therefore are much more than just warming up or feeling more comfortable. They are designed to help us to think with our bodies, not our minds and by doing so we can shed 'mechanical' or 'obvious' reactions, opening up new avenues of thought and action. Boal devised a whole structure of games and exercises (see Boal 1995 and 2002). Many Theatre of the Oppressed practitioners have developed their own, to suit their own contexts, whilst applying the practical and theoretical base of Boal's work.

2.2 What is Participatory ESOL?

The language work carried out during the project was based on participatory approaches to language learning (Bryers et al. 2014, Cooke et al. 2015). As with Theatre of the Oppressed, participatory ESOL approaches view participants as

sources of knowledge rather than 'empty vessels', needing to be filled with the teacher's knowledge through a process of knowledge transfer. These ideas draw on the theoretical work of Paulo Freire and his searing critique of transfer or 'banking' models of education. According to Freire, "projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of enquiry" (1970:53). His emphasis on dialogue and enquiry in education means that students, far from being mere collectors of someone else's (the teacher's) knowledge instead play an active role in knowledge creation.

Participatory ESOL includes and incorporates political critique of our society, based on social divisions and inequality, as well as a critique of authoritarian or hierarchical educational models that either fail to challenge or actually perpetuate this inequality. A key aspect of participatory ESOL is a focus on action for social change via liberatory education. According to Cooke et al participatory approaches to ESOL "involve reflection on the material conditions of learner's lives and experiences and, where appropriate, involve students in action to effect change" (2015:214).

2.3 Current debates and issues in critical approaches to language teaching

2.3.1 Organising the language-learning programme

There are a number of ways in which participatory ESOL differs from more mainstream ESOL and other English language teaching. One of these is the way in which the curriculum is structured. As Auerbach points out, participatory curricula work "from the students to the curriculum, rather than from the curriculum to the students" (1992:19).

Traditionally, ESOL teachers have been trained to select specific language items for teaching and to embed these items into interesting and relevant contexts for their students. Planning for language teaching in this way takes place in advance of classes so that the teacher is well prepared. This planning model has been incorporated into most teacher training courses, published materials and popular ESOL websites. Although effective in many ways, the focus on 'advance' decision-

making or pre-empting what might be needed in a particular context has limitations. For example, advance decision-making means that it is the teacher, rather than the teacher and students, who has control over the content of language classes. In contrast, with participatory projects teachers try to reverse this by waiting to see what emerges from classroom activities before deciding on the learning focus. This does not mean that they consider advance planning for courses irrelevant or unnecessary, rather that organisational models and design of language courses are very different. Rather than choose language items and topics in advance, participatory ESOL teachers tend to select and devise participatory activities that can generate topics and language. In subsequent lessons they develop and reflect upon the language that students used during these activities. These participatory activities often incorporate ways to work collaboratively with students to devise the curriculum content.

One example of this model was developed during the participatory ESOL project, *Whose Integration*. In this project, the researchers developed a three-stage structure for their work. The first of these stages used very open tools to explore students' own ideas and experiences of a generative theme. The second stage used more analytical tools to explore the ideas further and the final stage encouraged students to understand and critique other texts relating to the same theme. All three stages could potentially lead to political action. For a more detailed account of this project see Bryers et al. (2013). Another relevant project, *Emerging Words, Emerging Worlds* (Cooke et al. 2015:217) describes how teachers began to work without a predetermined language curriculum, working instead, lesson to lesson, on "emerging language". In doing so, they discovered that "language produced by students was more complex and of a higher 'level' than the designated level of the class. Students lost their anxiety about spelling, punctuation and grammar but at the same time produced texts that were more accurate" (ibid). This way of working with language allows teachers to focus both on the language that participants really need, as opposed to the language the teacher thinks they need, and on language that is within their grasp as they themselves are striving to use it.

Participatory ESOL projects such as these have enabled students to work with topics and language which would not normally appear in published ESOL materials. Cooke et al. point out that

Some of the topics which emerged were highly political or personal in nature. Rather than avoid these themes we acknowledge that the majority of our students come from working class communities with genuine hardships which they wished to explore, and that many of them are politically aware and engaged citizens (2015:217).

This aspect of participatory ESOL is particularly suited to Theatre of the Oppressed work, which uses creative exploration of group members' own lives to generate themes and contexts for theatre work and performance. For ACT ESOL, the challenge was to find our own organising structure that would suit both the development of theatre and the development of language emerging from the workshops. This challenge will be outlined in more detail in Part 4.

