

# From Acting Class to Language Class

*by* Meilinda Meilinda

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**Submission date:** 08-Sep-2020 03:57PM (UTC+0700)

**Submission ID:** 1381877812

**File name:** From\_Acting\_Class\_to\_Language\_Learning\_cover\_and\_content.pdf (1.74M)

**Word count:** 4618

**Character count:** 23584



Proceedings

Language in  
the Online & Offline World 4:  
The Latitude

Petra Christian University  
June 3 & 4, 2014



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Perpustakaan Nasional RI: Katalog Dalam Terbitan ( KDT )

258 Halaman; 210 x 297 mm

ISBN: 978-979-99765-9-8

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## From Acting Class to Language Learning

By Meilinda

### Abstract

In this paper, I propose that interdisciplinary approach by combining acting, language teaching method, cultural understanding can be one of many ways in learning Indonesian language for foreign students. I argue that this approach enables the students to not only embrace the language but also the culture of targeted language. Inspired by andragogy teaching learning philosophy, interdisciplinary concept and the application of the concept of culture, language and representational acting, I explore a case study of foreign students who studied Indonesian language in Petra Christian University. In so doing, I discuss weekly activities, the reasons behind adopting those activities, as well as the boon and bane of the approach.

**Keywords:** interdisciplinary, acting, second language learning

### Introduction

I have been teaching theater in higher education since 2005 and when I was asked to open an acting class for international students to help them embracing Indonesian language that they have learned for a semester, I said, "Why not!" I am one of those lecturers who are always looking for a way to improve my teaching skill and inspire more students to try something new. Therefore, I think, it is an opportunity to do a little experiment.

As a background context, Indonesian language is not an international language. Nonetheless, in line with globalization movement, Indonesian government believes that cultural and language penetrations are needed to introduce Indonesia to the world. There are 750 scholarships every year available for international students who would like to learn Indonesian language and culture. Petra Christian University, where I am working, is one of the chosen universities to host these international students. The students who took this class came from European countries, like Poland, Slovakia, and Lithuania. They are international travelers who were brave enough to come to a third world country for an adventure. They were older and more mature compared to regular undergraduate students in Indonesia. They loved challenges and freedom. Paying attention to their characteristic and what they had undergone, I realized I needed to redesign my acting class to answer their needs.

My acting class, which is two credit hours class, was in English and the acting methodology that I applied was representational acting style that is well known in the western countries. However, I was fully aware that the goal of the class was not to make them actors. Acting here was merely the tool to help them understand and able to use Indonesian language with a better confidence. I realized that learning a foreign language is a challenge; it takes linguistic knowledge, literacy knowledge and world knowledge (Bernhard, 1991). Therefore, "learning language cannot be divorced from culture learning" (Miccoli, 2003). Thus, I broadened the scope of my class and brought in folklore understanding, script writing, acting skill and most importantly, pronunciation and intonation skills to the class. After sixteen weeks, the students successfully staged a reader's theatre of the adaptation of *Bawang Merah dan Bawang Putih*, a folklore from Indonesia.

In this paper, I would like to argue that interdisciplinary approach by combining acting, language teaching method, and cultural understanding can be one of many ways in learning

Indonesian language. It will enable the students to not only embrace the language but also the culture of targeted language.

## Literature Review

### Andragogy

In 1970s, Malcom Knowles, the champion of the term andragogy, explained how different teaching learning methodology should be applied based on the age of the learner. Andragogy is teaching principles that are used to teach adult. There are some of the principles that I use in creating my project. As stated by Green, J. (1998), adults are internally motivated and self-directed. This is when the lecturer takes the role of a facilitator. Lecturer must be able to build an environment where the students are free to share their thoughts without being criticized. The facilitator must be able to show that each student's opinion is important for the class. Students must be encouraged to ask questions and start their journey in finding out the answer through search. Each student deserves to get constructive feedback from the facilitator. Moreover, adults bring life experiences and knowledge to learning experiences. As an adult, they have experiences and interests. The lecturer should allow them to use their experiences in problem solving situation and in building their argument. Adults are goal oriented. So it is a must that the students know their goal of doing the class.

