Critical performative pedagogy: Augusto Boal's Theatre of the oppressed in the English as a second language classroom

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CRITICAL PERFORMATIVE PEDAGOGY:
AUGUSTO BOAL’S THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED
IN THE ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
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in
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by
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ABSTRACT

Performative pedagogy combines performance methods and theory with critical pedagogy in an effort to carry out the dual project of social critique and transformation. Performance offers an efficacious means of completing this project by privileging students’ historicized bodies, by implementing contingent classroom dialogue, and by exposing students to the value embedded in performance risk. In this study, I apply performative pedagogy to an English as a Second Language (ESL) context in response to its problematic pedagogical history. In particular, I argue that Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed practice should be adapted as a method for doing performative ESL pedagogy. Boal’s practice enlists body-focused performance techniques to encourage participants to investigate their oppressions and rehearse solutions to them.

I suggest that performative pedagogy is especially salient for immigrant and refugee students in community-based ESL environments whose efforts to learn English typically have concrete influences on their respective lives. In this project, I constructed a performative pedagogy within two sites inside a community-based ESL school. First, I devised a performance workshop using Boal’s image theatre techniques to instigate analysis of students’ language-based obstacles. I eventually moved to a second site, an intermediate-advanced ESL course, to initiate an explicit performative pedagogy that divided each class meeting into two sections: one that featured forum theatre and the other that emphasized structural language practice.

My fieldwork suggests that forum theatre, in particular, provides ESL students a means of acquiring communicative competence, particularly in the sociolinguistic and referential senses. Forum theatre’s efficacy can be seen in its commitment to students’ lived
experiences, its move to address students’ internally-based language obstacles, and its attention to students’ bodies as sites of critique and transformation. The value of using Theatre of the Oppressed in an ESL classroom concerns its capacity to particularize language instruction to the concrete areas of language use that students identify as most salient to their lives by creating unique performance spaces within which students assert their voices.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

There is little disagreement that language and politics are connected. Traditionalists may claim that language itself stands free-floating above politics but they consider attitudes to language as intensely political. These they see as dominated by a radical leftist current that has infected teachers, social workers, and worse still, university professors. At the other end, postmodernists, and others, see language as the nucleus of political life, steeped in power and defining people’s role in the world. (Holborow 1)

Several years ago, I hosted a small dinner party for students that I taught in a community-based English as a Second Language course. Five students from my advanced course attended the party, and unlike our classroom context where I typically maintained tight control of the topics discussed, the student guests dominated the dinner conversation. In the advanced class, students’ conversations were typically informal, but as the instructor, I always asserted my own sense of order. Regardless of the topics pursued by students, I regularly directed conversations back to the content matter I had planned for a given meeting. Dick Allwright’s characterization of English as a Second Language (ESL) students as reluctant to ask “the questions they would really like the teacher to address, just because other more confident or more competent people are around,” described the usual pattern in my class (115). I had a conservative tendency to correct students’ grammar and guide them toward a particular topic of relevance to my lesson plan. The conversations that emerged at the dinner party, however, did not follow this pattern. Students spoke freely with one other about topics relevant to their respective lives, occasionally ignoring either my spouse or me. An hour or so into the party, the guests began to discuss the ways that Americans communicate.
Referring to an idea that she had mentioned within an earlier class meeting, one
student guest, Lidice, launched into a playful critique of how Americans place exaggerated
emphasis on certain words, emphasis that she read as insincere and aloof. Jurate, another
guest, initiated Lidice’s critique by describing the disrespect she perceives when
communicating with the American family that hired her as an au pair: “What most drives me
crazy is when they treat me like baby. Oh, my gosh. At home I had more freedom. I am
twenty-four. ‘Oh, don’t do this baby.’ I can’t stand. Or sometimes ask for meaning of word,
and they explain me like, ‘This is wall. Wall is wide.’ I am saying, ‘I need just name of
this!’” Lidice then reprised her earlier impersonation of women she had encountered in
various social contexts. Lidice imitated a specific conversational form that she labeled
artificial: “It’s sooo cuuute! I would, I would like to have in my kitchen. It’s sooo sweeet!
Hi, Hi sweeetie.” Lidice had first offered her mocking impersonation during a class lecture
on proper pronunciation of vowel sounds. During that class, Lidice interrupted me to inquire
about the appropriate emphasis one should place on certain words during a conversation, and
she used the impersonation as an example of what she thought to be improper pronunciation.

Both times that Lidice offered her mocking take of the women she had heard, she did
so in part to entertain a classroom and dinner party audience who had come to expect such
jokes from her. Yet Lidice’s performance is also symptomatic of the larger implications
always present within the ESL classroom. First, Lidice recognized that any language has
rules for its use and that English is no exception. Her particular interest in pronunciation
guidelines emerged from her concern with what is considered appropriate for social use.
Perhaps already aware that her own English pronunciation was viewed as inadequate by
native English speakers, Lidice took interest in the ways of speaking that would be deemed
acceptable. Second, her outright rejection of a native speaker’s exaggerated speaking style hinted at the potential agency that non-native speakers possess in exercising their voices regarding acceptable communication behaviors. Finally, Lidice called attention to the ongoing project of identity management that ESL students face when using English in their respective lives. Like the women whom Lidice criticized, ESL students’ use of language—particularly their pronunciation, conversational competence, and vocabulary—helps determine how they are perceived in an English-speaking society. Lidice’s primary interest was in the construction of a social performance that others would view as competent, understandable, and most importantly, acceptable.

I refer to this extended narrative as a means of introducing the broad juxtaposition of social, political, linguistic, and identity issues housed within ESL classrooms in the United States. The case of ESL learners in the United States demands a particular pedagogical project, one that privileges the inherent difficulties that immigrants and refugees face in acquiring a second language. Data from the 1990 United States Census indicates that 25.5 million adults speak a language other than English, and of those, over five million report that they either do not speak English at all or do not speak English well. Furthermore, the 1993 National Adult Literacy Survey reports that immigrants who struggle with English comprise an even larger number than indicated on the Census (Wrigley A-46).

For non-native English speakers studying ESL, reliance on English-speaking family members, employers, and teachers can become disabling. Auerbach and Burgess report that during the 1970s, adult education programs catered specifically to the large numbers of immigrants and refugees who entered the United States following the Vietnam War. They indicate that the pedagogical response constructed by adult ESL programs emphasized
functional communication skills needed to survive in the U.S. rather than structural English training (150). The altruistic motives of survival ESL curricula, however, have disguised the subtle limitations such curricula have created in their definition of what it means to “survive” in the United States. The result, argue Auerbach and Burgess, is an oppressive pedagogy that assumes adult ESL students will at best assume menial social positions (158-9).

In recent years, ESL scholars have turned to critical theory and specifically critical pedagogical methods in an effort to insure that language instruction occurs within a context of social critique and hopeful transformation (Pennycook “Critical”). Johnston et al. go so far as to position the ESL teacher as a moral agent whose pedagogy is necessarily immersed in assumptions of trust and truth. They observe that ESL instructors label their critical practices “student-centered” while also claiming “to know how best to teach languages.” ESL pedagogy is essentially an intercultural form that engages students of diverse cultures in the process of learning the language of still another culture. This fact makes it difficult for instructors to assert their allegiance both to students and to their own established curricula (Johnson et al. 171-2). The classroom performances of ESL teachers have strong social significance for their students, many of whom encounter English as an obstacle to their education and career goals. The bottom line for all ESL teachers may concern language instruction, but the pedagogy by which such instruction gets carried out influences how students view their learning tasks and how they implement English in their respective lives. ESL pedagogy can serve larger social agendas by implicating the classroom as an instrument of social critique and change. Yet ESL pedagogy can also situate the classroom as a normative site that indoctrinates students into a restrictive social order.
My history as an ESL instructor led me to consider the language classroom as an extraordinarily pragmatic educational context. Students such as Lidice and Jurate regularly described their concrete uses of language during my traditional language lectures, and their narratives typically concerned the basic communication situations that a person would encounter in daily life. As non-native English speakers, the students usually labeled even the most mundane social interactions as problematic. In many cases, students expressed their personal fears or insecurities when speaking English among the American public. As I began to recognize both the pragmatic and symbolic importance that learning English held for ESL students, I reconsidered my pedagogy, especially its impact on the students’ negotiation of their internalized and concrete language-based obstacles. I recognized that I allowed very little opportunity within my traditional ESL pedagogy for students to reflect on the various social, political, and identity implications that their acquisition of English held. My lecture-style class sessions offered only limited chances for students to discuss their personal experiences and even these were encased within specific grammar or conversation lessons. Despite my typically positive rapport with students and our frequent social interaction outside of class, I recognized that the immigrant and refugee students attending the ESL class were interested in more than mere linguistic competence. They also desired communication competence or a means of using the English language that combated any number of personal and social obstacles.

The purpose of this study is to examine the ESL context as a potential site for doing critical performative pedagogy, a pedagogy that recognizes the need for social critique within the classroom setting and realizes this need through an embodied performance process. An analysis of my earlier classroom fieldwork data indicates that ESL students, especially adult
immigrants and refugees to the United States, encounter a web of psychological and social obstacles while learning English that confine how their language competence gets translated to social action. Traditional language pedagogy makes little concession for the actual social use that students have for language, and the recent move to critical pedagogy within the ESL discipline has often failed to present concrete strategies for adopting critical and transformative goals within language classrooms. This study seeks to address the spectrum of social, political, and identity issues that encompass the ESL classroom by arguing for a revised ESL pedagogy that relies on performance as a theoretical construct and an embodied practice. English language acquisition is not only a project of linguistic competence but also one that implicates the social, historical, and ideological bodies of the immigrants and refugees who engage it. By approaching the ESL classroom as a site of performative pedagogy, this study explores the efficacy of performance when it is translated into pedagogical theory and practice and directed toward the simultaneous goals of social critique, consciousness-raising, and language acquisition.

As Elyse Pineau reminds us, performance and pedagogy are not disparate terms for educators.

As a colloquial expression, the performance metaphor is readily acknowledged by seasoned educators who recognize that effective teaching often relies upon “theatrical” techniques of rehearsal, scripting, improvisation, characterization, timing, stage presence, and critical reviews. (“Teaching” 4)

Educators frequently make casual reference to their classroom instruction as a performance carefully staged for a student audience. Pineau doubts, however, that the performance metaphor will ever receive serious consideration within American education, particularly in light of the United States’ preoccupation with schooling models drafted from industry and corporate contexts. Pineau claims, “As long as education remains ‘utilitarian’ and
performance ‘entertainment,’ the claim that teaching is performance will evoke nothing beyond the facile acknowledgment that a certain theatricality can help hold the attention of drowsy undergraduates in early morning or later afternoon classes” (“Teaching” 5). As a vocabulary used to identify various instructional behaviors that occur during the act of teaching, performance offers little more than vivid descriptions of the classroom environment. Moreover, the proliferation of the teaching as performance metaphor within educational literature disguises the potential that performance holds as both a critical framework and an instructional method.

Pineau’s use of the term “performative pedagogy” represents a move to position discussions of performance and pedagogy at the intersection of critical pedagogy and performance theory. Such a move emphasizes the experiential knowledge generated during the performance process, the function of dialogue during the moment of performance, the utility of the performer’s body as a historical, ideological site, and the efficacy of performance to fulfill the joint project of critique and empowerment. As a critical practice, performative pedagogy is interested in exposing education as an ideological practice that can both enable and disable students. As a performance practice, performative pedagogy attempts to mobilize students as active constituents in the curriculum. Performative pedagogy recognizes students’ bodies as sites of ideology, as tools for experiential learning, and as agents of critique and transformation. Joining performance and pedagogy, therefore, suggests that education itself be rewritten as a particular type of critical pedagogy that engages participants’ bodies in performance acts while relying on performance theory to critique the ideological practices that dominate the classroom.
In this chapter, I first provide a historical context for this study’s assumption that performative pedagogy can operate as a tool of social critique and transformation by examining performance as both a psychosocial and sociopolitical practice. Next, I describe my use of Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed as a method for enacting an ESL version of performative pedagogy within a community-based adult ESL program. I close the chapter by discussing the limitations of this performative pedagogy experiment, the project’s significance, and a preview of the remaining chapters.

Performance as a Psychosocial and Sociopolitical Practice

Within the Performance Studies discipline, performance has been considered an instrument of both psychosocial and sociopolitical change. Psychosocial uses of performance locate the individual as the context for performance. As Kristin Langellier explains, “Interpretation [performance] is a process of self-discovery with the aim of integrating the self, and self with society” (64). Sociopolitical perspectives of performance involve the mobilization of individuals to act collectively in an expression of social critique or transformation. Langellier characterizes sociopolitical performance as “self-conscious and intentional efforts on the part of practitioners to give voice to muted groups or social issues” (64). This study’s connection of performance to a pedagogical framework pursues both psychosocial and sociopolitical goals by considering the individual, language-based oppressions of ESL learners and the resonance of these oppressions within a larger ESL group. My adaptation of Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed recognizes the problems faced by non-native English speakers are psychologically rooted but also manifested within external communication practices. This study seeks to locate a performative pedagogy that begins with the individual ESL learner’s language-based obstacles on a psychological level.
and eventually expands to address ways that the individual, as a representative of a non-native English speaking culture, acts concretely in the world. To this end, I adopt performance as both a theoretical model and an instructional method for its utility to instigate psychological and social change.

The history of performance studies, especially when linked to the oral interpretation tradition, contains numerous examples of performance being adapted as a psychosocial instrument. David Williams outlines an impressive list of twentieth-century thinkers whose view of art as psychologically beneficial influenced oral interpreters from the 1920s to the 1970s, including John Dewey, Carl Jung, and Sigmund Freud. Dewey’s view of art as a necessary means of experiencing and communicating life influenced a wide range of literary and oral interpretation scholars (Williams 422-23). Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud also influenced views of literature as a psychosocial outlet by describing the personal benefit of engaging aesthetic endeavors. Freud focuses on the individual within artistic endeavors, arguing that literature can be beneficial because it allows an individual to indulge in fantasies without the concrete ramifications of living those fantasies out in daily life (Williams 420-21). Jung, conversely, highlights the literary artist’s and literary reader’s connections to a “collective unconscious.” Though an individual creation, literature connects artist to reader by tapping into the collective unconscious, those “primordial images which are awakened when people are in need of an archetypal image” (Williams 421). Jung envisions that the reader of literature “gets caught in the energy force of the creation and experiences the collective connection of humanity” (Williams 421).

Leland Roloff contextualizes Jung’s notion that literature has a therapeutic potential by examining the practice of performing literature. Roloff views performance as a
fundamentally therapeutic pursuit. Though he acknowledges that performance of literature has served a social-communal need during ancient history, Roloff locates the purpose of performance in serving “the spectator within psyche, allowing that actor of psyche the fullest reaches of its own consciousness” (24). Roloff’s psychology of performance privileges the performer but views the performer from a special perspective. The performer’s most important quality is “consent,” “that ineffable grace of spirit by which s/he receives the imaginal realm of artistic statement” (15). Roloff suggests that in consenting to the aesthetic text, the performer initiates an inner, psychological performance event. This inner performance occurs when the performer first experiences the text and then “com[es] to know (gnosis) something about the text that simply cannot be put to the test of rational discourse” (20).

Throughout the twentieth century, performance became a psychosocial tool for a wide array of therapists who used various performance techniques to enable individuals to become self-actualized and to redirect their negative emotions. Bob Fleshman and Jerry Fryrear, for example, observe the use of music, visual arts, dance, theatre, language arts, and media arts in therapy sites. Williams describes poetry therapy as a literature-based practice that attempts to “bring about an overt emotional response as well as a cognitive recognition of a real problem” (428). A clear example of performance as therapy also emerges from Jacob Moreno’s practice of psychodrama. By using theatre concepts and methods, particularly the notion of Aristotelian catharsis, psychodrama patients attempt to negotiate a healthy distance in relation to their emotions (Moreno Psychodrama; Theatre). Psychodrama and its relative, drama therapy, both view catharsis as a tool to promote a unique interaction between release and containment of emotion (Emunah 32). Catharsis becomes necessary when individuals
either engage their emotions at an extreme proximity or when they remove themselves from their feelings entirely (Landy 103). Moreno argues that reliving an experience through drama liberates participants from their psychological oppression: “. . . this unfoldment of life in the domain of illusion does not work like a renewal of suffering, rather it confirms the rule: every true second time is the liberation of the first” (emphasis in original, Theatre 91).