2.3.2 Communicative repertoire and multilingualism

Another key aspect of the participatory ESOL framework are the many languages migrants speak and how these languages skills enhance the learning context. Recently, there has been a move among applied and sociolinguists to challenge the idea of whole bounded languages, preferring instead the idea of “linguistic repertoire” (see Blommaert and Backus: 2011). Linguistic repertoire challenges the idea that the languages we speak are separate entities and suggests instead that languages are resources, collected over time by every individual, depending on their biographical experiences. People who travel, migrate or live in linguistically diverse contexts will have very different resources to those who live in static monolingual communities. Moreover, those speakers with a large amount of different linguistic resources, or a large ‘repertoire’, tend to use of mixture of these resources when communicating. This blurring of boundaries has been described in different ways in different studies, for example, “translanguaging” (Creese and Blackledge 2011), “language crossing” (Rampton: 1995) or “transidiomatic practices” (Jacquemet 2005). These ideas are connected to more complex patterns of migration and the increased movement of people across the world and language communities that are constantly changing. They are therefore especially relevant in large cosmopolitan centres such as London where people draw increasingly on a whole variety of linguistics resources in their everyday lives and where the idea of speaking a language or even two languages no longer adequately describes the way people use language to communicate. Sociologist Mario Jacquemet (2005:74) describes this as,

Speakers use a mixture of languages in interacting with friends and co-workers, read English and other ‘global’ languages on their computer screens, watch local, regional, or global broadcasts, and listen to pop music in various languages. Most of the times, they do so simultaneously. In this logic, we should rethink the concept of communication itself, no longer embedded in national languages and international codes, but in the multiple transidiomatic practices of global cultural flows” (2005:74).

The benefit of this analysis for ESOL is that it views migrants from a more equal linguistic perspective by taking into account the totality of a person's language resources rather than just the deficiency of the language of their new country. As Simpson (forthcoming) points out, "approaches to pedagogy which draw upon translanguaging for their theoretical bases would seem to be particularly fitting in educational settings in the global cities of today where students may be developing English as part of a multilingual repertoire".

This perspective is hard to reflect in language teaching, whose very essence, it might seem, hinges on the definition of single discreet languages that can be taught, learnt, counted and measured. Many language courses in fact go so far as to require that only English be used in the classroom, effectively banning other languages from the communicative process. In some ways, this is the epitome of the knowledge transfer approach where existing language resources are erased in order to infill the teacher's own knowledge. However, many educationalists have begun to reject this approach and instead draw on all participants' language resources in their teaching. During the ACT ESOL workshops we explicitly made use of the many different language resources people had alongside English and interestingly the impetus for doing this emerged quite naturally from the participants themselves. Again, this will be described more fully in Part 4.

Although not an exhaustive account, this section has outlined the background and framework that informed ACT ESOL, from a theatre and pedagogical point of view. It has drawn a parallel between theoretical underpinnings of Theatre of the Oppressed and participatory ESOL work. This parallel created a solid foundation upon which the creative work we did could take place.

Part 3: The ACT ESOL project

ACT ESOL was an 8-week pilot project that aimed to work with second language speakers to combine Boal inspired theatre work with language development. Participants enrolled on the course to learn new performance skills and use theatre as a context to develop their English language skills. The idea for this specific course emerged from previous experiences of working with second language speakers on courses designed to develop Theatre of the Oppressed knowledge and performance skills. Members of these courses had experienced difficulties with language and felt that language barriers made participation in the course difficult for them compared with more fluent English speakers in the group. They had often felt a bit lost during the sessions, especially during discussions of theory and politics but also during the theatre work itself. In addition, migrants' life experiences relating to language and to migration itself were not necessarily explored adequately as they were not shared experiences with the rest of the group. The idea therefore emerged to create a course specifically for Theatre of the Oppressed with English and to pilot a project with theatre and language experts working together to experiment with different ideas. Implicated Theatre worked with the Migrants Resources Centre to establish the project that became ACT ESOL.

There were ten participants enrolled on the course. There was a range of different language backgrounds in the group and also a range of migration experiences. Some had struggled with their experiences as migrants in the UK, especially with employment and housing. In contrast, others had been recruited from overseas to high-level jobs, or had come with spouses who were working in the UK and therefore had a more privileged experience of migration. Some were refugees, who were highly trained in their fields in their own countries but had to start from scratch in the UK and were trying to come to terms with the dislocation and loss of status, as well as processing high levels of trauma. Class backgrounds were also very diverse. Despite this diverse range of experiences, all participants had struggled with English in one way or another as well as with adapting to life in the UK. It was these experiences of migration and language that unified the group and created the cohesive force and potential for change.