As quoted from The Clinical Educator's Resource Kit Homepage, "adults are relevancy oriented." There is an urgency to find the relevance between what they are learning and their need. Ask the student to do some reflection on, for example, what they expect to learn prior to the experience, what they learnt after the experience, and how they might apply what they learnt in the future, or how it will help them to meet their learning goals. One of the ways in applying the principles above is by using theatre as an approach, since the process of making theatre will allow students to observe and find the complexity of life in the characters (Hampton,2001). Paying attention to my students' background and the goal of the class, therefore, andragogy became my teaching philosophy in conducting my acting class. I functioned more as a facilitator and let them bring themselves to be the center of the class.

### Interdisciplinary Concept

Jones (2009) explain that the interdisciplinary approach is "an integration of methodology...and a much needed lifelong learning skill". There are different methodologies that can be used in order to teach the students one thematic topic. This methodology will effect the students to have more comprehensive understanding between all disciplines or enhancing communication capability.

He quoted Haynes (2002) in the paper explained that the interdisciplinary approach has been defined by Executive Director of the Association for Integrated Studies William H. Newell and William Green (1982) as "inquiries which critically draw upon two or more disciplines and which lead to an integration of disciplinary insights". This concept will help my paper in justifying the approach that I use in the case that I have. I write about how language teaching and learning can be approached by using this concept.



### Concept of Culture and Language

Lazear (1999) in his paper "Culture and Language" mentioned that "a common culture allows the traders to have common expectations and customs, which enhances trust." To be able to communicate ideas, the speakers need to have common understanding on things that they are communicating; otherwise, the words are just words and they are less meaningful. The understanding is important in order to gain trust and so that the two communicators can avoid misinterpretation. Furthermore, Micolli mentioned that "culture here includes issue such as how to communicate anxiety, excitement and how culturally accepted intonation is used to deliver humor or anger." In other words, as learners of second language (L2), students must pay attention to the cultural factors to be able to communicate effectively in the targeted society. Their intonation and pronunciation will help them delivering their message and being understood by the native speakers more easily. There are certain cultural codes that they need to adopt for the native speakers to understand what they are saying and to trust it. This is the cultural concept that I adopt in combining pronunciation and intonation skill learning process with cultural context. This concept justifies my action and the training that I gave to the students in my acting class.

### Discussion

Even though the lecturer is the leader of the class, based on andragogy approach, the students must take active role in class. Lecturer's role is to facilitate students' movement to be more self-directed as well as to foster the students' internal motivation to learn. Students must be encouraged to ask questions and start their journey in finding out the answer through research. Therefore, I tried to be a facilitator instead of a lecturer in this class. I set fundamental rules then encourage them to do the rest. It does not mean that I let them do everything without my guidance, but I gave guidance only when they required them. My relationship with my students was a partnership. It was always important to let them believe and think that it was their story, their work. In order to achieve the goal of the class, I had to set a safe and trustworthy environment that encouraged the students to ask and explore things concerning the class' project.

Since my students had to feel safe with the required knowledge, I needed to make sure that they have it. In order to perform a theatre performance in Indonesian language that will be viewed by Indonesian audience, students must know theatre performance history and trends in Indonesia as background. It will help them in understanding their audience's expectation. Therefore the first meeting was dedicated to make a pact between me and my students that they would create an adaptation of Indonesian folklore and perform it live in front of Indonesian audience. At first the students were pessimistic. They were afraid that their language capacity would not be able to handle the challenge and some of them never did acting before.