Performance anthropologists have considered performance, especially ritual performance, as a means of transforming the participant on an individual, psychological level. Barbara Myerhoff considers transformation to be a special product of ritual performance, generated only by certain rituals and experienced only by some participants. Transformation of consciousness means that “one has an altered state of consciousness, a new perception of oneself or one’s socio/physical world, a conversion in awareness, belief, sentiment, knowledge, understanding; a revised and enduring emergent state of mind and emotion” (Myerhoff 245). Myerhoff recognizes that ritual is a site where personal transformation might occur while conceding that a ritual’s success does not depend on such individual benefits. Rituals are socially derived, scripted, and evaluated; that is, the success of ritual is measured in its “continuity,” “predictability,” and “rhetorically sound” construction (Myerhoff 246).

Richard Schechner distinguishes between “transportation” and “transformation.” Transformations characterize the permanent changes performance participants undergo, like what occurs during an initiation ritual. Transportations are temporary transformations, as evidenced by theatrical performances in which performers leave their dramatic roles to return to their own identities (Schechner, Between 20). Transportations involve transformations, performers going “from the ‘ordinary world’ to the ‘performative world,’ from one
time/space referent to another,” but they also feature an exact return to the space from which the performers began (Schechner, Between 126). Initiation rites can be classified as psychosocial performances at the same time they are viewed as socio-cultural phenomena because they affect not only an entire society, but in a psychological sense, their specific initiates as well. Schechner observes, “An initiation not only marks a change but is itself the means by which persons achieve their new selves: no performance, no change” (Between 127). Although the initiation rituals described by Schechner reinforce the traditions of an entire society, particularly because social hierarchies frequently depend on such rites, the participants are psychologically transformed. Schechner highlights the “social, public, and objective” characteristics of ritual as transformative (Between 129), but it is equally important to note that social rituals register effects on their individual participants as well.

Psychosocial perspectives offer a kinetic potential for performance because performance becomes a means of doing (Howard 25). For the wide array of psychosocial performance practices described here, doing performance encourages therapeutic healing inasmuch as the doing provides a more direct and full experience of some problem or solution (Greenwald 143). Within a psychosocial framework performance may also become restricted to individual oppressions (Howard 18-9). The crucial question for psychosocial uses of performance is whether participants are empowered to make changes in their environments as individuals or as participants of a larger social group. Its acute focus on the individual prevents psychological performance practices from affecting social structures on any significant scale. While practices such as psychodrama and drama therapy are not explicitly interested in affecting social or political change, it seems unlikely that those who receive psychological benefits from such therapies will be able to eliminate entirely the very
social and cultural pressures that produced their initial psychological repression. As Howard describes, psychosocial performance practices frequently “show individuals how to cope with existing systems” rather than critically responding to their oppressions (18).

Sociopolitical performance practices involve deliberate attempts to affect social or political change or to deconstruct performance practices to reveal their underlying political and cultural values. These objectives are pursued through historical analyses of literary or cultural performances, critiques of the sociopolitical power structures that ground certain performances, or attempts to initiate change within participants’ and audiences’ respective sociopolitical environments (Langellier 64). Kay Ellen Capo identifies sociopolitical performance as an ethical practice in that it encourages “open, rhetorical relationships with the audience” (“Performance” 34). As seen in the theatre practices of Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator, presentational performance styles transform audiences from passive to active roles. Sociopolitical performance also invites disenfranchised groups to take on performance directly and features the histories of such groups within the performance itself. Capo remarks that groups are marginalized precisely because “they cannot participate in fashioning the story of the polity” (“Performance” 34). Sociopolitical practices respond to this condition by inviting the disenfranchised to participate in the construction of performances and to critique their respective sociopolitical conditions.

The theatre practices of Brecht and Piscator offer historical examples of sociopolitical performance. Brecht’s epic theatre is ultimately concerned with engaging audiences in critique of the socio-historical situation depicted onstage. Using “alienated” acting and staging systems, Brecht works toward a transparent theatre, one in which an audience can recognize and criticize the underlying social and political influences of any given historical
situation (Rouse 230-31). To achieve his ideological ends, Brecht assumes a stance contradictory to Aristotelian theatre, which attempts to effect a catharsis in its audience. Representational Aristotelian theatre operates from a principle of naturalism: the actors on stage and the mise-en-scène work together to produce the illusion of reality. Audience members, in turn, practice a “suspension of disbelief,” allowing the actor’s image of reality to represent reality in the constructed environment of the drama (States 37). Brecht criticizes the result of such theatre, which essentially allows audience members to exit the theatre and forget the drama’s representation of reality. Theatrical naturalism, as Brecht envisions it, disregards mimetic recreations of the world and its characters. Brecht’s natural order is “determined from a social-historical point of view” (Brecht 58). Where representational theatre “flattens out all social and other distinctions between individuals,” creating a “common humanity shared by all spectators alike,” Brecht’s epic theatre presents images of humanity that audience members encounter in everyday life (Brecht 59-60). Characters are seen with all their socio-historical classes and attributes intact. Moreover, if theatre achieves its sociopolitical purpose, audience members are charged with the task of “assembling, experimenting and abstracting” the various social characters/types they have witnessed to their own socio-historical lives. Brecht declares, “Man has to be understood in his role as man’s (the spectator’s) own fate” (60).

Piscator explored the political efficacy of theatre within a number of theatrical genres, including the German Agitprop movement, Documentary Theatre, and Total Theatre. He also juxtaposed mass media documents with theatre, introduced film and photographs to the stage, and offered an epic tactic for defamiliarizing audience members from the dramatic action (Innes 3-4). Piscator’s Agitprop experiments instigated the use of the agitation and
propaganda style of theatre by the German Communist Party during the 1920s. His Agitprop troupe, the Proletarisches Theater, used sparse and movable sets to transform beer halls and assembly rooms into its theatres. Piscator also solicited amateur actors from his audiences in his effort to motivate and unite proletarian audiences (49-50). Piscator called for the use of all “new and stylistic possibilities of recent movements in the arts,” as long as the purpose of such experimentation privileged the proletarian audience (46). Above all, Piscator dedicated his political theatre to the creation of “a footing of equality, a common interest and a collective will to work” (46). For audience members uncertain of their ideological loyalties, the Proletarisches Theater aimed to “make an educative, propagandistic impact,” in hopes that the undecided would understand that “a proletarian state cannot adopt bourgeois art and the bourgeois mode of ‘enjoying’ art” (46).

In recent years, a number of performance groups have formed for the explicit purpose of affecting community or a larger social change, a trend documented by Joel Plotkin on the Applied and Interactive Theatre Guide website. Plotkin’s website lists a lengthy collection of theatre companies whose work addresses social issues relevant to specific communities. Plotkin notes that the groups frequently use plays, Augusto Boal-based forum theatre, and drama workshops to promote sociopolitical messages or to affect change (“Community”). Based in Washington, D.C., and founded by Michael Rohd, “Hope Is Vital” incorporates Boal’s techniques into workshops with youths and adults in a community setting. Topics addressed in the group’s work have included AIDS, conflict resolution, and substance abuse (Plotkin “Theatre”). “PeaceTroupe” was founded in 1994 by performers and social activists, including Jan Cohen-Cruz and Mady Schutzman, who both have trained with Boal. The troupe uses workshops, residencies, and interventions, and has recently worked in Bosnia,
Croatia, and Hungary (Plotkin “Theatre”). The troupe’s mission statement emphasizes its collaborative nature in promoting cultural arts in varied contexts, increasing activist efforts within communities, and aiding nonviolent peacemaking efforts (“Organizational Mission”). In all these cases, performance is viewed as an aesthetic tool that has the potential to produce critical analysis and practical change in a wide range of contexts.

Method and Project Design

This study considers the context of ESL pedagogy as a potentially problematic site for immigrants and refugees to the United States. Pedagogy, in general, is an ideological project, and ESL pedagogy, in particular, affects how non-native English speaking students address the psychological and social problems they encounter when using English. My use of a performative ESL pedagogy as a method seeks to address the various obstacles that immigrants and refugees identify. Performative pedagogy examines the schooling process as a performative construction played out on students’ bodies. Performative pedagogy also relies on performance-based learning of academic content, and it situates that learning within a critical analysis of the social realities within which students will apply their academic knowledge. Within performative pedagogy, education is a site of critique and transformation. Within performative ESL pedagogy, language learning implies a number of internalized and socially-located obstacles that can be addressed in both analyses and performance rehearsals for real life. Therefore, this study uses a problem-solving pedagogy that looks to performance theory and method for lessons in how students learn a subject, language, that is already encased within a web of ideology and performance and how students apply that learning in their respective social contexts.
Specifically, my version of performative ESL pedagogy adapts Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) practice as a means of identifying, analyzing, and combating participants’ respective language oppressions. Boal’s practice originated as an overtly political theatre in his native Brazil during the 1950s, where Boal used drama as a means of activating citizens to transform the social oppression they faced. Boal acknowledges theatre as an inherently political practice, and he resists traditional, Aristotelian-based cathartic productions because they tend to demobilize audiences. Boal claims, “Those who try to separate theater from politics try to lead us into error—and this is a political attitude” (Theatre i). Theatre of the Oppressed recognizes theatre as a viable weapon of social critique, transformation, or propaganda. At its core, TO is also a problem-solving performance practice. Boal’s fundamental objective is to use performance to initiate change: “the theatre can also be a weapon for liberation. For that, it is necessary to create appropriate theatrical forms. Change is imperative” (Theatre i).

Within this study’s ESL context, TO operates as a performative pedagogy by suggesting the methods by which participants come to recognize their respective language oppressions and eventually rehearse tangible communication solutions to them. This study involved a significant degree of adjustment as I experimented with various Boalian ideas, techniques, and exercises within two community-based ESL sites, a performance workshop and an intermediate-advanced ESL course. Though I began and ended the study with the same objective—to explore the utility of using performance as a pedagogical instrument within an ESL context—the steps I took toward this objective underwent revision as the fieldwork developed. I began the project with the assumption that I would test the efficacy of Boal’s practice as a performative pedagogy within the context of a performance workshop
that operated outside an actual ESL class. I intended to begin with performer training
exercises and progress to a full-scale performance production by the end of the project. My
initial project design thus reflected my early belief that a final performance product would
provide sufficient evidence to examine the efficacy of performance as a critical and
transformative pedagogical tool. I eventually realized, however, that the workshop context
isolated performance from ESL pedagogy, a division that workshop participants viewed as
less useful than the subsequent shift to an explicit performative pedagogy within an
intermediate-advanced ESL course. The performance process proved to be more important
than the construction of a final performance product. While the general Theatre of the
Oppressed framework remained consistent throughout the project, Boal’s image theatre
dominated the workshop sessions, and his forum theatre was used more frequently during the
class meetings.

A year before I began the fieldwork for this performative pedagogy project, I worked
as an instructor in a community-based ESL program. I taught in an ESL school for adults
sponsored by a Catholic diocese’s community service organization. The school operates out
of the Migration and Refugee Services department and is one of several services the non-
profit organization offers to immigrants and refugees. Other programs offered through the
same department include assistance in locating employment, housing, and schools. Funded
in part by federal grants, the ESL school offers relatively low cost language courses to any
immigrant and refugee. During my initial stint as an instructor, students designated as
immigrants paid only $25 for an eight-week course that included three, three-hour evening
class sessions each week. Documented refugee students attend the courses for free. The
school is designed for adult students, though some teenagers and elementary-age children
occasionally attend with parents or friends. Courses are held Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday from 6:30 to 9:00 p.m. A Thursday night course is also available to students interested in practicing their English conversation skills with a native English speaker who guides a series of discussions on various topics. Within the last three years, the ESL school has also sponsored a pronunciation workshop prior to the regular evening class meetings and a conversational pairs program in which American college students are matched with one or more ESL students to practice English conversation.

Approximately five or six instructors teach the ESL courses, each assigned to a different course level. The course levels typically change in relation to the number of students enrolled in any given session and those students’ respective levels of English proficiency. More students usually enroll in the lower courses—as many as forty or fifty in the beginning course—than the higher courses, where I taught as few as five students during some sessions. Upon registering for the school, students take a placement test that evaluates their grammar, vocabulary, and writing skills before interviewing with the school’s director, who evaluates their speaking competence. The director then assesses the incoming students’ overall language proficiency and places them into appropriate course levels. Students move into higher courses after their respective instructors recommend them for promotion, usually after the completion of at least one session in any given level.

The courses themselves include instruction in numerous areas of English, including speaking, pronunciation, vocabulary, listening, reading, writing, and grammar. The school provides an instructor’s textbook for most of these areas, and the teachers typically design their curricula from these texts, making copies of exercises and readings for students as necessary. The school also encourages teachers to assign homework to students during every
class session. Students in all levels keep writing journals in which they respond to class assignments or practice writing on their own. Students typically receive four writing assignments each week, one for each day they are not in class. Teachers evaluate and respond to the journals weekly, and the director of the school periodically reviews the journals. The school also requires two tests during every session, a midterm and final exam. All levels usually include some type of final project, which has taken the form of a writing portfolio, a public speech, and a group presentation. The school awards report cards at the conclusion of each session, and a ceremony is held at least twice a year to recognize students with high attendance and/or classroom performance.

I returned to the ESL school in August of 2000 to solicit interest for a performance-based ESL workshop. After discussing my research program with the school’s director and receiving her support, I designed a workshop that would meet for one hour twice a week prior to the evening courses for three seven-week sessions. The stated purpose of the performance workshop was to address the considerable social difficulties that adult ESL students face in learning and practicing English. To that end, I proposed a three-part organization for the workshop: a series of focus group discussions to identify participants’ language-based obstacles; a series of Boal-based performance exercises and games used to analyze the obstacles; and a final performance product that might suggest solutions to participants’ stated problems.

I initially agreed to offer the workshop to students in the school’s highest levels, at that time, an intermediate-advanced and an advanced course. Though those classes were traditionally the smallest, I suspected that they also included students with enough speaking and listening proficiency to engage in discussion following the performance exercises.
conducted during each meeting. As I will discuss in more detail in chapters 4 and 5, the original arrangement I made to conduct performance workshops substantially changed. I increased the workshop meetings from two to three each week. I eventually solicited participants from all course levels. The entire project lasted longer than I initially expected. The neat, three-part organization fell apart, and the process of doing performance exercises became more important than a finished performance solution. Finally, and most significantly, I scrapped the workshop idea in February 2001 and began teaching in an intermediate-advanced ESL class, using a Boal-based performance methodology. The project thus involved four eight-week sessions. Two and a half of those sessions occurred within the performance workshop context, and the rest were situated within the ESL class.

I measure the efficacy of this study’s Boal-based performative pedagogy from a performance criticism perspective by describing, interpreting, and evaluating the performance process that occurred within the workshop and ESL classroom. I treat the fieldwork as a process that naturally evolved in relation to its ESL participants, and I consider discrete performance moments within that process as evidence of the project’s efficacy for social critique and/or transformation. My adaptation of TO as a performative pedagogy must be measured in relation to its central concerns: critical consciousness-raising and the capacity for change. To that end, I examine specific events within the fieldwork process and the impact of the entire process itself to determine the effect that performative ESL pedagogy had in achieving its critical goals. I do not measure performative ESL pedagogy via a traditional pre-test, post-test standardized assessment instrument. I did not administer a structural language test during the fieldwork, and, consequently, I do not measure the efficacy of Boal’s TO using participants’ respective linguistic competence.
scores. I instead explore participants’ reaction to the critical performance work as reported within interviews, journal entries, and group discussions. I also consider participants’ assessment of the project’s performance approach to aid in their respective social uses for English. My final assessment of this project’s efficacy to achieve its goals emerges from both my interpretive fieldwork notes regarding the performances that participants constructed and participants’ interpretation and evaluation of those same performances.