Most of the group had no or limited theatre experience and only one had come across the ideas of Boal. The dual aim of the project was made explicit to the participants before enrolling and both aspects of the course were a motivation to the participants. Some of participants were more interested in the theatre work and some were more interested in the language work but overall there was enthusiasm for both and this was an important element of the course.

The ACT ESOL team consisted of two Theatre of the Oppressed specialists, two language specialists and one participant/advisor who had previously been part of Implicated Theatre projects and had worked closely with the Implicated Theatre team. The team worked together devising, planning and delivering the eight sessions. Collective reflection and further planning which allowed the team to experiment with ideas and then collectively evaluate the results followed each session. We also evaluated each session with all the participants and conducted interviews with some of the participants at the end of the course. The work was collaborative and dialogic and drew on the experiences and expertise of all team members without working from a rigid plan. The ideas therefore emerged weekly in a very creative process. This report is the culmination of the process and, although clearly most organisations working with migrants are not able to provide such a team, both in numbers, resources and expertise, we envisage that the work we did will hopefully create a framework that others can draw upon, use and adapt for their own work with migrants.

Part 4: ACT ESOL- Acting with English

Acting and exercise is quite new to me, so at first I'm a bit hesitating; what shall I do? But it's very good warming up. Very nice. And you picked up the sentences, the important sentences related to it and it was really acting with English — Sarah, ACT ESOL participant.

In this section of the report we describe the ACT ESOL project, drawing on the main aspects that we hope can be used and developed by other groups. We describe how we used and developed Boal structures and techniques to incorporate language development work. We started from the premise that theatre work is in fact language rich to the extent that even without intervention language development will happen. We were mindful that any language intervention that risked silencing the expressive potential would be counterproductive. Therefore, it was important that any explicit language work we did respected first and foremost the theatre process. We worked, therefore, from the performance to the language curriculum. The language work extended and developed the talk the participants themselves produced during the creative process. In addition, we created space to discuss and reflect upon the language used in the activities. To do this we drew on the idea of a 'language break' (Bryers et al. 2014:47) where discussing language at the meta-level felt almost like light relief compared to the intensity of the theatre work. This was especially the case when difficult topics were being addressed. We found that talking about language and how we were using it worked as an effective breathing space.

In the following sections we describe both how we structured the course and outline some of the language activities we experimented with.

4.1 ACT ESOL's Organisational Structure

One of our principal aims with the ACT ESOL project was to experiment with a structure and organisational model that would allow us to develop both theatre work and language work. We wanted the work to be as open and fluid as possible and so, as with the participatory ESOL projects described above, the ACT ESOL project was going to be very different from predetermined or prescriptive curricula where context and content are decided in advance by teachers and group leaders. We drew upon the structures often used by Implicated Theatre in their Theatre of the Oppressed workshops, feeding the language work into these structures.

We used the following a three-stage structure.

- Building a community
- Performing ourselves
- Exploring society using forum theatre

These are not necessarily consecutive stages but we felt it was important to explore each stage fully. The first stage, 'building a community' was our starting point but ran continuously through the whole set of workshops. The order of the stages might also vary depending on the particular group.

4.1.1 Building a community

In both participatory ESOL and Theatre of the Oppressed, building a community of trust is a prerequisite to any work that follows. Participants inevitably work with complex and difficult issues, relating both to their own life experiences and society as a whole. Without a feeling of safety and belonging in the group, this complex work would not be possible. In ACT ESOL we began each workshop with extensive Boal exercises to build the ACT ESOL community. In the community building phase we combined many of the Boal exercises with language work. Although participatory ESOL also utilises many trust building games and activities, the work we did with ACT ESOL represented new ground, with almost half of each workshop dedicated to trust building and community building. Sometimes we followed a more traditional Boal approach to the exercises (see Boal 2002) but, increasingly, we developed and adapted them to incorporate a language element. In doing so we often uncovered the creative power of words and language. This was a significant departure from participatory ESOL, where language is rarely used without a real life context.

However, the work we did revealed the immense potential of language not just for communication but also for stimulating creative expression.