Their opinions were slightly changed after I explained the Basic Course Outline which explained in details the steps that they would take in order to finish the project. I revealed to them that they would get a chance to learn folklores in Indonesian culture, to use the acting method that they are familiar already, to understand how cultures around the world are connected in one way or another, to believe that the piece they would make would be useful for them despite the uncomfortable process. The students had to commit to the process since it would be time consuming. Grammar was taught inductively; the students learned several sentences and decoded the grammar system being used. Pronunciation and intonation of new vocabularies that were used in the sentences had to be drilled to build the students' confidence in delivering them

on the stage. My explanation about theatre in Indonesia came next after that. Apparently, this knowledge helps them to build their confidence in doing the project. It also helped them to feel familiar with theatre performance and the audience in Indonesia. At the end of the first meeting, they were ready to commit to do this challenging project.

Meeting 2 - 4 were dedicated to enable the students to understand and practice representational acting skill. The important acronym in representational acting is GOTE, which stands for Goal, Obstacle, Tactic and Expectation (Cohen, 2001). Actor will base his actions on the GOTE of the character on the stage. In order to be able to do it, actor must write a character analysis which will help them understanding the character as they analyze the given circumstances in the play. This is the methodology that I use in acting class. It was also dedicated to understand the importance of characterization and given circumstance that would help the students to perform the lines with specific goal and choose the most appropriate tactic in the performance. Open scene scenario was chosen, since it was short and open for varieties of interpretations when students were exercising their capability to create a solid plot. Furthermore, it helped the students to develop their mind through character analysis and scene study (Stucky & Tomell- Presto, 2004). A positive aspect from creativity point of view was that students had an opportunity to create their story by using open scene scenario. It was a series of open-interpretation lines that could be meaningless or meaningful depending on how the actor decided to play them.

Example of Open Scene Scenario

A: Satu

B: Dua

C: Tidak Cukup

A: Satu

B: Coba pikirkan baik- baik

C: Satu

A: Tidak mungkin

B: Bagaimana bisa

C: Satu

A: Ya, kamu benar

B: Apa maksudmu?

Students had to create a plot, story, and character analysis based on given circumstances rule, the where-when-who-what. After they gave identity to the characters, they would write the action and the intention of each character. Based on Cohen (2001) methodology, GOTE, they needed to understand the reason behind their action where all their tactics had to be justifiable by their goal while paying attention to their goal, obstacle and expectation. It helped them a lot in mastering representational acting style that is used in the class. Only then could they rehearse the open scene scenario. There were a lot of questions regarding this method. They were still afraid in exploring the possibility. They were afraid to make mistakes and be a joke on the stage. This was when physical exercises took place, where I gave them a lot of theatre exercises to build the trust among one another and to help them feel comfortable on the stage in front of people.

There were doubts and lots and lots of questions from each of them to me and to their acting partner, questioning whether or not their actions can be justifiable with the intentions that they had, whether they would look silly on stage with the choice they made. This was when "just do it" charm did not work. Therefore, in these meetings, a lot of experiments of interpretations took place. I went word by word in the open scene to make them embrace the meaning of the words, exploring many possibilities that they could do in executing the script. Only by then were they able to finally create a story using the script.

There are some evaluations on this part for future reference. First, the lecturer needs to make a vocabulary list that is not only the translation of the words but also the social context and example of how the words are used in everyday life. Also, there must be a special session dedicated to pronunciation drilling. It will help them believe in the words, feel confident in using them, imagine and then create the story more easily. Also, every meeting must start with physical theater exercises done by the lecturer and the students to remind them that they are in an environment where making silly mistakes are just part of the day.

In meeting 5 – 9, students learned the connection between world culture and language. Their understanding on Indonesian culture related to the folklore also became one of considerations that they used in order to create the plot.

They examined and found similarities between folklore from Indonesia and their own country. Why folklore? As stated above, “a common culture allows the traders to have common expectations and customs, which enhances trust” (Lazear, 1999). Here, the targeted language is both used in written and spoken with a very close relation to the culture behind the language. The students had to learn the spoken language culture in targeted language before they were able to translate and write the story using the targeted language.