Limitations

The scope of this study is confined by a number of factors related to its community-based ESL participants, my performative pedagogy method, and the project’s location within an ESL school. First, the ESL participants for this study come from a community-based ESL school that serves immigrants and refugees. The Baton Rouge area houses a number of English as a Second Language programs. The largest is affiliated with a large university and typically enrolls traditional college-aged students who pay several thousand dollars a semester to attend. Some contain very little structure and meet only once a week in a discussion group format at various churches in the area. This project’s location within a community-based ESL school betrays an interest in a specific category of ESL students: immigrants and refugees whose study of English implicates their ongoing quality of life within the United States.

More specifically, I solicited volunteers from only a small segment of the school’s population. Participants typically came from the school’s highest course levels and therefore usually possessed a particular level of English fluency. By focusing on students with relatively high language skills, I confined the scope of this problem-solving performance project to the particular obstacles identified by participants who held a functional level of
Participants from the school’s lower course levels briefly attended the second round of workshops. The communication problems they identified, however, did not resonate with the higher-level participants because they had already encountered and overcome the basic language obstacles that the lower-level students listed, such as greeting rituals and the learning of situation-specific vocabulary words. My isolation of a specific language level within the ESL school thus resulted in consideration of problems that could not be readily solved by improving one’s linguistic competence. In several cases participants had earned academic degrees in their respective countries, another factor that limits the scope of this study. Many ESL participants had already participated in a formal schooling process in their native countries, which distinguishes them from the usual participant pool in a community-based education site.

Second, my adaptation of Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed as a performative pedagogy method implied that I would not approach the instruction of ESL from a structural linguistic perspective. My use of the label “ESL pedagogy” in this project does not refer to traditional language instruction whereby students learn various linguistic structures and engage in a series of standardized tests or oral interviews that measure their learning. This study’s performative ESL pedagogy pursues education as a political enterprise that introduces opportunities for social critique and change. In my case, the use of performative pedagogy replaced the commonly held view that ESL classes will teach its students to speak, write, and comprehend the English language with a priority on situating students’ already existing knowledge of the English language as a tool for critique and transformation.

Finally, this study applies performative pedagogy to a non-academic context. Though I discovered that participants held specific visions of how pedagogy should be enacted, the
location of this performative ESL pedagogy within a community-based school distanced the project from the traditions and norms of university classrooms. Virtually all performance and education scholars who identify their classrooms as sites of performative pedagogy refer to college courses. In the university context, students typically attend courses in the shadow of their respective degree plans. Classroom pedagogy can be seen in this context as a necessary step in the acquisition of course credits, which students accumulate in pursuit of a degree. Although community-based schools for adults also offer degrees, the educational culture is frequently seen as more utilitarian. Courses are constructed as opportunities to learn discrete skills that will be immediately useful in students’ lives. Classroom pedagogy, therefore, is measured by how helpful it becomes to students in their respective daily tasks. Because this study occurred within a community-based educational site, my findings may be less applicable to traditional college contexts.

Significance

This study’s significance is supported by its connection of performance to pedagogy. Performance scholars have argued for years that the act and study of performance offer important lessons for how classroom instruction is enacted. Pineau’s recent work describes how pedagogy can be reconstructed as a practice that considers issues of central importance to performance scholars—the ideological body, the performance process, and commitment to dialogue. Pineau’s work also suggests that using the label “performative pedagogy” formalizes some of the assumptions and practices traditionally recognized in performance classrooms (“Performance;” “Teaching”). This study supports this effort by providing a discrete context devoted to exploring the limits and potential of performative pedagogy. Particularly, this study views performative pedagogy as a means of engaging students in a
dual project of social critique and transformation and thus extends the utility of performance beyond classroom teaching methods to include social agendas.

Second, this study has significance for a greater body of performance research concerned with Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed practice. Boal traditionally applies his techniques within social arenas, but performance scholars have frequently adapted TO into their classrooms for a wide range of pedagogical purposes (e.g., R. Bowman). This study explores Boal’s practice within a classroom context that has explicit social and political implications. The community-based ESL classroom provides a context that allows for an investigation of Theatre of the Oppressed as a performative pedagogical tool, as both an instrument of language instruction and of psychosocial or sociopolitical change. As a tool that trains ESL students to view the English language as a socio-culturally constructed performance enacted through their respective bodies, Boal’s practice fuses language instruction with critical pedagogy.

Finally, this study calls attention to the performances surrounding the learning and practice of any language. The ESL classroom is fundamentally a performance classroom. The most obvious justification for this statement comes from the recognition that ESL students rehearse for social performances that display their respective language skills. More significantly to performance research, however, language acquisition implies learning a system whose use is always entangled in social, political, and cultural issues. For ESL students, speaking English requires a meticulous identity construction and the recognition that language develops and emerges within social interaction, not within the relatively safe ESL classroom. By positioning the ESL context within a performance framework, this study
highlights an array of performance issues that impact the acquisition of language, particularly issues that concern how non-native speakers incorporate language into their daily lives.

Preview of Chapters

This study assumes a problem-solution design by positioning performative pedagogy as a corrective response to the difficulties that emerge within both traditional and critical practices of ESL pedagogy. In chapter 2, I review historical approaches to teaching English as a Second Language, and I identify the pedagogical flaws of both structural linguistic and communicative competence approaches to ESL. Both these strategies, I argue, fail to recognize the ESL classroom as a political site that implicates how students view language and subsequently implement it into their respective lives. I also respond to critical theory’s move into ESL pedagogy by calling attention to the lack of practical instructional strategies for implementing the critical/transformative project within the ESL classroom. In chapter 3, I suggest performative pedagogy as a solution to the ideological and pragmatic obstacles that have hindered ESL practices. I criticize a wide range of performance-pedagogy juxtapositions, many of them within education research, for their failure to address performance as both an engaged, corporeal method and a means of theoretical critique. I argue that performative pedagogy reflects three concepts of importance to performance research: a commitment to students’ ideological bodies, the recognition of performance risk, and an opportunity for dialogue.

Chapters 4 and 5 provide a fieldwork context for my argument that critical performative pedagogy represents the best means of enacting a critical project within the ESL context and that Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed represents an appropriate performative pedagogical method. Chapter 4 describes and interprets my initial fieldwork within an ESL
performance workshop, which I held prior to participants’ ESL classes. I characterize my adaptation of Boal’s image theatre practice within the workshop, and I explain participants’ general resistance to performance as a pedagogical method. Chapter 4 also details the adjustments I made to my performance strategy, particularly my shift from a focus on constructing a performance product to exploring the efficacy of the TO performance process. Chapter 5 describes the project’s move to an intermediate-advanced ESL class and my effort to launch an explicit performative pedagogy within that context. In this chapter, I account for my use of Boal’s forum theatre practice to negotiate students’ desire for conversation practice and the project’s problem-solving objectives. The ESL class used forum theatre as a performative means of analyzing and rehearsing solutions to students’ respective language oppressions, but the class also followed a traditional instructional format during the latter portion of each meeting. Chapter 6 summarizes the study and evaluates the efficacy of this performative ESL pedagogy to achieve its critical and language goals. I also address the value of Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed and performative pedagogy as both a critical strategy and a method for ESL instruction. I conclude by making a series of suggestions for the practice of TO and for practitioners who engage performative pedagogy in general.
CHAPTER 2

PEDAGOGICAL PROBLEMS IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

“There is little doubt that newcomers need to know the language associated with finding jobs, housing, health care, and so on. Refugees and immigrants are immersed in a process of profound transformation, and they need the tools to be able to confront changes. The question is not whether they should be taught the language of survival, but how and to what ends” (emphasis in original, Auerbach and Burgess 166).

“The problem . . . is that the scholars are looking only at classroom methodology and not at the underlying intellectual assumptions which generate methods” (Raimes 538).

Throughout the performance fieldwork for this ESL project, I asked participants to comment on their motivations for learning English. I anticipated a degree of similarity in their responses, particularly in light of my previous ESL teaching experiences. My earlier stints in the ESL classroom led me to consider the study and practice of English by non-native speakers as acts of empowerment. Students frequently described the personal gain they acquired and hoped to expand within everyday social contexts as a result of their improving English skills. I had not, however, considered the serious weight of survival that also accompanies their language acquisition. During my fieldwork, one performance exercise, in particular, illustrated the acutely personal significance of English within the lives of several immigrants and refugees from a wide range of countries (e.g. Colombia, Vietnam, Mexico). I had hoped to initiate student discussion and critique through performances that centered on the topic of discrimination. To begin the performance exercise, students viewed a cartoon that depicted a white police officer refusing a woman of color access to a public building. Next to the woman, a long line of people, all white, were entering the building. Atop the building, a waving flag read “Equal Access for Almost All.” After looking at the cartoon, several student volunteers offered to represent the scene but quickly transformed it...
into an immigration office. Luis and Vicente, both legal immigrants from Latin American
countries who did not yet have green cards, extended my request for a frozen performance
image of the cartoon into a session of simultaneous dramaturgy. Vicente portrayed an
American immigration officer and instructed Luis to play an immigrant who comes to the
office seeking help.

I responded by merging the scene into a Boalian forum theatre session, in which
student spectators replaced Luis in attempts to resolve his problems in securing a visa
extension. The forum theatre session later merged into an ongoing discussion that spanned
two class meetings. Almost every student, I discovered, had an experience with the United
States immigration office. A few had paid substantial legal fees but had seen virtually no
progress in securing visas for family members or work permits for themselves. Others had
obtained work permits but expressed disgust with the slow difficult process they encountered
in doing so. An immigrant from Colombia, Gloria, offered specific advice for those seeking
to help family members gain access to the United States. Vicente reported his brothers’
experiences with hiring citizenship lawyers. Lavrent, an immigrant from Eastern Europe,
declared U.S. work permit laws for immigrants to be discriminatory, scoffing at the idea that
lawyers could help plead an immigrant’s case. All these responses and others led to a
dramatic turn in our ESL classroom. Students’ specific real-world contexts—often times
those social situations that students encountered immediately prior to attending class—
guided our subsequent discussion and performance workshops. The business of survival as it
related to the concrete lives of adult ESL students, I discovered, always colored how students
approached the study of English.
For adult students in the English as a Second Language classroom, pedagogy is a high stakes enterprise, particularly when those students are immigrants or refugees to the United States. Students in ESL classrooms frequently report their reliance on English proficient family members, employers, and teachers. Along with factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic class, and education, language competence marks the distinction between those holding and those seeking communicative power. Despite living within an American political and social system that is often viewed globally as powerful and privileged, students enrolled in ESL programs comprise a lower class labeled as somehow deficient. In her review of education research in the United States, Lourdes Diaz Soto discovered an overwhelming trend toward classifying the non-native English student as deficient: “Bilinguals have been referred to as handicapped, mentally confused, and less intelligent than mainstream learners” (94). As a corrective, critical pedagogy envisions education as an opportunity to speak against the reductive tendencies located in traditional schooling.

In this chapter, I first criticize traditional approaches to language instruction for ignoring the contingent histories of the students who occupy language classrooms. I identify problems that arise within the history of language pedagogy by reviewing and critiquing the influence of structural linguistics and then functional or communicative theories of language. While ESL curricula have continually evolved during the last century, only within the last twenty years have scholars recognized the problems of pursuing a language program that privileges linguistic structures over students’ embodied experiences. Operating within structuralist and communicative language paradigms, the ESL pedagogies that emerged during most of the last century erected immobile and restrictive frameworks that forced immigrant and refugee students to set aside their respective social goals for language fluency.
Within these frameworks students must adapt to classroom methods that either uphold the sanctity of linguistic structures or insist on established versions of communicative competence that do not align with students’ actual language uses. ESL pedagogy possesses a tainted history that has ignored the ideologies of students even as it has established an ideological sovereignty regarding the appropriate methods to be used within the classroom.

Second, I account for the extension of critical theory into ESL pedagogy, a transition that has operated only as a partial solution to the flaws of traditional language instruction. Critical theory’s dual mission of a pedagogy for critique and possibility recognizes the tensions inherent in teaching English to immigrants and refugees. Education is always a political enterprise, and this is especially true for immigrant and refugee students who have been subjected to extreme forms of patriarchy and paternalism within survival-based ESL curricula and whose diverse language needs make a universal functional or need-based approach difficult (Auerbach and Burgess). Critical pedagogy provides a means for dialogue regarding ESL students’ respective positioning within a new society and their struggle for a sociocultural identity that enables rather than confines. While ESL scholars have frequently called for critical approaches to language instruction, many of the resulting classroom practices have not fully engaged the dual position of critical pedagogy as both a project of critique and possibility. As a result, the critical movement that has indeed occurred within the site of ESL pedagogy has failed to articulate a praxis through which students might make tangible the lessons of consciousness-raising. I describe both theoretical and methodological accounts of critical pedagogy before turning to specific applications of critical pedagogy to the ESL context. Finally, as a precursor to the next chapter’s argument for a critical performative pedagogy in the ESL classroom, I review previous efforts to inject performance
methods into language instruction in the form of educational drama. The final section’s
discussion of performance as a method for doing ESL pedagogy thus establishes the need for
a bridging of the gap between critical theory and ESL instruction.

Historical Theory and Practice in Second Language Instruction

A genealogy of ESL pedagogy in particular, and of language pedagogy in general,
reveals the difficulty in articulating any single theory or practice that encompasses the
complexity of language acquisition. In his abbreviated history of language pedagogy, Peter
Strevens takes note of a universal search within language acquisition research “for the single
most effective ‘method’ of optimizing learning while standardizing and, hopefully,
minimizing teaching, together with a quantity of experimentation whose results have often
been ambiguous or too specific to lend themselves to generalization” (3). That is, language
pedagogy research, and this also applies to research in ESL pedagogy, has historically
viewed language acquisition as a systematic process that might be discretely understood and
replicated in location after location. To this end, the early evolution of language pedagogy
(from approximately 1900 until the 1970s) reflects a series of experiments, all of which seek
the “most effective” means of acquiring a language.¹ Of course, taken to its most extreme
end, this pursuit ignores the historical contingency of students, teachers, and a mutable
language, all of which resist discrete definition. And as critical scholars remind us, “no
curriculum is neutral”; all pedagogy assumes an ideological stance that dis/enables
participants in the learning/teaching process (Auerbach and Burgess 150). Thus, in tracing
early approaches to ESL pedagogy, I argue that many such efforts isolate language learning
to a formula that operates outside the politicized lives of participants, even while revealing
ideologies that uphold the dominance of the teacher and the already fixed curriculum. While
ESL theories eventually recognized the role of the learner in determining objectives and methods, it has been only recently that the consciousness-raising project of critical pedagogy has been applied to the ESL classroom. Further, in light of the present study’s commitment to performative pedagogy, I am interested in how language pedagogy has both called attention to and silenced the performative aspects inherent to the act of language learning.