Language Oriented Boal Exercises

Walk with the word, vocabulary development

Many traditional Boal exercises consist of walking around the room, finding a space and interacting with other group members and following the instructions of the group leader. In the first session participants were told simply to walk around the room and occupy the space. For some people this was already a departure from their known experiences. Participants were then told to walk on grass, then in rain, then to dodge heavy traffic and so on. This provided a safe and fun introduction to performance, allowing those with no theatre experience to feel what it is like to change roles. We then followed these silent activities by incorporating language into the walking. Initially we began to greet each other as we walked around the room, then we changed that to rejecting each other. There is almost endless potential to extending this activity, each time allowing the participants to experiment with a new persona or feeling. As the sessions went on we found this activity very useful for introducing and practising new vocabulary. Indeed, this essential aspect of language learning flowed very easily from the theatre work. For example, we walked around the room greeting each other but substituting a traditional word of greeting such as 'hello', with one of the new words that had emerged from the workshops. One time, for example, we walked around the room and greeted each other using the word, 'ambiguous'. We called these activities, 'walk with the word' and we used them many times during the workshops to explore and try out new vocabulary. This gave participants the chance to use the body and their creative force to practice new vocabulary and internalise it, make it their own somehow.

Adverbing

We did a similar activity with a variety of adverbs. We worked with adverbs that had emerged in the discussions and as we did the walking activities described above, we assigned a particular adverb to each action, for example, seriously, suspiciously or honestly. We found that completing an action 'honestly' or 'ambiguously', again led us to delve into our creative selves. These activities were also a lot of fun.

Another advantage to these exercises was that the combination of performance and language allowed a lot of time to be spent on practising single vocabulary items. Very often in ESOL classrooms, maybe especially participatory ones where the focus tends to be on whole stretches of talk, practising new vocabulary is not given the necessary time for people to incorporate new terms into their linguistic repertoires. Repeating vocabulary many times over can feel alienating and repetitive

and devoid of meaning, but somehow, in combination with performance and theatre exercises, this repetition seemed fresh and productive.

Performing grammar

In other activities we used performance and games to play with grammatical structures. The following example focuses on verb combinations in sentences. We wrote verbs of desire: want, need, would like, wish, love on cards on the floor. Participants then chose a card and paired up with another person in the group to make a sentence. They then performed an image of that sentence and shared it with the group. Far from being decontextualized grammar sentences as they might have been in a classroom context, many of the images were poignant and fleeting moments from the participants' lives. The starting point to this activity was the words themselves. The participants were not asked to think of any particular experience. However, the combination of language as experienced by the body proved to be a very powerful force. We used performance and the creativity of the participants to inject content and context into what might otherwise have been a mere grammatical construction.

4.1.2 Performing Ourselves – participants' lives as contexts

Creating an image

The next stage of language and theatre work was 'performing ourselves'. In keeping with the Theatre of the Oppressed tradition, participants were invited to create images or mini improvised performances of situations that had occurred in their lives. These situations represented problems that had occurred or situations in which a feeling of oppression was felt. Initially, group members were invited to create images of any difficult situation that had taken place when they first arrived in London. This work was done in small groups where the 'Protagonist', or storyteller silently moved the other group members into an image that represented his or her experience.

We can see an example of this in the following photograph.



ACT ESOL participants create a still image

She might be...

The images invited much discussion and we spent time, not only discussing the meanings but developing the language appropriate for speculation. For example: She might, Maybe....., She could be.

Performing the image

Following the image work the Protagonists explained the background or 'story' of their image to the rest of their group. The groups then worked together to develop an improvised performance of this with dialogue. The development of this performance was not necessarily a true representation of real events but, as in all good creative theatre practice, involved the original story as a prompt for generalising the experiences and exploring universal themes that affect all of us. This 'pluralising' of individual experiences is key to Theatre of the Oppressed work. Boal states, "the nature of society is reflected in its smallest cells. The great themes are inscribed in the smallest personal themes. Theatre of the Oppressed is the theatre of the first person plural. It absolutely must begin with the individual story but if it does not pluralise itself, it is not fulfilling its purpose" (1995).

Below we describe one of the performances developed during this tier of work.

The Bus

The bus tracked the story of Josie who had been sleeping in her van since arriving in London five months previously. As an experienced lorry driver in her country of origin, she didn't necessarily see this as great hardship but was keen to move on with her life in London. One day as she boarded a bus, the bus driver recognised her accent and they struck up a conversation. She told him about her difficulties and a bit about her life including that she was a HGV licence holder and he began to offer her advice on how to get a job in London.

In the midst of this conversation between passenger and driver, uproar ensued from the other passengers. According to the passengers, the bus driver was driving dangerously by engaging in conversation with a passenger. This was confounded by the fact that it was snowing.

Both passenger and bus driver knew the risks and were not putting anyone in danger. For our Protagonist there was a definite feeling of xenophobia and fear of other languages circulating in this encounter. Following this experience, the participant went on to find all her attempts to become a bus driver blocked by her lack of knowledge of English. Multiple generative themes emerged from this performance and as the performance developed within the group, it ceased to be about Josie, and became the experience of those who performed it. Indeed, even though Josie was unable to attend the subsequent workshop, this did not matter as her story had already been 'pluralised' and became the group's story and the group's experience gaining strength and meaning through each different performance.

