

Bit Cold – a very English dialogue (shorter version)

Aims & explanation:

“Bit Cold” was inspired by the minimalist dialogue structure of “*The train to Oxford*” by Scott Thornbury, though it explores different cultural themes and language aims. Scott Thornbury wrote “*The train to Oxford*” as teaching material for students of English to illustrate ellipsis, the omission of words that are understood from its context. All credit to Thornbury for the original format. “*Bit Cold*” is designed to get ESOL-students to identify and feel through the spoken lines behavioural aspects that could be perceived as quintessentially English, both linguistically and culturally. The text is designed to be short to be easily accessible, readable and dramatically playable, with little preparation.

The aim is to feel the spoken words in an embodied fashion. It may give a sense of feeling the English language and humour. ESOL-students who haven't yet mastered the subtleties of its phonology however often find the playing with short words and sounds, the context focus through word omission, and the underlying humour as playful, intriguing, and engaging.

Number of students:

Either 2 students (minimum) without an audience or 4 students (minimum) so the pairs can watch each other perform. Accommodate unequal numbers so everyone gets a chance to play if they wish.

Preparation:

This version of the text is deliberately left short. Give students enough time (2 - 3 min max) to read it. Once students feel like talking, briefly discuss the meaning in the group, e.g. ask: How many people are in this scene? (two), What are the circumstances? (freezing cold, speakers feel cold). You may wish to ask: Where does this take place? (Britain), or better, leave the place open to interpretation (but mention it during final feedback). Don't go into the detail of meaning, British culture (students may discover this themselves) or phonology. Then

pair up students, let them choose a part, and ask them to move around the room and speak out aloud their lines. Instruct students to play with the words, the different effects these can have on the other player, as well as on the self (5 to 7 min). Play some music into the room during practice to encourage speaking aloud. Monitor. Perhaps ask students during practise how the lines make them feel, when appropriate.

Running the activity:

First, tell students they can perform the text how they see fit. Explicitly say that playing the text is not about acting. Elicit circumstances (freezing cold) to remind them. No need to forge an understanding of British culture, which can be part of a final discussion, let students work that out themselves if they latch onto it. Instruct the audience to actively watch and think about what they see. Tell students that they will play the same text twice, perhaps three times. This is for students to get over initial nerves, but also to explore differences in presentation. Run and repeat scene work (4 to 6 min) with audience feedback after a run. Aim to run the text 3 times but students need to be encouraged, motivated and facilitated. To do this, pick up on cultural aspects of behaviour (bodily expression, gesture, movement, emotions, speaking / language, spatial distance between speakers) that emerge from the discussion. Audience members can step in and take over a player's role to explore a points made, in or after the 3rd round. Don't forget to thank the players for their performance and have a round of applause.

Audience:

The text can be performed by 2 students in front of an audience of fellow students (2 students minimum) who can then be invited to comment on what they see. Give clear instructions to focus audience reflection and comments on what they see re: 1) bodily expression, 2) movement, and 3) speaking. Tell students not to comment on the '*quality of the acting*' or who performed better, etc. No need to refer to British culture, do it in the final feedback, but explore if it comes up.

Final feedback:

Encourage students to reflect on how people with different cultural backgrounds perform the text. Refer to aspects of British culture appropriate to student levels and interest (see aspects below).

How this text reflects aspects of British culture:

Subject matter: weather, pub

- evokes cold weather and emotional understatement if not stoicism as a coping strategy
- pub: refers to the culture of socialising, here also a place of escape

Speaking: features a combination of aspects of English phonology that could be experienced in an embodied fashion.

- rhythmic turn-taking & fast exchange (quick turns mimic fast, clipped conversational rhythm common in casual speaking)
- reduced forms like "bit" (glottal stop), short stress-timed rhythm (e.g. "Cup of tea?", "You cold?") where key content words are emphasised (e.g., *cup*, *tea*, *cold*) and function words (e.g. *of*, *you*) are reduced
- consonant-vowel linking (e.g. "Left it", "warmer inside")
- consonant assimilation (e.g. *Wind's sharp*)
- range of long and short vowel sounds (e.g. long: *tea*, *hands*; short: *in*, *it*)
- range of vowel pronunciations (e.g. o: *no*, *cold*, *always*, *want*; a: *hands*, *face*, *sharp*, *hat*, *ha*)

Movement and distance between speakers

In British culture, physical space amongst acquaintances is maintained to respect personal boundaries, which may show in subtle gestures, avoiding prolonged eye contact, and standing side-by-side or angled.

Emotions, gestures, facial expression, and humour

British emotional expression and gestures amongst acquaintances may be subtle with a tendency towards emotional reserve. Humour in the text can display through dry understatement by pointing to the funny side of adversity, eg the absurdity of talking about the weather, and polite pretence of self-sufficiency to show coping and deflection from discomfort.

Bit Cold

A: Tea?

B: No flask.

A: Hands?

B: In coat.

A: Still cold.

B: Face burns.

A: Wind's sharp.

B: It is.

A: Hat?

B: Left it.

A: Silly.

B: Always.

A: Want mine?

B: You'll freeze.

A: Already am.

B: Ha.

A: Laughing helps.

B: Maybe.

A: Pub?

B: Warmer inside. Half.

A: Quick one.

B: Go then.

A: Now?

B: Now.