The history of language pedagogy, particularly in the United States during the last one hundred years, follows not so much a single linear direction as it does at least two separate paths. At best, a linear history reduces language pedagogy—a tenuous project that always must answer to both linguistic theory and teaching method—to an evolution of methodology, where one technique simply replaces its predecessor en route to the “one best method.” David Nunan observes two opposing pedagogical approaches at work throughout the previous century: the subject-centered and learner-centered frameworks. The subject-centered perspective concentrates on teaching a prescribed “body of knowledge,” while the latter emphasizes the “process of acquiring skills” (21). Learner-centered curricula further recognize the impossibility of acquiring every aspect of a language, even as a native speaker, and therefore focus on teaching students communicative competence or “skills they need to carry out real-world tasks” (Nunan 22). This dual classification has more frequently been identified with the terms structural and communicative frameworks. Structural pedagogy recognizes grammatical structures as the preferred curriculum subjects. Communicative pedagogy is best identified as a learner-centered approach in that its primary focus is the ability to engage in meaningful communication. Communicative pedagogy features students’ respective social and educational positions and aims to improve students’ real-life communicative competence (Virginia Adult Education C-12). To complicate the history,
numerous language pedagogues have developed methods in situ, translating ideas from both structural and communicative frameworks when they benefit a given classroom situation.²

**Structuralist approaches to ESL pedagogy**

Prior to World War II the Grammar-Translation method, inherited from the teaching of Latin, was used in most language courses, English or otherwise (Finocchiaro and Brumfit 4). As its title suggests, the Grammar-Translation method features active translation of written texts with the goal of acquiring grammar structures and vocabulary. Grammar-Translation emphasizes written rather than spoken competence (Doggett C-16). In the 1940s, though, the United States’ entry into World War II created an urgent need for rapid language training that emphasized speaking and listening competence. Reacting in large part to the perceived rigidity and impracticality of the Grammar-Translation method, American language teachers shifted toward a phonological and syntactical basis as located in the Audio-Lingual method.³ Motivated by the descriptivist tradition of structuralist linguistics, a school that worked towards creating a taxonomy of linguistic patterns, proponents of the Audio-Lingual method argued for language training in speaking and listening. As “taxonomic scientists,” linguists could only consider those elements of a language that could be externally observed and described. Semantics were, therefore, temporarily set aside in favor of phonology and syntax, both of which could be observed in the external language behaviors of speakers (Adamson 11). Another theoretical influence that shaped the eventual direction of the Audio-Lingual method came from behavioral psychology. Extended to language learning, behavioral theory suggests that language proficiency occurs after firmly established habits develop. Adamson explains, “If a response to a particular stimulus is rewarded, that response will be likely to follow that stimulus in the future, and gradually a
habit will be formed” (12). Descriptive linguists were most interested in observable phenomena, and they viewed the phonological and syntactic behaviors of speakers as habits that had been acquired over time.

Charles Fries, a descriptive linguist whose 1945 *Teaching and Learning English as a Second Language* is a pioneering explanation of the Audio-Lingual method, articulates the principal objectives of structural language learning: “It is, first, the mastery of the sound system—to understand the stream of speech, to hear the distinctive sound features and to approximate their production. It is, second, the mastery of the features of arrangement that constitute the structure of the language” (3). Robert Lado, another early descriptive linguist, offers several principles on which the empirical “scientific” methods of language learning are based. Foremost, of course, is the notion that speech precedes writing: “Teach listening and speaking first, reading and writing next” (Lado 50). Connected to this idea is Lado’s suggestion that speaking must be modeled on near-native speaker conversations. Next, Lado advises that language patterns and common structures must be practiced until they constitute habits for students: “Talking about the language is not knowing it. The linguist, the grammarian, and the critic talk and write about the language; the student must learn to use it” (emphasis in original, 51). Pronunciation should be rigorously practiced. Lado also avoids prolonged vocabulary lessons: “The most strategic part of a language for use is the system of basic patterns and significant sound contrasts and sequences” (Lado 52). Finally, Lado recommends that discussion of discrete differences between students’ native languages and the target language be avoided. Such problems “often require conscious understanding and massive practice” on the students’ part and cannot be easily drilled into habits (Lado 52).
The classroom instruction of the Audio-Lingual method typically follows one of two instructional techniques: mimicry-memorization or pattern practice (Diller 39). Mimicry-memorization attempts to generate habits within language learners and was most notably used by the U.S. Armed Forces during World War II. Grammar instruction first consists of the memorization of basic sentences, which are modeled by a native speaker of the target language or a teacher well trained in the target dialect. Once the basic sentences become “overlearned” or habitualized, students read grammar explanations in their native language regarding the structure of the recently memorized pattern. Students then repeat the mimicry sequence with gradually more elaborate dialogues until they are able to participate in the dialogues habitually.

The pattern practice technique follows the mimicry-memorization prescription for teaching students initial sentences. As Lado defines the technique, however, its constitutive features are the speed with which oral practice takes place and the disguise of the problem pattern that is being drilled (105). Teachers model a simple sentence that illustrates a problem pattern. For example, asking questions with “do” might constitute the problem pattern for a drill. In this drill, students mimic the following pattern: “Do you understand?” Then, the teacher leads a series of rapid pattern drills in which students focus on substituting a single word or phrase rather than constructing the problem grammar pattern. Using the above example, the teacher delivers single word cues to students, who respond by substituting the words into the “do” question pattern.

T: Understand.
S: Do you understand?
T: Hear.
S: Do you hear?
T: See.
S: Do you see?
The creation of habits serves as the primary focus for both mimicry-memorization and pattern practice exercises. Fries argues that achieving the status of “automatic unconscious habit” with both sentences and grammatical patterns constitutes the acquisition of a language (9). To reach this point, however, both Fries and Lado claim that systematic repetition and practice must take place.

While the Audio-Lingual method can be attacked for its extremely reductive vision of language students, its singular purpose is certainly well intended: to promote the rapid acquisition of a target language to enable people to speak the language. United States military language programs reported significant results during World War II when using an approach that adopted many Audio-Lingual principles. These successful programs also featured intensive conversation meetings with native speakers of the target language and teaching sessions provided by descriptive linguists (Krashen and Terrell 13; Yalden 9). When the Audio-Lingual method moved into a wider context of language teaching programs, the dedication and funding so readily available to a wartime military was not present. The sort of urgency observed by the military personnel enrolled in language training during World War II was not easily replicated in the lives of civilians. That is not to say that language learners, particularly immigrant and refugee ESL learners, do not possess exigencies that demand intense language training. It does, however, indicate that the context in which learners study and learn a language cannot be easily systematized. The goals and
needs of one group of learners, even when classified into similar levels of proficiency, education, or socioeconomic status, cannot be assumed as a universal.

In recognizing language as a system of habits, descriptive linguists effectively reduce the role of students—whatever their demographic or occupational status—to that of passive and pliable, non-thinking reactants. Diller summarizes the structuralist position on which the Audio-Lingual method rests: “Whenever a person speaks he is either mimicking or analogizing. All one needs to do is mimic a few basic sentences, and then make new ones by analogy as the occasion arises” (14). In this view a language learner does not autonomously speak a language, but rather reacts to a situation unconsciously via habit alone. The ideological position accompanying this methodology, then, situates all students similarly: to learn a language one must give up any notion of thinking about the language, either grammatically or in comparison to one’s own native language. Language “learning” within the Audio-Lingual framework is more appropriately known as language “repetition.” The more a student can replace autonomous, cognitive creativity with rapid, unconscious reaction when faced with the chore of language structure or semantical construction, the better that student has mastered the language.

Paulo Freire’s banking education metaphor is vividly brought to life in the Audio-Lingual method. “Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (Pedagogy 58). Because the Audio-Lingual method so fervently relies on mimesis, the stock of the linguistically trained teacher who can model the ideal speech and pronunciation patterns dramatically increases. The result is an unequal teacher-student relationship, one that ignores the cognitive skill or potential of the student. Diller notes, “[T]o teach the language’ is to impose a set of conditioned speech
habits on a student who, as far as we can observe, is not in possession of a mind and is incapable of mental activity” (16). Fries admits that the “heart” of the Audio-Lingual method lies with the teacher trained in descriptive linguistics who enacts that “scientific” training via classroom materials and methods. Mimicry-memorization and pattern practice must be structured in a way that aligns with “sound linguistic principles” (7).

However altruistic the rapid language acquisition goals of the Audio-Lingual instructor might be, students are framed as ignorant, as “adaptable, manageable beings” (Freire, Pedagogy 60). Pioneering descriptive linguist Leonard Bloomfield states this point clearly: “The command of a language is not a matter of knowledge: the speakers are quite unable to describe the habits which make up their language” (12). Students actively participate it is true, but only as echoes of their instructors. They function as automated sounds within a descriptive linguist’s master monologue.4 Within an Audio-Lingual language curriculum, students encounter no risk because there is no chance for contingency, no chance for dialogue. Student bodies are made less corporeal and more mechanistic by the insistence that repetition leads to speaking and listening proficiency. One significant difference between the Audio-Lingual method of ESL pedagogy and the performative pedagogy that I outline in chapter 3 concerns the site of learning. Students typically engage in oral practice during Audio-Lingual instruction in hopes that they will mentally absorb the modeled phonemes and syntax in a fashion that exactly duplicates the model. Therefore, mimicry-memorization and pattern drills both target the unconscious dimensions of the brain. Performative pedagogy, conversely, recognizes the kinesthetic learning potential of the body. It views the body as a legitimate site that can effectively participate in the construction of meaningful knowledge.
Otto Jesperson’s early twentieth century call for teaching methods that emphasized pronunciation and speaking demanded instruction that was both “connected, with a sensible meaning” and “interesting, lively, varied” (23). For Jesperson and other Audio-Lingualists, “meaningful” communication became a rallying point, one that separated their phonology-and syntax-centered practices from the fragmented, oppressive Grammar-Translation approach. Meaningful communication was easily accomplished, for it only meant avoiding the isolation of grammar structures from the content of a written or spoken passage. Meaningful communication could thus be seen in the oral repetition of simple sentences, as long as those sentences were not dissected and categorized according to grammatical function or linked in random order with no larger narrative thread. Linguists have subsequently refuted this claim. Krashen and Terrell, for example, argue that students of the Audio-Lingual method have no cognition of either the meaning or the grammatical rules of their pattern practice sentences. Since the focus is on constructing unconscious habits, students are not encouraged to think about the context from which the practice sentences emerge. Even in the case that a student does comprehend both the meaning and grammar rule demonstrated during a drill, Krashen and Terrell deny that “real” communication can occur as the drill never sends a “real message” (15).

The Audio-Lingual method discourages students from expressing original ideas within the classroom since doing so violates a crucial tenet of Audio-Lingual theory: language is a system of habits unconsciously invoked in reaction to some stimulus (Finocchiaro and Brumfit 7). Language production should always be tied to habitual reactions, and, therefore, reflexive analysis and revision of one’s language usage moves away from the stimulus-response model of learning. Representing the Audio-Lingual tradition,
Earl Stevick considers ESL learners’ construction of their own creative speech and writing expressions as a separate and advanced problem. “Only as the learner progresses further does he become able to form new expressions that are acceptable to the established speakers of the language; the learner forms these new expressions only by analogy—analogy based on the forms he has already learned through imitation” (emphasis in original, 25). Wilga Rivers thus characterizes the personality of language students engaged in Audio-Lingual type drills as “submissive and malleable” and completely in opposition to the practice of communication in any real interaction (26). Because language—particularly language used in context—can be linked to critical consciousness and empowerment, the acts by which language is learned carry significant ideological messages. The Audio-Lingual method reduces the potential that language enables either consciousness-raising or resistance. And yet the project of language learning in all its various forms—speaking, reading, writing—ought to serve an ethic of enabling. It should make possible Henry Giroux’s vision of a pedagogy of political difference where subordinate groups obtain “the opportunity to govern and shape history rather than be consigned to its margins” (“Literacy” 367).

Structuralist linguistics can also be linked to the direct method and the cognitive code method, though the descriptive structural linguists disagreed with these approaches. Linguist Karl Diller’s assessment of structural language pedagogy illustrates this conflict. Writing in 1971 prior to the widespread argument for communicative approaches, Diller observes the history of language teaching as polarized between two structuralist stances: “The great theoretical division between linguists—the empiricists vs. the rationalists—also divides the language teaching methodologies” (5). The empiricist or descriptivist approach to linguistics envisions a language pedagogy that enables a mastery of phonological and syntactic patterns
that can be simply conceived of as habit formations (Adamson 11-2). The rationalist
approach advocates Noam Chomsky’s generative grammar which states that “linguistic
patterns arise from knowledge contained in individual minds” (Adamson 14). To this end, a
rationalist pedagogy advocates “meaningful practice,” a phrase that invokes practice in
thinking in a target language—through speaking, writing, listening, and reading (Diller 34).
Diller argues that this pedagogical position rests on the notion that language is “characterized
by rule-governed creativity” (21). Following Chomsky’s generative grammar, the direct and
cognitive code methods both viewed language learning as the conscious recognition of
grammar rules and the subsequent innovative use of those rules. Moreover, the manner in
which people come to know the scope of linguistic rules is always tied to functional practice
“in a way which relates the changes in abstract grammatical structure to changes in meaning”
(Diller 24-5). As Diller indicates, rules for language action are best learned via practice of
that action (27).

Advocated by John Carroll and explicitly described by William Rutherford in his
1968 text Modern English, the cognitive code method encouraged the teaching of grammar,
though it used the pattern practice made popular in Audio-Lingual training. Carroll
recognizes the learner’s consciousness as a significant determinant in the meaningful use of a
language: “learning a language is a process of acquiring conscious control of the
phonological, grammatical, and lexical patterns of a second language, largely through study
and analysis of these patterns as a body of knowledge” (278). Adamson characterizes the
cognitive code method as “old wine in new bottles” inasmuch as it renewed an open
discussion of the grammatical structures that enable language, but ignored the meaning of
language. In fact, many of Rutherford’s grammar drills pair disjointed sentences whose
meanings are not crucial to the understanding of an isolated grammatical principle (Adamson 19-20). The direct method also allows discussion of grammar rules, but organizes the rules progressively and teaches them through a series of question and answer dialogues. Grammar rules are always demonstrated through examples before being explicitly explained. Most significant to this approach is that students are disallowed to speak their native language in the classroom. Learning within an immersion-type environment, students must learn to paraphrase or use the vocabulary they have already acquired in the target language (Diller 67-80).  

Both these methods argue for instruction guided by “meaningful communication,” but, like the Audio-Lingual approach, they fall short in defining this goal in a way that recognizes the always-politicized lives of language students. Diller claims that the direct method is inherently interesting, inasmuch as it requires “genuine communication from the very first day of class” (76). Diller observes that teachers also benefit from the dialogue exercises that characterize the direct method because they are able to avoid the dull role of “drillmaster.” Meaningful communication gets defined against the criteria of interest, a quality—in this case—narrowly confined to enjoyment: “it is a great deal of fun trying to communicate with people who do not know your language—especially when this communication is organized in such a way that it is successful” (77). As interesting and fun as the use of student dialogues might be, the direct method does not usually engage students’ actual lives outside the classroom (Finocchiaro and Brumfit 6). Neither the unique context in which students use language nor the sociopolitical identities that either constrain or enable students receive mention. While students are situated more actively within the direct method classroom, engaged in dialogues and studying grammar rules rather than rote memorization,
students never get the opportunity to explore how dialogue and grammar serve as pragmatic tools of empowerment inside or outside the classroom.

One connection between these “rationalist” language methods and a performative pedagogy exists in the involvement of students’ bodies. Performative pedagogy uniquely recognizes the political and epistemological potential of the body. Several rationalist methodologies also involve the body, though not in a way that necessarily empowers students. In the direct method, for example, students acquire grammar structures inductively through experience with spoken dialogues, but teachers introduce vocabulary terms directly through pictures, media, or role-playing (Doggett C16-17). Krashen and Terrell describe a number of related methods that rely on pantomime, gesturing, and active demonstration of some object or activity (10). The premise of these approaches is that the body can serve as a visual aid during the period in which language learners have limited vocabularies. The primary function of the body, then, is to enable the cognitive aspect of the mind. At best, student bodies are viewed as capable of some experiential knowledge, but that knowledge always serves the already memorized and practiced linguistic patterns formed in the mind.

Communicative approaches to ESL pedagogy

The shift toward communicative language pedagogy recognizes that the structure of any language—and the constitutive rules therein—always serve a larger objective: use of the language. In response to Chomsky’s theory of generative grammar, which emphasizes knowledge of the grammatical rules of a language over the socially situated use of a language, sociolinguists pointed out that communicating also implies knowledge of the rules that dictate appropriateness for the language used. Communicative competence became the rallying point for sociolinguistic-driven language instruction. Though its definition has been
contested by linguists and communication scholars, communicative competence generally references the act of communicating. It contrasts Chomsky’s descriptive generative grammar, which worked to identify the language speaker in a pure state, as an “autonomous individual” uninfluenced by sociocultural or idiosyncratic factors that occur during real interactions (Cooley and Roach 16). Communicative competence, however it has been defined, takes issue with Chomsky’s separation of competence (the knowledge of a language and its rules) from performance (the actual use of that language). Applied to language instruction, communicative competence takes into account how a person employs appropriate and effective language (Adamson 26).