After each performance, we took time out from the theatre situation to reflect on some of the new language. This reflection included meta-discussion about language and language practice. Although this kind of dialogue about language is not new to participatory ESOL work (see Bryers et al 2013) it was a different way of working for the Implicated team. From a language development point of view, it was very productive work as the language came directly from the participants' experience and was fully grounded in what they wanted to express. The language work was then recorded on flipcharts and then written up after the workshop and given as handouts. See Appendix I and II for an example of this. These handouts perform a different function from traditional 'handouts' that are normally prepared by the teacher in advance of a lesson and constitute an instruction on the part of the teacher about what learning is expected. In contrast, the ACT ESOL handouts provide a record and a validation of the learning that has already taken place.

Retelling the stories

After this phase of ACT ESOL, the group had developed two stories. In developing and performing the stories they had also produced some rich material that provided further opportunities for language development.

In order to make the most of this opportunity we took some time out of the theatre work to develop storytelling skills. Storytelling is a key aspect of social relations in most contexts but it also requires complex language skills. We spent time in small groups re-telling the stories we had performed using a basic three part narrative frame to structure the story: background, action or events and outcome. Interestingly this frame, common in ESOL teaching, also corresponds to the structure for performing images. Before every performance the performers are required to set the scene and make the context of the performance clear, using whatever props are available to them. Then the scene is performed and a variety of conclusions are drawn.



ACT ESOL participants taking part in Forum Theatre

It was easy, therefore, to transfer the structure of performances to the basic narrative structure to support storytelling. What was more complex, however, was for less experienced speakers of English to take the long turn necessary for narrating a story. We gave time to mini groups to work together preparing written notes to support the storytelling. One person from the group then used their oral skills to retell the story to the other group. This activity was a challenge but it allowed the development of language skills and, crucially, enabled the participants to go away and talk about what we had been doing in the workshops in English as well as their more fluent languages. The stories they produced were impressive in their completeness and dramatic content and showed a strong link between performance and rapid progress in language development.

To sum up this second stage, 'performing ourselves', we combined theatre and language work. A pattern emerged whereby we did performance and then took time to discuss it, developing language skills as we did. We initially performed a still image and discussed multiple interpretations of that image. We then performed the stories behind the image and finished with a retelling of those stories. From a language point of view this work relies on participants creating their own complex and interesting contexts for language developing via performance work, which proved to be a very powerful and productive combination.

4.1.3 Exploring society and making change using Forum Theatre

The final stage in our structure focuses on Forum Theatre. In our process the group then worked the ideas that were developed in the 'performing ourselves' stage into a performance. In the previous phase the image of an individual experience was developed into a performance by the group. This process allows the image to become universal or in Boal's words 'pluralised'. As we have already said, this is a key aspect of Theatre of the Oppressed work. In the forum phase, the group members work with the performance to explore alternative outcomes. How could things have been done differently? How could the Protagonist have acted or said something else in a different way? Should they remove themselves completely from the situation? Is there something divergent to do? All interventions are equally engaging and interesting. This exploration of different outcomes showed us different ways of reacting to situations of oppression and how to transform and change oppressive realities.

As it is a theatre form that is entirely determined and developed through participation, the interventions took place through action rather than discussion and debate. The discussion took place afterwards as we reflected on what we had experienced.

Two ways of making Forum Theatre

In ACTESOL, we worked with a variety of performances to explore different outcomes to the stories told by the group. There were two different aspects to the forum work we did. Firstly, we established that during the forum work, the changes made to the original performance could consist of either changes to the outcome or changes to the language used. We referred to these alternatives as 'Forum (change) the action', and 'Forum (change) the language'. In ACTESOL both of these forums were possible and both were relevant. The 'language forum' allowed participants to be experimental with language by trying out new things. Group leaders also made some suggestions here, for example, 'How could you say that more forcefully?' or 'more subtly', or even, 'that wasn't clear, could you try to say that differently'.

One story we worked with related to an experience of everyday racism. This was a recent incident experienced by two group members while walking together near the theatre. An old lady had shouted some racist abuse at them to the tune of 'bloody foreigners using our pavement space'.

Another story related to experiences of bullying at the job centre. Many in the group had experienced this. In small groups we performed a Forum Piece of both of these stories to explore different outcomes. In doing this we were able to use performance to investigate what was happening and understand how our reactions to oppressive situations may be rooted in acceptance of oppression. Forum Theatre allowed us a safe space to explore alternative actions which may ensure a different reaction next time a similar situation arises, a reaction based on resisting rather than accepting oppressive situations.

