

Reader's Theater Exercise VI

Speaking a character's part with an accent is an easy way to multiply the fun of reading, and even listening, with Reader's Theater! The activities in this exercise, which introduce accents and dialects, are designed more for students in the upper elementary grades and beyond. When readers can hold an accent consistently, they can represent their characters more fully and creatively. Unique accents allow students to feel as if they are really becoming their characters and help them get into their roles.

Some Playbook® stories feature character parts with fun accents spelled out phonetically, making it easier to speak the part with an accent and helping children get used to pronunciation different from their natural speech. However, character parts without phonetic spellings or implied variations in speech can still be read with an accent designed by the teacher or students.

For example, a Russian accent can be accomplished simply by replacing the “th” sound with “z,” “ing” with “ink,” and “w” with “v.” For instance, a character could say,

“I must stick vith ze vay I have allvays taught ze ballet dance-ink.”

Another example of sound replacement that might be easier for students is speaking the part with a lisp. A lisp can be represented simply by replacing “s” with “th.” A lisping character might say,

“Justht becauthe I lithp and I talk kind of funny doethn't mean I'm a bad perthon.”

There are many students that have a natural talent for speaking with accents and can make this conversion as they read, while others may need more preparation and practice. Some easier conversions of speaking dialogue with an accent that don't need as much practice or effort can include simply changing the pitch or volume of the voice (higher or lower), or changing the speed (faster or slower). For example, a bird character might speak with a high pitch, and an “old person” character might speak at a slower speed. Using the breath can also change the way an accent sounds; an old person might be portrayed by speaking as if he or she is out of breath.

To make a character's part more believable, it helps when students understand the factors that influenced the character's speech pattern and accent. Teachers can help students create in their minds a profile of the character's background such as their social status, education, ethnicity, health, parental influence, religious background, outlook on life and other possible significant factors in the character's upbringing. These variables contribute to the word choices and sentence structure in a character's dialogue.

Students can learn through the following exercises that accents and dialect can contain a lot of information about a person. You might begin by asking your students to make a list of the type of accents they have heard such as people from the South or from New York, or from other countries such as England or Ireland, or different sorts of people like cowboys, clowns, or even their favorite cartoon character.



Reader's Theater Exercise VI (continued)

(for older or more advanced students)

Part B – Study of Dialects

Studying the English language dialect introduces your students to how language varies geographically and socially. Learning about dialects helps develop students' critical thinking skills. By comparing patterns, they develop a clearer understanding of their own dialect and an understanding for the real reasons for language diversity in this country. It helps them see the social and educational consequences of dialects as well as the function it serves in mainstream and indigenous community settings.

Project #1 – Ask your students to conduct a small interview with community members (parents, grandparents, relatives or friends from different neighborhoods). They may ask the person to recall a local story about how they used slang in their era, how they learned English, or how language has changed in their lifetime. The students may want to tape record the conversation to analyze the dialect for language patterns later.

Project #2 – Students can research one of the over 24 dialects in the American English language and write a paper that discusses the history, geography, common word usage, grammar patterns, pronunciations, speech style, cultural characteristics, misconceptions and prejudices, and other interesting facets about a particular dialect. (Examples: New England, Boston-New York, Southern, Cajun English, Tangier, South Midland, Western, Alaskan, Hawaiian, Southwestern, Appalachian, Valley-Girl, Chicano-American)

Project #3 – Ask students to visit the following PBS link to test their understanding of regional dialects and accents. This website asks you to listen to a phrase and identify the words. It tests your ability to identify regional accent sounds.

www.pbs.org/speak/ahead/change/vowelpower/vowel.html

The PBS website also has a regional word quiz developed by DAR (The Dictionary of American Regional English) that documents the varieties of English usage. For example in some parts of the US we call Pepsi a “soda” and other parts it’s known as “pop.” This is a great test for students to learn about common word usage for various regional dialects.

Using audio or video samples is the best way to demonstrate the variety of dialects in this country. Listed below are two suggestions.

“American Tongues,” 1987, Alvarez, L., & Kolker, A. (Producers) available through New Day Films, NY, NY

“Story of English Series: Black on White,” 1986, PBS series hosted by Robert McNeil, available from Films Inc., Chicago, IL

Finally, the 1964 movie and Oscar winner, “My Fair Lady,” is a wonderful adaptation of a Broadway play where a linguistics professor takes on a bet to transform an unrefined Cockney accented flower girl into a young lady who speaks proper Queen’s English. The movie allows you to discuss afterwards the exercises used by the professor to change the girl’s accent and the prejudices associated with certain dialects.