Communicative language teaching rests on how communicative competence is defined. Two general approaches to the concept have attracted attention within language pedagogy, and the methods that each definition generates promote differing communication goals. Dell Hymes’ conception of communicative competence emerged from his critique of Chomsky and has been labeled the sociolinguistic perspective (Canale and Swain). Hymes views competence as a person’s capabilities for using a language. Communicative competence depends on a person’s linguistic knowledge and ability to use that linguistic knowledge or skill for both referential and social meanings (Paulston, “Linguistic” 38). Thus, Hymes looks toward social factors along with the more traditional influence of grammatical knowledge as affecting a person’s ability to communicate a message (282-83). Hymes explains his position by offering the example of a child who learns basic grammatical structure. “He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner” (277). When a person actually engages another in communication, what Chomsky referred to as performance, the result is a
dynamic meeting of “competence (knowledge, ability for use), the competence of others, and
the cybernetic and emergent properties of events themselves. A performance, as an event,
may have properties (patterns and dynamics) not reducible to terms of individual or
standardized competence. Sometimes, indeed, these properties are the point (a concert, play,
party)” (283).

A sociolinguistic view of communicative competence, then, recognizes the
contingency of language use. If language instruction is designed to enable students to
communicate, to use a language truly, then its goal lies in identifying the mutable factors that
comprise communicative competence in any given event. It necessarily recognizes that such
a competence is mobile, changing in regard to interactants and the social positioning of the
interaction. Muriel Saville-Troike emphasizes that speech communities, groups that share “a
set of values regarding the uses of language in various contexts,” influence the practice of
language in real life through their treatment of a number of cultural variables (40). Turn-
taking behaviors, appropriate language dialects, and grammar structure all might vary
according to speech community (54). Paulston adds that language instruction should feature
sociocultural linguistic rules as a central objective rather than as an “added cultural
component” (“Communicative” 98). A person’s communicative competence cannot be
isolated as an individual achievement but is always linked to the event in which it emerges
and the people it engages. Moreover, such competence is always enmeshed with “attitudes,
values, and motivations concerning language,” factors that are shaped by a person’s social,
cultural, and political identity.

The second definition of communicative competence rests on a person’s ability to
communicate meaning, what Paulston refers to as a referential emphasis (“Linguistic” 38).
In this view, communicative competence occurs when interactants achieve “free, spontaneous interaction” within a target language. Such interaction features “autonomous” individuals who possess the ability to select and transmit their own respective messages that are then understood by a receiver (Rivers 25-6). As Sandra Savignon illustrates, the goal of referential-driven competence lies in communicating so that another person understands the message: “In any second-language learning there is much starting, stopping, repeating, and reflecting. Sounds are mispronounced; patterns are less than exact. What counts is getting the message across” (13). In their critique of this perspective, Michael Canale and Merrill Swaine label it a “basic communication skills” definition that relies on two tenets: there are a minimum number of communication skills necessary to achieve competence, and competence is more easily achieved if clearly communicating one’s meaning is emphasized from the beginning of instruction (10). The most serious criticism of this approach concerns its inattention to the socioculturally situated appropriateness of language. Rules for language use are never clearly described, though the referential-based definition clearly implies that students ought be able to communicate in realistic situations. Savignon, for example, claims that students “will find themselves eventually in the real world, outside the classroom, to discover they don’t know ‘all’ of French, or German, or Spanish, etc. They will have to make do with what they do know” (13). Yet, those very “real world” scenarios cannot be removed from their social contexts, and as such, always imply rules of appropriateness above and beyond what will merely be understood by an native-speaking interactant.

Canale and Swain attempt to fuse the referential and sociolinguistic views of communicative competence by asserting three constitutive competencies that comprise the term: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence.
Grammatical competence references a person’s knowledge of grammar rules including morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology (29). As per Hymes, sociolinguistic competence embodies the rules of language use that are deemed appropriate for respective communication events (30). Finally, strategic competence covers both verbal and nonverbal strategies that a person invokes during a communication breakdown. If, for example, a speaker feels extreme nervousness while communicating or does not possess the proper knowledge of either grammar or sociolinguistic rules for a situation, the compensating behaviors enacted in response demonstrate a strategic competence. Canale and Swain identify such behaviors as “coping strategies” that people acquire throughout their lives during various interactions (30-1).

While Canale and Swain’s tripartite approach to communicative competence has been adopted by a number of notable scholars interested in language pedagogy (e.g. Savignon; Tarone and Yule), classroom applications of their model have focused largely on sociolinguistic competence alone (Adamson 27). Margie Berns criticizes teachers who promote communicative competence as an objective but do not fundamentally steer their classroom instruction away from a structuralist philosophy or an audio-lingual methodology (e.g. Paulston “Linguistic”; Rivers; Finnochiaro and Brumfit). They merely offer “new names for old concepts” (84-8). Berns instead argues that communicative language instruction hinges on a functional view of linguistics where “function” refers to a wide range of speech acts (e.g. apologizing, complaining, praising) as well as the “ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions of language” (103). A commitment to communicative competence, Berns continues, mandates a radically open conception of the key phrases “communicative” and “function.” When demonstrated in the classroom, this revised
theoretical position reveals the following characteristics. First, language is viewed as a “social tool” of communication. Language diversity—the variation of linguistic styles—is both recognized and taught. Any person’s competence is conceived in “relative, not in absolute, terms of correctness.” Culture is viewed as a significant influence on communicative competence, both in a person’s native and second languages. Teaching methods are not prescribed a priori. Finally, students are encouraged to do things with language—to use it for a wide range of purposes—throughout the duration of language instruction (104).7

Most classroom applications of a communicative competence theory privilege the pursuit of fluency in a language more than strict accuracy. Christopher Brumfit characterizes an accuracy-based curriculum as necessarily resting on a social judgment that is constructed by a teacher in coordination with a specific speech community. The result can be characterized as a “deficit curriculum” rather than a “student-centered curriculum” because it ignores what students do with their language as a basis for instruction (187-8). In a fluency-based classroom, the focus shifts to how the linguistic knowledge that a student holds is used, rather than the correct or incorrect form of that knowledge. That is, rules of interaction become paramount. Finocchiaro and Brumfit characterize this approach as an active attempt to replicate the interaction strategies that native speakers invoke while adjusting to each other during a conversation: “[W]e negotiate the purpose of conversations to reach agreement with the other participants, and we negotiate about the meanings and significances of the language items we use in order to achieve our agreed purposes” (95). Moreover, these adjustments made in situ are familiar to a speaker of any language, native or otherwise. A communicative curriculum, therefore, should offer students opportunities to grapple with the tenuous task of
adjusting to the linguistic variation used by other interactants and appropriate to various speech events.

In pursuit of this objective, communicative language instruction uses classroom activities that promote, above all, talking in reality-based situations. These activities feature practice in the messiness of meaningful communication, which is marked by creativity, unpredictability, purposefulness, and goal orientation (Canale and Swain 33). Janice Yalden concisely describes the end goal of communicative activities: “We aim for the exchange of ideas, however slow and painful, between human beings, and the production of real interaction, not as a set of conditioned responses to questions without significance to the learner, nor yet a discussion about the language to be learned” (19). To this end, drama exercises are frequently injected into communicative language instruction as opportunities to engage students in interactions that are as close to real life as possible. Role-playing is the most heavily recommended theatrical exercise for communicative teaching (c.f. Newmark; Paulston “Developing;” Paulston, et al.; Savignon; Yalden). Savignon links the success of role playing to its provision of the “emotional involvement necessary for authentic interaction in the classroom” (17). Leonard Newmark explains that drama includes the potential to transform the isolated context of the classroom into an indefinite number of “imaginatively natural contexts.” Newmark thus equates language learning with acting out a communicative message; learning to use a language must be done, not discussed. With its suspension of reality, drama provides a means by which students might rehearse communicative situations for future use outside the classroom (163).

Ultimately, any critique of communicative-based exercises must address the issue of salience. Does the activity address the central criteria of meaningful communication as it
relates to students’ lives? In many cases, the answer is no. Ann Raimes describes the proclaimed shift in paradigm from a structural to a communicative bias that occurred during the 1970s, but sees no conclusive evidence that the view of language as “structure and form” has changed (539). While a new perspective on language and language learning did succeed the structuralist tradition, Raimes observes a struggle to implement communicative ideals within the classroom: “The current emphasis on communication has . . . been absorbed neatly into our positivist traditional framework. . . . It opens up a variety of classroom procedures, such as interactive drills, while for the most part leaving undisturbed the underlying approach to language and language teaching” (545). Too often, communicative instruction focuses on interpersonal uses of language, but omits the context or purposes behind using language. Raimes offers the paradoxical exercises frequently used in such instruction, “communicative drills,” as evidence of the difficulty in separating structuralist traditions from true communicative pedagogy (544). The result of this struggle is a collection of ad hoc methodologies that produce one of three situations. Some language instruction has essentially laid the new communicative competence goal on top of the old structuralist philosophy. Another method merely changes labels, injecting the terminology of communicative competence but none of the theory. A final ad hoc response involves maintaining the structuralist tradition and inserting communicative components in a way that disguises them (541).

As Berns explains, Paulston’s adaptation of communicative competence to the classroom always begins with “communicative drills” before advancing to role plays and student interaction. These drills are very similar to the pattern drills of the Audio-Lingual method, differing only in their requirement that students answer oral questions honestly.
rather than with a scripted reply (85). Berns characterizes this approach as an ad hoc overlay solution. A case of changing the label from structural to communicative can be seen in Finocchiaro and Brumfit’s functional-notional communicative approach. The functional-notional syllabus revolves around a series of communicative functions and situations that language learners will likely encounter. The difficulty of this approach, of course, involves the selection of the functions and situations to be included within a curriculum. While Finocchiaro and Brumfit acknowledge diversity in language learners’ particular needs, they also believe that “all individuals will have similar sociocultural needs—the need to live and to survive in an unfamiliar community” (60). Moreover, they assert that these needs are identifiable and list a number of classifications that perform this task (61-74). Though the explicit focus is on the communicative competence tied to learner’s discrete, sociocultural language needs, the blanket inclusion of all learners within a categorization system betrays a structuralist position, where learners must demonstrate proficiency in predetermined areas of sociolinguistic language use.

Rivers, who views communicative competence as meaning based, divides classroom instruction into skill-getting and skill-using activities. Her approach begins with traditional linguistic instruction, admittedly mechanical skill-getting exercises that serve to demonstrate a particular grammatical form (30). Then, students engage in active skill-using exercises by practicing the structures they have obtained. The student-directed exercises always follow teacher-directed practice, however, and they are designed so that students “produce the same types of responses as in an artificial teacher-directed exercise, but this time of their own volition” (31). As Berns notes, this divided approach merely adds a component of autonomous communication to an otherwise pattern-drill method (85). Barry Taylor explains
that such instruction misses an invaluable opportunity for demonstrating the communicative utility of language: “Being taught a specific language form in isolation, and then practicing it by means of a contrived activity designed to create the illusion of reality, does not carry the same psychological impact or create the same kind of motivation to learn as realizing that, by learning that specific form at that moment, a real communicative need will be met. . . .” (37). Taylor points instead to injecting grammar instruction at the various moments which students use grammatical forms so language is always perceived as linked to communicative action. While the above description and critique of communicative language instruction operates on a general level, the specificity of language classrooms should also be considered in devising a communicative approach. Specific learner needs, demographic identities, and the sociocultural rules attached to a given language by given speech communities all influence whether students merely learn a language or use it to achieve their particular goals. Elsa Auerbach and Denise Burgess locate a “hidden curriculum” within certain communicative approaches to ESL instruction, particularly survival pedagogy that alleges to privilege the experiences and realities of adult immigrants and refugee students. Their critique of the sociocultural meanings and values that underlie survival-based ESL curricula reveals that many of the communicative texts and exercises within such courses are neither situationally realistic nor socially empowering. In reviewing one survival text, Auerbach and Burgess find that dialogue exercises feature class- and culture-specific references such as playing golf during a day off work, calling about snow conditions for skiing, and making telephone purchases by credit card (153). In another communicative dialogue exercise, students encounter a woman who calls regarding her daughter’s fever and rash. Not only is she able to speak directly to a doctor, the doctor tells her that her daughter will be seen “in a
few minutes.” Auerbach and Burgess wonder how students will react when their experiences
do not match the simple conversation modeled above: “Failure to address such factors as
crowded clinics, long waits, unhealthy living or working conditions, high costs, and
communication problems neither prepares students for what they might encounter nor
legitimates these experiences when students encounter them” (154).

Missing from these communicative curricula are realistic opportunities to
communicate about the sociolinguistic factors that scholars have so diligently added to
language instruction. Although students may practice situational conversations, recognize a
set of prescribed verbal and nonverbal behaviors for given situations, and eventually replicate
these in their real lives, there is no opportunity to discuss the possibility that these factors
might in fact be confusing, inhibiting, or even discriminatory. That is, language instruction
that has communicative competence as its end has not moved beyond sociolinguistic or
sociocultural description. It typically remains focused on prescribing solutions for potential
communicative problems that students might face. Critical analysis and creative problem
solving do not occur in such instruction.

Critical Pedagogy and the ESL Classroom

Critical pedagogy scholars have argued that education involves more than teaching
and learning. Henry Giroux and Roger Simon define pedagogy as “a deliberate attempt to
influence how and what knowledge and identities are produced within and among particular
sets of social relations” (12). They observe that pedagogical praxis brings together a wide
range of tasks, all of which inherently implicate pedagogy as a political venture. Pedagogy
always indicates “what knowledge is of most worth, in what direction we should desire, what
it means to know something, and how we might construct representations of ourselves,
others, and our physical and social environment” (Giroux and Simon 12). Freire positions classroom instructional methods as extending from political stances. Traditional instruction, which Freire calls banking pedagogy, constructs “a partial view of reality” that serves the status quo (Pedagogy 60). In stark contrast, Freire’s problem-posing pedagogy aims for the “practice of freedom” by encouraging students to gain a critical consciousness regarding their respective positions and related oppressions in the world (Pedagogy 66-67). Pedagogy thus works within distinct sociopolitical and cultural boundaries, hegemonic lines drawn between those holding/maintaining power and those seeking power. McLaren explains, “[S]chooling always represents an introduction to, preparation for, and legitimation of particular forms of social life. It is always implicated in relations of power, social practices, and the favoring of forms of knowledge that support a specific vision of past, present, and future” (McLaren, Life 160-61). When viewed this way, pedagogy implicates educational institutions, administrators, instructors, and students as participants in a socially and politically charged battle for power, representation, and identity. Pedagogy is seen as always already enlisting participants in a sociopolitical and cultural struggle. Rather than viewed as “a unitary, monolithic, and ironclad system of rules and regulations,” schools take on the identity of a contested site of cultural politics, where the dominant ideologies of a society might be reproduced, resisted, or transformed by both students and teachers (McLaren, Life 186).

Ira Shor argues that pedagogy follows one of two motivations: accepting the traditional curriculum or rejecting it. In either case, the teaching that results contributes to a particular vision of society, and that vision either restricts or enables students (347). McLaren describes the project of critical theory in education as one that both recognizes the cultural politics at work within sites of schooling and articulates means of agency and empowerment
for the students and teachers affected by that politics (Life 160). Critical pedagogy has been suggested as an answer to inegalitarian conditions, inasmuch as it critiques the power structures present in an educational system and offers resistant practices to democratize those structures. This project requires a revised vision of schools “as sites of both domination and contestation.” As Giroux explains, this position resists the hopeless view of a totalizing dominant culture that merely imposes itself on students. Instead, critical pedagogy recognizes that resistance to the dominant culture and its attempts to reproduce occurs naturally within normal social relations (Theory 62-63). Operating from the possibility that resistance enables transformation, scholars in critical pedagogy have asserted the goals of “hope and emancipation” as central to the new version of social life advocated in curriculum (Aronowitz and Giroux 141).

The critical turn in pedagogy

Critical pedagogy in all its various strains—liberatory pedagogy, border pedagogy, problem-posing pedagogy, and dialogic pedagogy, among others—rests on the assumptions of critical theory. Critical theory, in turn, simultaneously references a position of “self-conscious critique” regarding one’s social reality and a contingent “discourse of social transformation and emancipation.” Giroux indicates that critical theory thereby references both “a school of thought” and a “process of critique.”