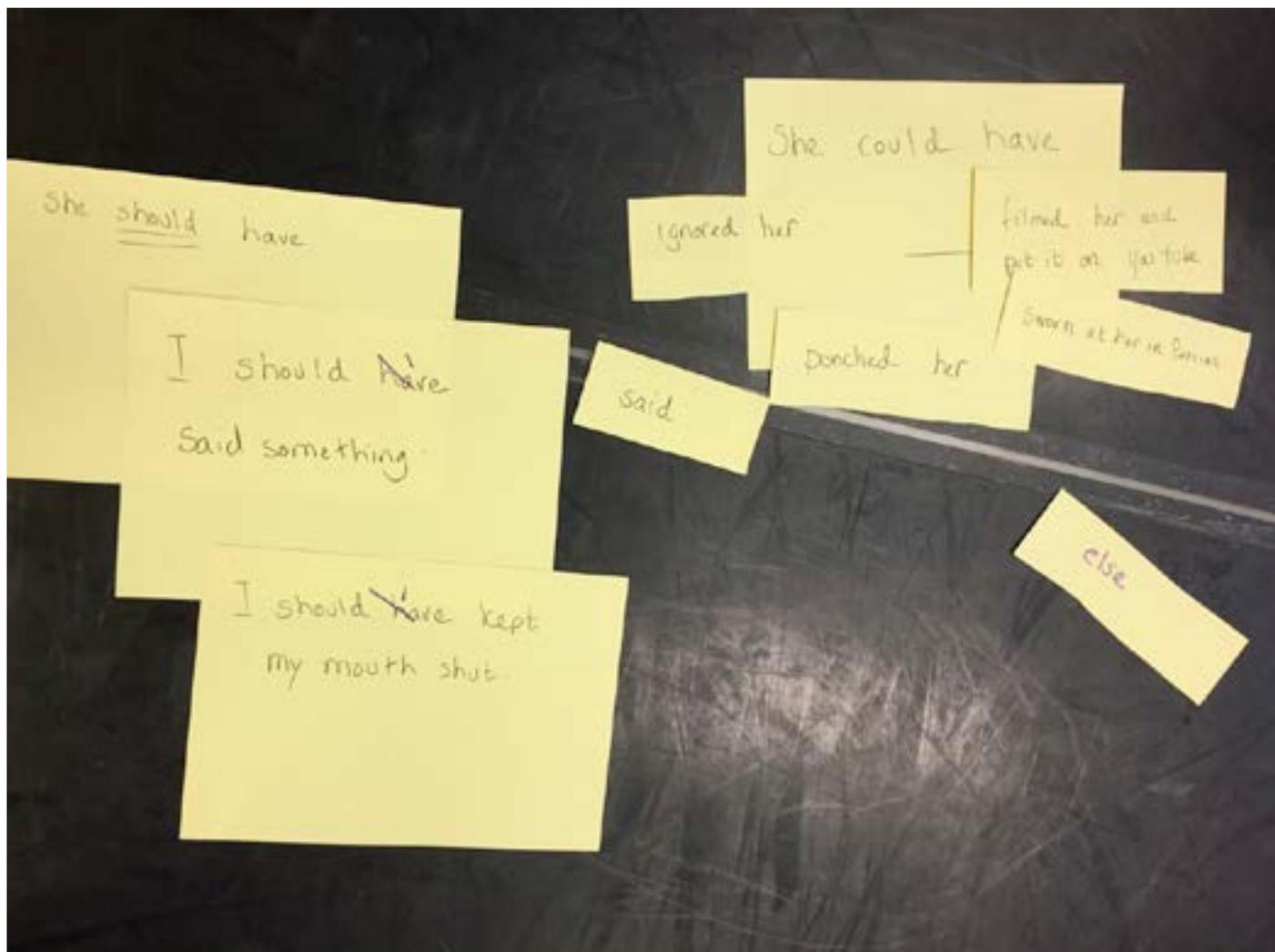
'Bloody Foreigners'

The Forum piece, 'Bloody Foreigners', showed the Protagonists strolling down the road chatting. They come across an old lady who begins shouting at them saying things like, 'bloody foreigners, get out of my way'. The Protagonists, in this case two, felt upset but decided to move on without challenging the woman.