In line with Andragogy, adults bring life experiences and knowledge to learning experiences. Allowing them to use their experiences in problem solving situation and in building their argument are encouraged. The opportunity for the students to compare and contrast their culture and targeted language's culture was necessary to help them in understanding and building trust toward the targeted language culture which later on would help them in using the targeted language more confidently. Folklore also brings the childhood memory that is, hopefully, a simpler phase of their life. The students did independent research to find out the most suitable topic for all of them. This was where the discussion could take a very long time since each of them could come up with a story and ideas. There were topics like super power, magic, curse, mother-daughter relationship, step-mother as the devil, cruelty among step sisters, power and control of knowledge, relation between strength and size and many more. However, the class ended up falling in love with the issue of step-family and woman power. There might be bias factor in choosing the issue since three out of four students in my class were female but they were very sure on the topic that they would like to explore.

There were plenty of factors that I needed to consider in assigning this project to them. I asked the students to choose a topic that was important and interesting for them, write a play in the length that they can bear, consider the number of people in class to make sure everyone got a fair part and used their own language. The above requests are in line with Toscan's rules of thumb (1995). They had to write a twenty minutes play. Then, students made the treatment/summary of the play. They reviewed the treatment to decide on a more solid plot. Furthermore, they decided the characters and cast the actors before they wrote the whole script. Each character decided what they would say in the play. They struggled with targeted language here, but by doing this, they were forced to use Indonesian language. Some part of the script was originally written in Indonesian and some were in English which needed translation afterward. When the script was ready, they needed to learn how to reproduce the words in a believable manner using representational acting skill that was taught previously. It was amusing to know how a group of international students transformed *Bawang Merah dan Bawang Putih* into a detective story. They challenged the issue of step-family cruelty. They believed that greed and cruelty are beyond family relation. The result is very satisfying regardless the time commitment that we had to pay for this project.



As a lecturer, I functioned more as a facilitator, making sure that the discussion flowed and hit the target and as a source of understanding Indonesian culture. I helped them understand the power and position of a mother in Indonesian culture, the importance of magic as part of this culture. I also functioned as the editor at the end of this writing process and assisted them in translating the script, including answering many questions like “why do we have to use this words instead of that word.” The beauty of this process is the students got a chance to learn the language through understanding their culture. Their relationship as a group grew stronger. They did not care of saying something silly in the class. They became braver to explore ideas. The downside of this process is it was time and energy consuming for both the students and lecturer. As an evaluation for the future, it will be easier if this is a three credit class instead of two.

After meeting 9, the students prepared the performance. This was where they needed to rehearse a lot. Not only were rehearsals enabling them to act on the stage, but most importantly, they really made them own the lines. This was where my function shifted to being the director of the play. I staged them on the stage, discussed the reasons why it was important for the students to move to this direction, and discussed their GOTE as a reason why they chose to act in certain way on the stage and so on. Along the way, I helped them with memorization, pronunciation drilling, and intonation. Even during the rehearsal, in order to be connected to their understanding of the script, students had to face cultural communication to be able to understand why such a word was pronounced in such a way. The same case applied to intonation. For example, why an angry mother use certain intonation while revealing her anger toward her step daughter; why a step sister must use certain word and intonation to mock her step sister; and why a reporter of a newspaper must use certain intonation to investigate a case. This method put a lot of emphasis on vocabularies and spoken language skills, although from the very beginning they had to work on the four skills (writing, reading, speaking and listening). They read the folklore in targeted language, they rewrote the story in a form of a play, learned to say the words in the play, and learned to listen to other characters' lines to not miss the cue. Pronunciation, thus, received a lot of attention since the beginning of the play production. This class was using English and targeted language only. Students were not allowed to use their native language not only for the sake of getting the opportunity to use targeted language but also because they were from different countries with different language origins. The only way to communicate to one another was using English and Indonesian language.