[Critical theory] exemplifies a body of work that both demonstrates and simultaneously calls for the necessity of ongoing critique, one in which the claims of any theory must be confronted with the distinction between the world it examines and portrays, and the world as it actually exists. (Theory 8)

Critical theory works in the tradition of protest and thus critiques education as an exercise in cultural politics, where a particular hegemonic vision of social reality is promoted to the
exclusion of an underprivileged, illegitimated class. The first task of critical theory, therefore, is to construct a “counterlogic to those relations of power and ideologies in American society that mask a totalitarian ethics and strip critical ethical discourse from public life” (Giroux and McLaren xxi). Second, critical theory works to install a radical democracy through the project of education: “American schooling becomes a vital sphere for extending civil rights, fighting for cultural justice, and developing new forms of democratic public life within a life-affirming public culture” (Giroux and McLaren xxi). This two-prong approach explains the call for a pedagogy of critique and of possibility within critical theory.

In contrast to traditional educational theory, which essentially views society as fixed, productive, and just, critical theory attacks society as “both exploitative and oppressive,” but asserts its potential for change (Weiler 4-6). Early critical theorists argued that social and cultural structures reproduced themselves through a wide range of processes, including schooling. For educational theory, this position assumes that students participate in a hegemonic process by which they ingest a particular vision of social reality—including class and power structures—and ultimately reproduce the status quo (Weiler 6). In this early view, schools duplicate the divisions already at work in society: upper class students achieve upper class status, while lower class students remain in their lower class (McLaren, Life 186-87). The most substantial attack lodged against reproduction theory, however, concerns its inability to account for the contingency and potential agency of student and teacher bodies. In response to what has been viewed as ignoring the “actual experience of schooling and teaching,” critical theories of production or resistance assert that students may oppose the preferred meanings promoted within an educational system, opting instead to generate their own meanings and culture (Weiler 11). As McLaren explains, “Social reproduction, it turns
out, is more than simply a case of economic and class position; it also involves social, cultural, and linguistic factors” (Life 187).

Critical theorists working in the tradition of resistance admit that knowledge—particularly when acquired in schools—always contains evidence of power relations (McLaren, Life 169). Rather than stopping with that critique, critical theorists turn toward a “language of possibility” wherein education becomes enmeshed in a positive social reconstruction. McLaren explains, “The point to remember is that if we have been made, then we can be ‘unmade’ and ‘made over’” (Life 189). The role of schools within a critical perspective remains adamantly political but undertakes a different sort of politics. Schools occupy a central role in the transformation of society, not just of students who constitute portions of society. Freire views the human vocation as entrenched in the fight for “humanization,” a term he coined to describe the project of liberation from social oppression (Pedagogy 28). Humanization references the possibility of living an authentic life and being empowered to act in an autonomous fashion, to make personal choices. Freire notes that, in spite of the oppressed’s desire for authenticity, a considerable fear of that very pursuit also exists. The politics of the oppressive society reproduces itself within the oppressed: “They [the oppressed] are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized” (Pedagogy 32). Freire thus turns to education as a means by which social transformation might take place.

Freire’s particular view of pedagogy as an ends to liberation rests on dialogue, which he views as interactions between people for the purpose of naming their respective social worlds (Pedagogy 76). This definition implies that people have the right to speak, and therefore can inherit their importance as people by expressing their views on their reality
(“speaking their word”). To speak a word implies an action, since Freire equates the “word” with praxis, or reflection and action. Dialogue is thus entangled with the pursuit of a liberated society: “If it is in speaking their word that men, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which men achieve significance as men” (Pedagogy 77). Dialogue is not aimless action; dialogue is stimulated by a “love for the world” and humanity, humility in approaching others, an “intense faith” in people as capable of an ongoing pursuit for liberation, and hope (Pedagogy 77-80). Resistance to an oppressive society gets played out through dialogue in Freire’s view, but that dialogue must always recognize the historicity of its participants and must always include optimism for change. Finally, dialogue that contributes to transformation both requires and generates critical thinking. Freire explains his conception of critical thinking as a hopelessly democratic process:

thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and men and admits of no dichotomy between them—thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity—thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved. (Pedagogy 81)

Following this position, education must always operate from a basis in dialogue. In this way, “revolutionary action”—action that places the sole responsibility for change in the hands of the oppressed stakeholders—might take place. The actor-subject relationship that characterizes oppression dissolves into a fluid conversation between interacting subjects (Pedagogy 131).

Freire admits that his vision of a pedagogy simultaneously committed to critique and transformation relies on a utopian vision, but he rejects simple definitions of the utopian as
linked to either “idealistic or impractical” actions. For Freire, the very acts of critique and resistance, which he labels denunciation and annunciation, constitute a utopian project:

Our pedagogy cannot do without a vision of man and of the world. It formulates a scientific humanist conception that finds its expression in a dialogical praxis in which the teachers and learners together, in the act of analyzing a dehumanizing reality, denounce it while announcing its transformation in the name of the liberation of man. (“Adult Literacy” 492)

Denunciation and annunciation become “historical commitments” in Freire’s view, actions that are continually repeated in an education that seeks true revolution. The process of reflecting and resisting defines the critical, emancipatory education that Freire seeks. Yet this process does not, in itself, transform the criticized social conditions nor does it guarantee the actualization of the announced reality. Freire indicates that this process must be ongoing with the end objective of constant revision toward the continued “humanization” of its participants (“Adult Literacy” 492). For Freire, liberation is not a finite goal, but an ongoing project that spans one’s life.

Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci also views education as a tool to be wielded in the pursuit of social transformation, specifically the creation of a society in which all members attain intellectual status. In his view, transformation plays out in a wide range of educational practices, both in traditional schools and in other public institutions; the political becomes more pedagogical (Aronowitz and Giroux 11). Gramsci’s unique contribution lies in his theory of hegemony as it relates to the social indoctrination of members of a society. As it is commonly used in educational theory, hegemony is used as a descriptive analytic measure. McLaren illustrates its use for many critical educational theorists:

Hegemony refers to the maintenance of domination not by sheer exercise of force but primarily through consensual social practices, social forms, and social structures produced in specific sites such as the church, the state, the school, the mass media, the political system, and the family. (Life 173)
Gramsci did not intend for the concept to serve as a deterministic model for the ways in which domination will necessarily occur (Weiler 14). As Gramsci explains it, hegemony serves two possible functions, either “domination” or “intellectual and moral leadership,” according to the present objective of a social group: “A social group dominates antagonistic groups, which it tends to ‘liquidate;’ . . . it leads kindred and allied groups. A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise ‘leadership’ before winning governmental power; . . . it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power” (57-58). Hegemonic domination can be observed in schooling that reproduces the social practices of the status quo and thereby upholds inequalitarian power structures. Hegemonic leadership—a sort of ethical, moral guidance—involves consent of the stakeholders involved in the schooling, teachers and students. Gramsci envisioned education as the primary means by which such ethical leadership occurred: “every relationship of ‘hegemony’ is necessarily an educational relationship” (350). The final goal of hegemonic leadership, therefore, is the “attainment of a ‘cultural-social’ unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous aims, are welded together with a single aim, on the basis of an equal and common conception of the world, both general and particular” (349).

Gramsci further argues that such leadership depends on a democratized relationship between teachers and students, not only in formal instances of schooling, but throughout society; regardless of class or identity differences, all individuals within a society approach each other as both active students and teachers (350). Paula Allman labels this moral, ethical leadership a “socialist hegemony” and explains that “critical choice” rather than manipulation marks the relationship between individuals (106). Decrying the traditional division of vocational education for the subaltern classes and classical education for the
dominant classes, Gramsci proposes a common school in which all students begin from the same intellectual traditions. He explains, “The common school, or school of humanistic formation . . . or general culture, should aim to insert young men and women into social activity after bringing them to a certain level of maturity, of capacity for intellectual and practical creativity, and of autonomy of orientation and initiative” (29). This new common schooling envisions students as active, creative, and tangibly situated within historical conditions. Traditional education, Gramsci observes, creates a specific type of schooling, complete with specific content and function, for every social class. The result, of course, is reification of traditional class boundaries (40). A social transformation guided by a revolutionary educational practice cannot merely provide training for the unskilled laborer. Gramsci declares that democracy insures “that every ‘citizen’ can ‘govern’ and that society places him, even if only abstractly, in a general condition to achieve this” (40).11

Allman pushes Gramsci’s dual vision of hegemony—both a process of domination and a model for ethical leadership—in the direction of resistance. Refusing Gramsci’s insistence that prior to a socialist revolution social groups must attain their own version of hegemonic control, Allman asserts that an unjust society, particularly one hegemonically rooted within the consciousness of its members, must be opposed before launching a wide-scale hegemonic endeavor. She explains, “[I]n every instance, it seems to me that prior to revolution our project is an oppositional one—that is, a critique of existing conditions, a counter-hegemonic project, based on small-scale projects that offer the experience of transformed relations—rather than a predominantly hegemonic one” (120). The potential for this critique lies in the always-incomplete hegemonic control by the present unjust society. As noted earlier, Gramsci did not intend for hegemony to be viewed as an inevitable process
that precludes the human potential for critical consciousness. Rather, he asserts that people always hold fragments of the past and future within their consciousness; they are never confined to the oppressive conditions or ideologies of the present. Gramsci explains,

> The personality is strangely composite: it contains Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices from all past phases of history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over. . . . The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and in “knowing thyself” as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. (324)

Positioned as agents, people always possess a “complex consciousness,” Gramsci’s common sense, regardless of the constraints administered by the hegemonic ideologies of a ruling society. It is within this common sense that both hegemonic influences and the potential for self-criticism take root, yet it is the latter that generates “the possibility of historical change through thought and action” (Weiler 14).

Giroux also signals the need for resistance in any attempt grounded in educational practices to transform social structures. Within the context of education, the theory of resistance positions student agency against educational culture, whereby “educational knowledge, values, and social relations” are understood in the “context of lived antagonistic relations” (Theory 111). In this view, the schooling process is unable to reproduce its constitutive dominant ideologies; it is “neither a static process nor one that is ever complete” (108). Giroux calls for more sophisticated analysis of the interaction between students and the politicized schooling they engage. That interaction, Giroux argues, is inherently complex and contingent on the varied experiences of its participants. Giroux offers Foucault’s notion of power as a multidimensional influence on relations between people as an example that authority cannot be confined to a unidirectional analysis (Theory 108). By locating student
behaviors along a continuum of domination and resistance, critical scholars ignore the “moments of cultural and creative expression that are informed by a different logic, whether it be existential, religious, or otherwise” (Theory 108). Finally, Giroux recognizes that within resistance lies a fundamental “hope for radical transformation,” a desire to extend acts of critique to acts of change (Theory 108). The expression of hope situated within acts of resistance foregrounds the greater goal of any critical pedagogy: identifying and constructing a different way of living, a way in which one’s voice registers. According to this position, the radical transformation of society into a just, democratic sphere begins with educational practices that prepare participants for such a transformation. Still, it is imperative that theorists resist positioning critical pedagogy as an inevitable path to the achievement of radical social reform (Allman 86). Critical educational theory presents a philosophy from which any transformation might operate; it does not present, however, a proven course of action.

Applied to classroom practice, critical theory has been connected to at least two comprehensive goals: the construction of a “democratic public sphere” and the recognition of lived experience within the classroom. Giroux and McLaren use the label “democratic public sphere” to describe schools charged with a task they view as revolutionary: “awakening the moral, political, and civic responsibilities of its youth” (xxii). Giroux and McLaren are uneasy with the increasingly conservative connection between schools and the needs of industry. They charge that relationship with generating “sterile instrumentalism, selfishness, and contempt for democratic community” (xxii). Repositioning education as a primary stakeholder in social life, Giroux and McLaren identify its true purpose as constructing a
body of critical citizens who participate in the reform of economic, political, and cultural life.

Giroux begins to explain the means by which this education might operate:

If a citizenship education is to be emancipatory, it must begin with the assumption that its major claim is not ‘to fit’ students into the existing society; instead, its primary purpose must be to stimulate their passions, imaginations and intellects so that they will be moved to challenge the social, political, and economic forces that weigh so heavily upon their lives. In other words, students should be educated to display civic courage, i.e., the willingness to act as if they were living in a democratic society. (emphasis in original, Theory 201).

The concrete practices that Giroux advocates in pursuit of these goals include increasing the amount of student participation within the classroom, encouraging critical thinking, clarifying student values, and discussing ideological constraints on students’ lives (Theory 202-4).

In regards to students’ roles in the classroom, a critical pedagogy enables students to “both produce as well as criticize classroom meaning.” Knowledge gets constructed through an active engagement of course material in which students “challenge, engage, and question the form and substance of the learning process” (Giroux, Theory 202). Critical thinking is taught when students practice comparing various conceptions of reality and recognize that even objective course content is situated within a complex network of material relations (Theory 202-3). Giroux views the clarification of values as a central element of a radical critical pedagogy: “[Students] must learn how values are embedded in the very texture of human life, how they are transmitted, and what interests they support regarding the quality of human existence” (Theory 203). In response to the ideological constraints that students face, Giroux advocates explicit instruction on ways to construct political protest (Theory 203).

A second constitutive feature of critical theory in practice is a pedagogy of lived experience. Giroux warns against a priori assumptions of students’ experiences, even if such
assumptions are grounded in the pursuit of eradicating inequalities that constrain students’ lives (“Schooling” 146-47). As sociocultural agents situated in history, people constitute their own meanings through the “complex historical, cultural, and political forms they both embody and produce” (“Schooling” 147). Critical pedagogy therefore operates from the highly contingent basis of lived experience, where students’ reported experiences converse with the various categories (race, class, gender, sexuality) that ideologically influence students’ respective positions of power. In concrete terms, the classroom becomes a site where students obtain training in the analysis of how their respective voices and identities have been “implicated, produced, affirmed, or marginalized within the texts, institutional practices, and social structures that both shape and give meaning to their lives” (“Schooling” 148). Moreover, the curriculum in this site features “student experience as both a narrative for agency and a referent for critique” (“Schooling” 149). Giroux explains the curricular adoption of lived experience as an exercise in critical reflection on how student identities have been constructed:

Although this approach valorizes the language forms, modes of reasoning, dispositions, and histories that students use in defining themselves and their relation to the larger society, it also subjects such experiences and ideologies to the discourse of suspicion and skepticism, to forms of analysis that attempt to understand how they are structured by cultural and symbolic codes inscribed within particular configurations of history and power. (“Schooling” 149)

Frequently, analysis of one’s own identity and subsequent identification of the ideological influences at work therein leads to consideration of difference within the classroom. When teachers encourage students to analyze their respective identities, they invite difference into the classroom, for identity is always already politicized and is moreover contingent on social, cultural, and historical structures. Giroux indicates difference can
operate in two ways within a critical pedagogy. First, it promotes a historical and social analysis of how various student identities have been formulated. In this sense, self-reflexivity gives way to more generalized considerations of how identity categories such as gender, race, class, or sexuality have been understood historically (“Introduction” 48). Second, the differences at work between student identities can be analyzed in terms of how they are (and have historically been) articulated, resisted, or revised (“Introduction” 49). This latter function of difference reveals a particular critical project, a border pedagogy in which difference assumes a central role in pursuing the democratic public sphere referenced earlier (Giroux, “Border” 28). Giroux links border pedagogy to a recognition of the various social and cultural margins that influence how power gets situated within society. Border pedagogy also speaks to the need for students “to understand otherness in its own terms” (“Border” 28).