The rest of the group watched this performance. At a key moment the performers were called upon to freeze the action and the performance became a still image. The Spectators, the rest of the group, then, one by one, stepped into to the Protagonist's role and tried out other possible continuations of the story. This continuation did not have to be the 'right' way or even a 'better' reaction, rather it should be an exploration of alternatives to the original in order to explore possibilities and open up the idea of change, and of a non-fixed reality. The change of role also importantly allows the original protagonist to step back from their situation and observe it being reflected on.

We reworked the scene many times, each time with a different outcome. One scene tackled the woman directly, another with irony and another saw the protagonist address the woman with concern, asking if she was all right and needed any help. In another scene the protagonist began speaking to the woman in another language, adding a comic and slightly surreal slant to the story. The interventions were both serious and also very entertaining and funny.

Forum Theatre and language development



Follow up language work

Following the Forum process, we spent some time reflecting on the experience. In a similar way to the 'performing our lives' images this work served as a kind of de-briefing but also as a reflective moment, away from the performance in which we could work with language. After the forum process we reflected on the various alternative outcomes that had been performed. Instead of performing we described these possibilities in words using the 'could have' and 'should have' verbal construction. Although this construction is generally considered to be quite complex grammatically, the fact that it was so clearly linked to the performance meant that the participants had no trouble using the verb forms in their comments. Again, a follow up handout (see Appendix II) consolidated understanding of these forms.

4.2 Using multilingual resources in theatre work

One of the most exciting things to emerge from the project from a language learning point of view was the work that used the whole linguistic repertoire of the group members in the development of scenes. As mentioned in Part 1, there is a move in socio and applied linguistics to see languages not as entities in themselves but as parts of an individual's biographical linguistic experiences. In the planning sessions, we had spoken about using students' language backgrounds as a resource in the process but interestingly when this happened it seemed to emerge quite naturally from the participants as part of the theatre work entirely unprompted by the group leaders. This might reflect the level of deeper thinking about language that had been going on throughout the project as well as the openness of the emerging curriculum versus the prescribed curriculum. The following example shows how this happened.

The Art Gallery

In this scene, group members improvised a hilarious scene, in which one frustrated artist was attempting to get his opinion heard by a rather overpowering boss in an art gallery. The scene took place during preparation for a show and concerned the positioning of the art piece. Japanese, Portuguese and English were all used in the scene. Each performer spoke a language none of the others 'spoke' or 'understood'. When one spoke in Japanese, the other replied in Portuguese and so on. What transpired was a slightly surreal but highly entertaining piece of theatre that was based on a common understanding of communicative processes involving language, even though there was no shared vocabulary and grammar. For example, turn-taking procedures were understood and respected and voices were raised at the dramatic moments. In a moment of pure farce, the artist places himself in his own sculpture to force agreement for his bossy gallery owners. During the performance the speakers seemed to understand each other perfectly, much to the hilarity of the audience. The whole idea of flouting the perceived borders between languages allowed us to actively challenge mainstream ideas about monolingualism. One example already mentioned is the policy adopted in many ESOL courses where 'English' is the only language in the classroom and students are expected to create a very clear demarcation between English and their other languages. Languages are much more fluid however and this scene shows the fluidity in action. It is one of the many examples where the creative properties of theatre and acting helped to cut through the rigidity of the classroom context.

The various stories that emerged in the 8 sessions of ACT ESOL reflect the richness of the experience. As we have described, these were not just individual anecdotes but were live stories that were developed by the whole group, providing a huge range of language work from vocabulary, to verb forms to pragmatic functions of language. Although the focus was on theatre and performance, it was steeped in language work. All the language work emerged from the participants themselves and the rich fabric of their lives.

Part 5: Concluding remarks and ways forward

The aim of the ACT ESOL project was to explore ways in which radical ESOL and radical theatre could come together in a single project. Anyone working on theatre projects will have experienced the tremendous creativity that is unleashed by acting, both linguistic and performance. Theatre work and Theatre of the Oppressed work therefore can be used productively with ESOL students without any particular reference to language: just by performing in another language, they will have developed language skills purely from the imperative of having to express themselves. ACT ESOL, however, went much further. We discovered the endless possibilities of intertwining language work explicitly into the theatre work. This gave the project very much a language 'feel' and this encouraged the participants to discuss and reflect on language every step of the way. This was and is crucial. Thoughts about language are central to the lived experiences of migrants and also key to how they feel about their new life. This does not merely mean learning new language elements and practising new skills but also having the opportunity to think about and discuss language and issues pertaining to language that affect their everyday lives. Also crucial is being able to use their existing language resources as a way to develop new ones, rather than feeling so sharply the inadequacy of a new language. Another outcome of working in this way was that the language based approach revealed cultural difficulties alongside the more obvious linguistic ones. Having access to the tacit rules surrounding social codes and behaviours is just as important as linguistic knowledge.