I remembered one of the actors found it difficult for her saying *kurang ajar* using the necessary intonation. This is an adjective to describe one's capacity in behaving improperly toward another person. However, if the student translates it directly the meaning will not be revealed. *Kurang* means minus. *Ajar* means to teach. Without a proper context a foreigner will not be able to understand the meaning of both words when they become a unit. This was the case where giving example was not an effective way out. GOTE of the character could be a help but it was not enough. I had to discuss the meaning of *kurang ajar* literary and culturally. It took longer than my prediction. I had to convince her by giving many contextual examples on how and why people in Indonesia use the phrase, and it was ok to use that tone. After a long discussion and practices, she nailed it. If I am going to apply this again, I will set a buddy system involving local students who understand representational acting and can speak international language. So each actor has a buddy to help them with their lines because as much as I enjoyed the process, it was time consuming for the lecturer.

Other technical issues that we needed to tackle were scenic, property, and costume. It could be a problem, since the students were international students with limited sources in

providing all of them. This was where I requested the help from students who were members of Petra Little Theatre to deal with the above issues.

At the final rehearsal, I decided to change their theatre performance into readers theater because of one reason: they were not confident saying all their lines without the script. To my surprise, they could utter the difficult cultural-context lines, difficult pronounced words, and the challenging moments in the story, but they could not remember ordinary lines in the right order. It was my failure in teaching them representational acting. I think, if only we had had more time to deal with the script and to have more working rehearsals, we could have done it better. I realized that my biggest challenge in conducting this class was not the method but the limited amount of time. Therefore, instead of letting them have silent and awkward moments on the stage, I decided to change it into readers theater performance where they could bring small notes of the script on the stage. So, when they performed, they did not miss a cue. The pronunciation was clear. From the vibe in the room, I knew that the audience liked it.

I would like to share one testimony from one of the students when I asked whether this approach helped them learning Indonesian language. Tomas Hancel from Slovakia answered: "It is helpful because you (the student) are putting together words and emotions so the words are not unknown sounds going out from your (the student's) mouth. Also, the performance is making it easier to sense the meanings of the words". This approach helps the students to be more confident in using *Bahasa Indonesia* because the students believe that they understand the words, the context of the words. I also notice how they became more comfortable in using the language since people around them could understand what they said which in another word, they pronunciation skill was improved.

## Conclusion

1 Acting Plus More class can be used as a tool to help adult students in learning a second language. The class will be demanding and challenging which is suitable for adult learners who love challenges. It will also establish a connection to each student's native culture and open a discussion of cultural differences in order to understand the targeted language culture better. Students will learn spoken and written skills through reading and writing the script as well as speaking and listening to the lines that they exchange in the rehearsal and performance. Focus will be given in enriching students' vocabulary and helping them with their intonation and pronunciation. Since they deliver it on stage, they also have an opportunity to improve their confidence in using the targeted language by applying representational acting style. However, constructive feedback must be given in respectful manner regarding the age of the students and the culture of andragogy. Evaluation is given every week through class participation and assignments that take quite a significant portion in grading policy. Feedback must be given in unthreatening way. However, since this class develops different language skills, different approaches in correcting mistakes should be applied. For example, in writing, feedback is given in a form of discussion, where lecturer asks questions to stimulus students to find the right answer actively. Nonetheless, in pronunciation, drilling and direct corrections cannot be avoided.

The biggest challenges in doing this type of class were time and energy. Did students learning the language and the culture? Yes. Did they emancipate in the meeting as much as they could? Yes. Did they learn how to bear the idea of performing in front of strangers? Yes. Will

three credit hours class be able to help the students and the lecturer in achieving the goal of the class better? Will this class be able to handle more than four students? These are the questions that I do not have the answers yet and I am still planning to find out.

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### **Biography:**

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