Bakhtin’s notion of a dialogic existence, wherein a person cannot experience a concrete vision of self directly, signals the importance of benevolent communication between subjects. If difference is to be privileged within critical pedagogy, then the live acts of dialogue that occur within the classroom across borders of gender, race, class, language, or ideology take on new significance. The relationship between self and other is precarious; without the other, the entire self (both inside and outside) cannot be comprehended. A person must rely on the creative act of the other, that finalizing vision of self, for unity in regards to experiencing the self, and thus, the problem of ethical interaction becomes more prominent. Will the other provide a benevolent finalized vision of the self? In turn, will the other receive a helpful construction of self? What are the consequences of parodic, malevolent, or apathetic constructions of the other? These questions illustrate the significance of recognizing difference and the variable versions of identity available to
students. Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson further articulate Bakhtin’s insistence on ethical authorship within a social interaction: “Ethics, responsible action, and aesthetic activity require multiple consciousnesses and a recognition that particular actions, people, times, and places cannot be generalized away” (184). A pedagogy of lived experience operates from the moral stance of critical inclusion, where difference is invited, critiqued, and strategized in service of a larger project of radically rewriting social structures.

The task of critical pedagogy is admittedly optimistic, even utopian. Freire’s requirement of a revolution guided by love, which he views as a genuine commitment to others, illustrates the hope on which critical pedagogy is based (Pedagogy 78). In spite of its devotion to reforming educational and social practices to reflect a true democracy, critical pedagogy has itself been criticized along a number of lines, not the least of which is its failure to articulate a concrete practice (Giroux, “Schooling” 132). Ellsworth, who led a graduate seminar that used critical pedagogy at the University of Wisconsin in an effort to intervene in campus racism, concludes that the theory and practice of critical pedagogy actually take the form of “repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination” (298). Ellsworth observes that she and the students in the seminar were hampered by critical pedagogues’ suggestions for achieving empowerment and dialogue: “To the extent that our efforts to put discourses of critical pedagogy into practice led us to reproduce relations of domination in our classroom, these discourses were ‘working through’ us in repressive ways, and had themselves become vehicles of repression” (298). Ellsworth claims that much of the critical pedagogy literature reflects an absence of grounded, historical classroom practice, but extends this critique to suggest potentially more dangerous features of critical pedagogy.
First, critical pedagogy simplifies its utopian goal of a radical democracy, never questioning or defending the need for this goal or its potential risks. The result is a “posture of invisibility” in which critical pedagogues appropriate tangible public resources for a political project whose efficacy for altering oppressive power structures is never researched (Ellsworth 301). Second, critical pedagogy unproblematically espouses rationalism as the philosophical means by which social oppression gets critiqued and resisted. Ellsworth posits the following as critical pedagogy’s underlying rationalist basis: “the teaching of analytic and critical skills for judging the truth and merit of propositions, and the interrogation and selective appropriation of potentially transformative moments in the dominant culture” (303-4). In this view, oppressive practices such as racism are held up to a rationalist critique in which they are logically examined for their failures to insure a universally desired democracy (304). The classroom enactment of critical theory, although rooted in the spirit of benevolence, fails to acknowledge its historical exclusion of the “socially constructed irrational Others—women, people of color, nature, aesthetics,” whose own voices are constituted through partial narratives of lived experience (305). Ellsworth proposes that the unfinished narratives be accepted as signed and then considered on their own merit for their connections to other social groups and their work towards constructing an identity (305-6). Third, Ellsworth claims that critical pedagogy never seriously questions the authoritarian position of the teacher, in spite of all its recognition of the social construction of the teacher’s position (306). The focus on student empowerment and the active participation of students in critiquing the schooling process is limited by its rationalist basis. Repositioning the teacher as a teacher-student who learns from the students’ experiences serves a paternalistic final
goal of helping teachers to better educate students in line with their own level of critical understanding (306).

Critical pedagogy also advocates the reclaiming of the student’s voice as capable of expressing particularized and, frequently, repressed knowledge. In pursuing this goal, however, critical pedagogy assumes that students’ voices can be fully understood by the benevolent teacher, a notion that Ellsworth describes as unlikely (308-9). The teacher assumes the identity of an enabling presence that might guide students toward articulating and understanding their respective identities in “self-affirming ways.” Still Ellsworth wonders about the critical pedagogue’s own identity and its influence on the critical project. Speaking of her graduate seminar experience, Ellsworth explains the problematic situation she encountered when addressing the issue of student voice:

As an Anglo, middle-class professor in C&I 607 [Curriculum and Instruction], I could not unproblematically “help” a student of color to find her/his authentic voice as a student of color. I could not unproblematically “affiliate” with the social groups my students represent and interpret their experience to them. In fact, I brought to the classroom privileges and interests that were put at risk in fundamental ways by the demands and defiances of student voices . . . . Critical pedagogues are always implicated in the very structures they are trying to change. (309-10).

Teachers assume a central position in the pursuit of student empowerment, but they do so under the guise of a generic category, “critical teacher,” that erases the politicized interests that they always already bring into the classroom (310). Students’ personalized attempts to make their voices register, to resist dominant structures in their concrete lives outside the classroom, get ignored. Ellsworth objects to the notion that the student voice is to be discovered through the aid of a critical pedagogue within the classroom: “any individual student’s voice is already a ‘teeth gritting’ and often contradictory intersection of voices constituted by gender, race, class, ability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or ideology” (312).
Finally, critical pedagogy’s proclamation of dialogue as the unifying basis of radical democracy misunderstands the already disparate levels of power at work within the classroom among students themselves (315). The underlying assumptions of this dialogue include a unified relationship of those subordinated against those who subordinate and, once again, a rationalist perspective that students will transcend their allegiances to other identity groups in pursuit of a universally desired radical democracy (315-16). Ellsworth reports that students in her graduate seminar could not avoid the trap of their already fragmented, individualistic interests during classroom interaction. She explains, “Acting as if our classroom were a safe space in which democratic dialogue was possible and happening did not make it so” (315). Instead several students later reported that they were reluctant to discuss their particular experiences with oppression for fear that they might emphasize their own personal identities rather than the unification of all student identities within the course.

Ellsworth further notes that students joined allegiances within the seminar, spending time inside and outside the classroom with those people who matched their own ideological interests. She concludes that embracing these naturally occurring affinity groups serves a more productive construction of classroom dialogue:

> Once we acknowledged the existence, necessity, and value of these affinity groups, we began to see our task not as one of building democratic dialogue between free and equal individuals, but of building a coalition among the multiple, shifting, intersecting, and sometimes contradictory groups carrying unequal weights of legitimacy within the culture and the classroom. Halfway through the semester, students renamed the class Coalition 607. (317)

Dialogue, therefore, must be revised as a theoretical construct and enabling tool for critical pedagogy. It must reflect the true, indivisible identities of its participants, and it must recognize that coalitions rather than a universal unity better serve the projects of critique and reform.
The critical turn in ESL pedagogy

The move to critical pedagogy within the ESL discipline comes in reaction to that field’s long history of functional and structural approaches to language use and teaching. ESL pedagogues have not only recognized that all instruction invokes a political stance, but that language instruction in particular operates as a normative indoctrination into a society. Historically, language instruction has operated without a critical recognition that both language and those who use it are always already immersed in acute historical contexts. As Alastair Pennycook explains, “Language is reduced to a system for transmitting messages rather than an ideational, signifying system that plays a central role in how we understand ourselves and the world” (“Critical Pedagogy” 304). Pennycook notes elsewhere that even the “ahistorical and apolitical stance” adopted by many linguists and ESL educators constitutes an ideological position (“Concept” 592). The merging of critical pedagogy and ESL instruction views language as a highly politicized instrument to be wielded in efforts of constraint and empowerment. Issues of standard English dialects, bilingualism, minority education, and internationalism all implicate language as necessarily political (Pennycook, “Critical Pedagogy” 305).13

The controversy surrounding bilingual education in the United States further illustrates the ideologically charged nature of language. Marcia Moraes observes that the United States is one of the few nations in the world with established bilingual programs in its schools. Yet the heated debate surrounding the creation and maintenance of bilingual programs within elementary and secondary schools reflects the fear that one group—non-native English speakers or native English speakers—might be privileged over the other. In this ongoing controversy, language and the policies that determine which languages are to be
preserved, taught, or emphasized get mixed up in an ideological struggle for political recognition (Moraes 45). The “English-Only” movement, a call to make English the official language of the United States, also demonstrates the politics entrenched in language.\textsuperscript{14} Dennis Baron connects the movement to a renewed interest in nationalism and argues that it also works to exercise social and political influence (27). In his view, English either constitutes an attack on the multilingual, multicultural identities of immigrants to the United States or an appeal to assimilation whereby the English language becomes the “key to Americanism” (27-28). Baron describes a history of myths, both religious and secular, that uphold American English as a link to democratic liberty. One such myth asserts that language reveals the social structure of its users: “democracies have democratic languages, so the argument goes, while despotic states are revealed in the hierarchic and oppressive nature of their languages” (29-30). Language is upheld as evidence of logical structure, and while “under siege from . . . both competing languages and the ineptitude or the malice of its native speakers,” it can be improved to reflect a larger progress made by both citizens and their society (30-31). In spite of positivistic claims that language is a pure structural system, language regularly gets wrapped up in debates over social policy-making. That is, the politics of language can be seen in the decisions made by national, state, and local governments.

On the level of human consciousness, as well, language is always already political because it originates in an intensely social interaction with a concrete, historical environment and with concrete subjects. Marnie Holborow chronicles the inherently political position on language evident in the writings of Marx, Volosinov, and Vygotsky. Holborow observes that all these theorists connect the development of language to social activity and that for
Volosinov, in particular, language occurs within a “realm of ideology” wherein world views are contested by competing social classes (46). Volosinov explains that as a signifying system language cannot be separated from ideology. Moreover, language cannot be “divorced from the concrete forms of social intercourse” (21). Volosinov elaborates: “Every ideological sign—the verbal sign included—in coming about through the process of social intercourse, is defined by the social purview of the given time period and the given social group” (emphasis in original, 21). Volosinov connects ideology to language by noting that social classes use “one and the same language” but do so with varied “accents” that reflect a particular ideological interest. Though they rely on the same signifying systems, competing ideological groups—including the dominant and the marginalized—use their shared signs toward competing ends. Volosinov observes that language’s embedded ideology emerges during these clashes: “The ruling class strives to impart a supaclass, eternal character to the ideological sign, to extinguish or drive inward the struggle between social value judgments which occurs in it, to make the sign uniaccentual” (23). Language thus can be seen as an instrument of domination inasmuch as a social group effectively narrows the meanings available to any given linguistic sign to serve its particular ideological interests.

Vygotsky also makes evident the crucial role played by social interaction in the formation of language. Inner speech, a term used by both Vygotsky and Volosinov for the internal expression of a person’s thoughts, cannot exist outside of social interaction. Inner speech does not occur until an encounter with the other provokes it (132-135). Volosinov characterizes inner speech as the product of a “stabilized social audience that comprises the environment in which reasons, motives, values, and so on are fashioned” (emphasis in original, 86). Language—internal or external—arises from a reciprocal relationship between
the speaker and the listener, whether imagined or physically present. Volosinov claims, “[I]t is a matter not so much of expression accommodating [sic] itself to our inner world but rather of our inner world accommodating [sic] itself to the potentialities of our expression, its possible routes and directions” (91). Vygotsky views meaning as fluid, developing in relation to any given interaction (121), and Volosinov explains that the “immediate social situation and its immediate social participants” deeply influence the form of language use (87). Ideology always enters into one’s inner speech because consciousness “is incarnated in specific social organizations, geared into steadfast ideological modes of expression” (Volosinov 90).

The turn to critical pedagogy for ESL practitioners indeed rests on the political nature of language—both in its social constructedness and in its entrenchment in sociopolitical policymaking. Pennycook demands a critical turn in ESL pedagogy on these very grounds:

If we see education as a fundamentally political process, involved in the production and reproduction of social differences, and language learning as an equally contentious political issue, then the reluctance to deal with the fundamental but awkward social, cultural and political questions that surround SLE [Second Language Education] becomes on the one hand understandable but on the other reprehensible. (“Critical Pedagogy” 305)

Applied to ESL instruction, critical pedagogy recognizes that “culture is the heart of language, inseparable from it” and works to restore the meaningful contingency present in every language student (Trueba 379). Pennycook indicates that critical ESL pedagogy must not become, however, the mere practice of inclusivity wherein all the lived experiences of students are acknowledged. Critical ESL pedagogy must also recognize the dual perspective of critique and transformation found in other critical educational efforts; it must focus on issues of “power, inequality, discrimination, resistance, and struggle” (“Introduction” 332). The success that ESL students encounter in achieving social agency via their newly acquired
English competence hinges in large part on how the identity of a competent, literate English communicator gets constructed in the classroom.

Proponents of critical literacy provide a useful framework for a critical ESL pedagogy. McLaren and Colin Lankshear define critical literacy as “the interpretation of the social present for the purpose of transforming the cultural life of certain groups, for questioning tacit assumptions and unarticulated presuppositions of current cultural and social formations and the subjectivities and capacities for agenthood they foster” (413). At its core, critical literacy is interested in democratizing oppressive social structures that are supported by communication practices. To this end, critical literacy “seeks to produce partial, contingent, but necessary historical truths that will enable the many public spheres that make up our social and institutional life to be emancipated” (McLaren and Lankshear 414). In light of critical literacy, then, the ESL classroom becomes a site of action, a site intent on reaffirming the social agency of its participants.

Three specific goals can be culled from the application of critical pedagogy to ESL instruction. First, critical ESL instruction aims for the acquisition and development of communicative abilities in the English language. This obvious pursuit has already been discussed in detail at the beginning of this chapter, but it is important to note that language acquisition is not exempt from political agendas. Therefore, the second goal for critical ESL pedagogy involves using one’s communicative ability to analyze critically the social conditions in which one exists. This represents critical theory’s concern with social and cultural critique. Third, critical ESL pedagogy works toward action, transforming the oppressive conditions already critiqued (Crookes and Lehner 320).
These three goals are typically addressed simultaneously within critical ESL pedagogy. That is, English language instruction operates within a mode of critique and social transformation, though the latter goal cannot always be realized within the actual classroom context. Rather than locate gender, race, class, and sexuality as problematic content issues that are discussed topically throughout language instruction, critical ESL practitioners have turned to a “pedagogy of engagement” that constructs curriculum and, indeed, pedagogy on top of these foundations. Pennycook explains, “From this point of view, then, questions of difference, identity, and culture are not merely issues to discuss but pertain to how people have come to be as they are, how discourses have structured people’s lives. Questions of gender or race, therefore, make up the underlying rationale for the course” (“Introduction” 340). When practitioners work to implement these issues as the foundation for an ESL course, they frequently encounter feasibility questions very familiar to critical educational theorists: How might the dual vision of critique and possibility be applied to the mundane practices of the classroom? Recognizing the need to translate theory into practice, Pennycook offers an instructive list of questions that document the challenges for a critical ESL pedagogy:

Under what conditions can induction into a new language and culture be empowering? What kinds of curricula will allow students to explore critically both the second language and the second culture? How can one validate student voice when the means of expression of that voice may be very limited? How does one balance the need to explore critically the forms and implications of standard languages and the need to empower students by teaching that standard language? (“Critical Pedagogy” 311).

One tangible response to these challenges comes from Freire’s problem-posing pedagogy. In Freire’s approach, which he developed during literacy campaigns in Brazil, the entire educational process is presented as a problem that corresponds to the historical,
politicized lives of its student participants and is then attacked via critical perception, reflection, and action. Tomas Graman urges an ESL adoption of Freire’s pedagogy on the grounds that Freire’s practice addresses the “immediate realities” of students and teachers. Graman explains, “[T]he classroom must be the real world in which students and teachers critically analyze real problems and take action to solve them” (emphasis in original, 441). Linda Crawford-Lange explains the problem-posing approach to ESL instruction by relaying an example in which learning English is seen as a problem in communication within and across cultures (259-60). Her example simplifies the lived experiences of many ESL students to an equation of “communication/noncommunication” without recognizing the social and cultural influences already present on an institutional level. Yet, it also emphasizes the unique identities and situations of students. For example, the content of the problem-posing ESL course rests with the students. Not only do the relevant themes from students’ lives suggest the course content, but the students’ perceptions of those themes also influence the final selection of the communication skills studied in the course (Crawford-Lange 262). In this approach, the roles of teachers and students become unsettled. Teachers and students share in the task of teaching and learning. Freire calls for “committed involvement” in the practice of “co-intentional education,” where “teachers and students, co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge” (Pedagogy 56).