The other important thing about language is the way it unifies a group around shared difficulties to overcome. This group, and many other groups are very diverse and it is difficult to find a common issue around which to focus transformative theatre work. A focus on language and problems associated with language use, disclosing racism and language based discrimination, including monolingual bias and negative attitudes to different languages so prevalent in the UK today, provides a common experience around which ideas can begin to unfold. Talking about language, understanding how language works in society and expressing opinions and insecurities about language as well as using it and learning how to use it, are all part of a participatory language curriculum, a curriculum made infinitely richer and more relevant when combined with Theatre of the Oppressed.

Next steps and ways forward

The combination of participatory language work and theatre work is one which Serpentine Galleries and Implicated Theatre are committed to continuing. The next stage of this process is to train and develop a group of participatory ESOL teachers to carry out classroom-based action research using Theatre of the Oppressed approaches with ESOL. We hope that the work of the pilot project described in this report will act as a reference point for this work and will provide both ideas and underpinning rationale for combining Theatre of the Oppressed with participatory ESOL. In turn, we envisage that their experiences in the classroom will build on and add to the work described in this report and will begin to establish a community of practising Theatre of the Oppressed ESOL teachers.

Projects/organisations mentioned in the report

With thanks to Frances Rifkin and Implicated Theatre for their contribution to this report, and all the students who took part in the project.

English for Action <http://www.efalondon.org/>

Independent Workers Union of Great Britain <http://iwgb.org.uk/>

Justice for domestic workers (J4DW) <http://www.j4dw.org/>

Migrants Resource Centre <http://www.migrantsresourcecentre.org.uk/>

United Migrant Workers Education Project <http://www.unitetheunion.org/>

The x:talk project <http://www.xtalkproject.net/>

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Appendices

ACT ESOL Day 3 - 16th February 2015

English Focus

1. Storytelling – using a narrative structure

We used a useful structure for storytelling.

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| Background | For example, information about where the story happens, the characters, when it happened. |
| Action/Events | What happened, what were the main events of the story? |
| Outcome | What was the result? How did this event change me or my life? |

We also tried to use phrases to help us **join** the story together and to explain the **order** of the main events

For example,
next,
later that day
before that happened
while that was happening
after a few moments

We talked about how we need to add **suspense** to a story and **draw** the audience/listeners **in**. You told 2 stories, 'Get out of my house!' and 'The Bus'

2. New Vocabulary

You used these words during the workshop

Please add the meaning or a translation or both!

| Word | Meaning | Translation |
|-------------------------|---------|-------------|
| Facilitate (verb) | | |
| Intervene (verb) | | |
| Exaggerate (verb) | | |
| Dramatic (adj) | | |
| Humiliated (adj) | | |
| Ignore (verb) | | |
| Realise (verb) | | |
| Complain (verb) | | |
| Cheat on (verb) | | |
| Circumstances (noun pl) | | |
| Efficiently (adv) | | |
| Anxious (adj) | | |
| Anxiety (noun) | | |
| Dyslexia (noun) | | |
| Dehydrated (adj) | | |

ACT ESOL Worskshop 6 and 7 – More Verb Combinations

In workshop 6 we looked at some more combinations with verbs to express likes, pleasure and enjoyment as well as opposites (didn't like, hate etc).

When we use these verbs in combination with other verbs we use *ing*.

We used these verbs to talk about our experiences of Act ESOL so far.

*I liked **doing** the walking activities.*

*I enjoyed **doing** hypnosis.*

*I didn't like **doing** hypnosis.*

We also used some modifiers, **particularly, really and especially**, to strengthen or soften the sentiment.

*I **really** enjoyed **acting** the scenes.*

*I don't **particularly** like having to evaluate what I did and didn't like!*

But sometimes we don't want to soften!

*I didn't like **being** in the centre of the circle!*

*To strengthen a dislike we can use **at all**.*

*I didn't I didn't like **being** in the centre of the circle **at all**.*

In Workshop 7 we used past modal verbs to talk about an alternative version of the past. We use *could* to talk about how the past could have been different (even though it wasn't!). The event is already concluded but we are still thinking about it.

We talked about various possible alternative reactions to the racist old lady using the verb *could*.

We use **have** + **past participle**.

She *could have filmed* it and put it on YouTube.

She *could have just walked* away.

We also used **should have** + **past participle** to talk about regrets.

I *should have said* something.

I *should have kept* my mouth shut.

In spoken English *have* becomes **ve** and sounds a bit like **of**

I *should've kept* my mouth shut.

I *should've walked* away.

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