A problem-posing methodology thus moves through three connected phases: listening, dialogue, and action. Listening involves searching for the “hidden voices” that students speak inside and outside of class and results in the discovery of central issues—Freire’s generative themes—that resonate with students’ lives. Nina Wallerstein
recommends that both teachers and students should carry out this task by using the
ethnographic tools of participant observation, interviewing, and document analysis. Students
are encouraged to look closely at their daily lives, collecting artifacts that signify their daily
routines and communication interactions. Interviews with native English speakers and fellow
non-native speakers provide opportunities for students to explore questions regarding
interaction in American society. Document analysis initially requires students to collect
documents that they encounter at work or within common social institutions such as medical
offices or banks. These documents generate evidence for a particular generative theme that
students have selected and offer a particular context in which to consider the theme
(“Problem-Posing” 35-37). Graman recommends locating generative themes in students’
own written work (445). Terri Menacker proposes advocating critical language awareness in
which students consider how native English speakers socially construct language and how
that language enables or constrains non-native speakers. Her approach locates students as
ethnographers of language and culture, pushing ESL instruction toward a course in
sociolinguistics. Because the generative themes uncovered during the listening process will
become the subject matter for the ESL course, the investigation for themes constructs a
democratic basis for the classroom.

The second stage of a problem-posing ESL methodology involves dialogue regarding
the themes that students and teachers have generated. This stage encourages analysis of the
sociopolitical obstacles that students face when acquiring and communicating in English.
Freire’s prescription for this stage involves discussion of a particular code, “a concrete
physical representation” of a theme uncovered during the listening stage. Freire initially used
pictures that represented the stark poverty that his Brazilian peasant students faced.
Wallerstein also recommends written dialogues, photographs, skits, collages, or songs (“Problem-Posing” 38). The primary purpose of the code is to “re-present the students’ reality back to the class” which then encourages organized and focused responses to the selected generative themes. Wallerstein explains the benefit of using codes to stimulate critical analysis and eventual action: “In sum, a code ‘codifies’ into one depersonalized representation, a conflict or problem that carries emotional or social impact in people’s lives” (“Problem-Posing” 38). Once the code has been presented, Wallerstein recommends a five-step analysis in which students:

1. Describe what they see
2. Define the problem(s)
3. Share similar experiences
4. Question why there’s a problem
5. Strategize what they can do about the problem (“Problem-Posing” 38-39)

Wallerstein further explains that using codes as a stimulus for analysis enables a spontaneous treatment of the particular concerns and student identities present in any class: “each new group develops its own open-ended dialogue from the individual realities that form the group analysis” (“Problem-Posing” 40).

The final stage of problem-posing, action, potentially occurs both inside and outside the classroom. Action also instigates reflection, which, in turn, engenders renewed action. This ongoing cycle of praxis—reflection and action—creates a dialectic in which students live out their struggle against oppressive social forces. Wallerstein notes that the action stage within the problem-posing model does not necessarily lead to direct social transformation. Instead, action is understood as both a critical consciousness and the attempt to correct oppressive conditions, either in the classroom or in the social sphere (“Problem-Posing” 42-43). Therefore, Wallerstein offers the following as potential actions taken by ESL students:
in-class experimentation with using English, the construction of life histories, letters to the editor, radio public service spots, in-class role plays that rehearse a communication solution for real life, and taking legal action to correct a problem in the workplace (42-43). In its most basic sense, action means the adoption of a critical perspective whereby students learn “to see themselves as social and political beings, with rights to access the political systems in their workplaces or their cities” (“Problem-Posing” 43). In a larger, experiential view, action means the adoption of some intervention through personal communication or through public lobbying. In both views, however, the intended result is the lesson that “people can effectively interact in the U.S. political system to transform their reality” (Wallerstein, “Problem-Posing” 43)

Several scholars working with critical approaches in the ESL classroom emphasize the utility of open discussion and dialogue (Frye; Powell; Rivera). In their view, classroom discussion and, subsequently, language instruction centers around students’ concrete experiences. Rebecca Powell advocates open dialogue as well as the inclusion of multicultural texts as means of promoting “freedom of thought.” For Powell, the freedom to express one’s ideas and exposure to a wide range of world views increases the equality of power within the classroom (65-71). One concrete practice that Powell uses within her literacy classrooms features a process of role playing, discussion, and critique. While rehearsing for real life situations, students practice the use of “standard discourse” which frequently serves to exclude them in society. Then, they discuss and critique the hegemonic control that such dominant discourse maintains in their lives. In response, Powell encourages students to exercise the “discourse of power” by practicing oral and written language skills in “meaningful and authentic opportunities” such as writing letters to the editor, producing
pamphlets for the community, or publishing student books and magazines (85).

Unfortunately, Powell does not contextualize her suggestions with specific instances in which her critical literacy process has been practiced. As she presents them, they remain optimistic suggestions for classroom use.

Dana Frye and Klaudia Rivera describe successful concrete classroom experiences in which adult ESL students engaged their own lives as material for critical curricula. Per Wallerstein’s problem-posing approach to ESL, Frye enlisted students in establishing the social content for the curriculum in a Washington, D.C., area course for adult women. The students focused on salient issues that represented struggles in their lives, including employment, communicating with native English speakers, understanding cultural and social norms, and comprehending the school policies of their children (506). Frye reports that students quickly assumed control of in-class discussions by sharing narratives of their life experiences. She explains, “The dominant means of language learning in the class was the promotion and sharing of life journeys” (507).

Rivera’s New York City adult ESL class undertook popular research projects in order to address crucial issues that affected their families and immediate communities. Rivera connects the research programs to participatory research, noting that students selected topics, collected and analyzed data, and presented results as engaged members of an urban community. The results appeared on documentary videos that were later aired on local-access television (490). Eventually, students and program graduates were hired as teachers within the program, a move that situated knowledge within the community itself. Rivera explains, “The popular teachers brought the community’s ways of educating its members into the curriculum, leading to classrooms with high levels of participation and solidarity” (498).
Students regularly lobbied to maintain the ESL program, which experienced financial hardship and rigorous welfare regulations that required careful documentation of student attendance. One significant byproduct of this engaged, critical ESL pedagogy, then, was the construction of an education community fashioned for and by students. The adult ESL program became both the vehicle for and the result of the students’ move to transform their social realities.

As just noted, problem-posing represents the most frequently described method for applying critical pedagogy to the ESL context (Crawford-Lange; Graman; Wallerstein “Problem-Posing,” *Language and Culture in Conflict*). More often, however, the ESL literature argues strongly for a critical theoretical approach to language pedagogy, while offering little in the way of method (Ewald 275). Many articles that fuse critical theory and ESL pedagogy remain on the level of critique, rightly interrogating traditional structural or survival methods of language instruction. The question of method gets swept up in a paradoxical tension. Critical ESL pedagogy privileges the historicity of students as active subjects in the process of learning language, launching social critique, and transforming oppression. If this privilege is rigorously upheld, as it should be, then prescriptions for critical classroom methods risk ignoring the contingency of student participants. Graham Crookes and Al Lehner explain this paradox away by stating that critical ESL pedagogy “should be seen as a social and educational process rather than just as a pedagogical method. It is more concerned about how language can effect personal and social change than it is with ‘how to teach language’ more effectively or in ways that simply encourage critical thinking on the part of teacher and students” (327). As Jennifer Ewald reminds us, however, a significant portion of the social/educational process for immigrant and refugee ESL students
occurs within the classroom (276). The classroom becomes both a locale for real-world training and the real world itself.

Pennycook’s call for the application of praxis—“the mutually constitutive roles of theory grounded in practice and practice grounded in theory”—provides a useful framework for critical approaches to ESL pedagogy. Pennycook explains praxis as “a way of thinking about critical work that does not dichotomise theory and practice but rather sees them as always dependent on each other” (“Introduction” 342). By viewing critical ESL pedagogy as an inherent union of critical theory and classroom practice, scholar/educators might recognize the necessity for a contingent, situated pedagogy. Pennycook warns against identifying critical ESL pedagogy as critical pedagogy applied to the ESL context, and she urges reflexive analysis to uncover the problems inherent to any critical approach (“Introduction” 341). Critical ESL scholars find themselves in a precarious position, then, as they encourage a cycle of social critique and transformation while maintaining their original mission of teaching language lessons. Rather than ignoring the latter responsibility and moving ESL entirely into modes of critique and transformation, scholars must negotiate language lessons against the already present ideology of language and the sociopolitical contexts in which students find themselves using English.

Performance in the ESL Classroom

In light of my explicit interest in the performance issues that surround the learning and sociocultural practice of language, I offer performative pedagogy as a response to the theory-practice challenge facing critical ESL scholars. In chapter 3, I argue that a performative pedagogy is well suited to address the delicate balance between theory and practice found in critical ESL pedagogy, in part because it is a position commonly addressed
within the Performance Studies discipline. Performative theories of the body, for example, offer a means for critiquing the sociopolitical influences on students’ historicized bodies, while performance methods offer a means for rehearsing communicative practices that serve transformative functions in students’ respective lives. Before I articulate the contours of my performative pedagogy solution, however, I close this chapter with a description of the various uses of performance in traditional ESL curricula, including the use of role playing and theatre exercises as educational drama tools. This description operates as both a review and a critique of the performance activity already in use by ESL pedagogues.

The historical infusion of performance into the ESL classroom can be understood in the wider context of educational drama. The movements in education to include drama as a means for instruction in a given subject area, as well as a means for student self-exploration, have appeared under the labels creative dramatics and drama in education. In her review of educational drama in the language arts disciplines, Betty Wagner identifies the following goal for these practices: “to create an experience through which students may come to understand human interactions, empathize with other people, and internalize alternative points of view” (5). Drama is constructed as an exercise in the rehearsal of life. As Brian Way observes in his seminal book on the function of drama in education, “the achievement of skill in all human activities is dependent . . . on practice; skill at living is equally dependent on practice. . . . In this sense, a basic definition of drama might be simply be ‘to practise living’” (6). The tradition of educational drama—at least in the last forty years—can be traced through the practice of creative dramatics and drama in education. Creative drama originates in improvisation. Though students or instructors may suggest dramatic action via a story, poem, idea, or music, participants improvise their own actions and dialogue.
Beginning with warm-up and relaxation exercises, participants work through improvisations, role-playing, and/or pantomime within a linear, narrative sequence (Henig and Stillwell 5; Wagner 7). The goals of this practice lie in student self-exploration and the growth of student personalities (Wagner 6). By contrast, drama in education focuses on problem-solving or the transformation of a text and uses various dramatic modes (tableaux, pantomime, role-playing) to explore the experiences of dramatic characters (Wagner 7).

For the ESL context, the transition to a communicative competence approach during the 1970s also initiated an interest in dramatic exercises within the language classroom. Given the field’s emphasis on language in situ, several educators turned to role playing and reality-based dramas to encourage practice in using language for a wide range of speech acts. Paulston et al.’s role-play guidebook, for example, is organized around a series of functional language behaviors, such as complaining, offering advice, and expressing anger. ESL role-plays and other drama-inspired activities emerged from the pursuit of “real interaction” or “the exchange of ideas, however slow and painful, between human beings” (Yalden 19). These exercises best resemble the drama in education approach of problem-solving in that ESL students work to resolve a conflict or manage a communicative interaction. This “learning by doing” component characterizes the underlying goal of the improvised role plays, simulations, and scripted plays that ESL practitioners have traditionally used in their courses (Via 161).

Though role playing exercises receive the most attention from both ESL practitioners and critics, other forms of educational drama have also been adopted into the ESL context. In several cases, ESL educators have employed theatre as a means for teaching vocabulary, rehearsing oral and nonverbal expressions, and practicing writing (Cammack; Ersnt-Slavit
and Wenger; Via; Woosnam-Mills). Charlyn Wessels explains an ESL course based entirely on the production of a play. Students improvise scenes on a play topic agreed upon by the entire class. Then, students script the play based on rehearsal improvisations and discussions regarding the rehearsals. The course culminates in a public performance. Another dramatic practice involves performances of poetry; students dramatize a poem selected by the instructor, employing scenery, props, lighting, and costumes (Gasparro and Falletta).

Finally, storytelling performances have served as “transitional bridges” between ESL students’ native language consciousness and that of the English-speaking culture in which they now live. Anne Werner-Smith and Laura Smolkin describe an ESL curriculum that begins with students delivering improvised performances of cultural stories in their native language. Students then perform the stories in English. Finally, students work to reproduce the stories in writing.

Throughout communicative-based arguments for ESL teaching, scholars primarily propose role playing as an instructional method. Savignon, for example, lists “Theatre Arts” as one of the central components of her communicative curriculum. Within the Theatre Arts portion of Savignon’s ESL class, students consider and practice all the communication behaviors they have previously studied in a practical context. Communicative practitioners particularly value role-plays for their use of improvisation and their creation of fictitious roles (Paulston, “Developing” 60). Improvisation encourages students to communicate creatively and autonomously, while the use of roles enables a suspended reality in which students may rehearse communication without the ramifications of real life. Ali Al-Arishi connects the wide use of role playing in ESL contexts to a larger concern for classroom realism. He further explains the motivation behind a reality-based ESL curriculum:
Textual material should be authentic; realia should be brought into the classroom; audiovisual aids should allow students not only to hear real-world speakers but to see them; and since the real world knows or cares little about grammar, the classroom syllabus must be meaning-based, not structure-based.

As conceived by both Paulston (“Developing”) and Yalden, role plays include a defined situation, assigned roles, and useful expressions that are to be practiced during the drama. Background information is also sometimes provided to insure that students are confident in their roles. For example, in the brief role play “Calling Long Distance,” students assume the roles of a caller and an operator while enacting the conversation that occurs when a caller asks the operator for assistance in placing a long distance call (Paulston, et al. 2).

As explained by Paulston, role plays resemble Boal’s forum theatre, inasmuch as both theatrical exercises provide practice for real life action. A central difference, however, comes in the selection of the actions to be rehearsed within the given educational setting. Boal adopts an ethnographic stance along very similar lines to Freire’s investigation of the emic cultural perspective through the collection of generative themes. That is, the initial theatre piece presented as an oppressive problem to the spect-actors always operates from the spect-actors’ personal, shared perspective. The oppression addressed in the forum theatre session, whether it take the form of concrete socioeconomic discrimination or subtle, internalized constraints to democratic action, can never be suggested for the participating audience. Instead, the piece emerges from and responds to their life experiences. Boal’s explanation of his initial forum theatre practice in Latin America clarifies this requirement: “[A]ll the Forum Theatre sessions were organised by a core group of people of homogenous social origin, whose common interest was the resolution of relatively immediate problems” (Games 224). In traditional ESL role plays, even in those cases where the explicit goal is to
prepare for meaningful communication interaction, the interpretation of what constitutes meaningful communication lies with the instructor. In many cases of communicative curricula, where instructors are committed to practical language training that will impact students’ real communication, the selection of role plays follows a logical, realistic pattern. Paulston et al., for example, include a number of scenarios that ESL immigrants and refugees will likely encounter at least once, if not on a regular basis. Their role play collection includes scenarios in the following contexts: shopping at grocery stores, maintaining bank accounts, viewing television commercials, locating a motel room, and ending romantic relationships.

Yet even in those cases where the ESL instructor is both empathetic to and knowledgeable of their students’ respective realities, the imposition of role play content inevitably denies the situated contingency of those realities. Paulston et al.’s role play text is written with traditional college-age ESL students in mind. The role plays therefore reflect a vision of university life that reveals both academic and social interactions. Topics such as dropping out of school, experimenting with drugs, drinking parties, managing roommates, and complaints about teachers all demonstrate the text’s narrow focus on college students. Other scenes are seemingly unrelated to university life (a news conference scenario, surviving a plane crash, a hijacking, a murder scene). Missing from all the role play scenes is a fundamental recognition of students’ lives—college-aged or otherwise—as infused with culture and the problems that accompany culture. That is, the role plays serve as rehearsals for real life, but never recognize that students’ real lives are always already influenced by their cultural identities and the management of those identities in relation to others. The “Drunken Party” role play, for example, presents a well-known American college stereotype:
an “Animal House” style party with heavy alcohol consumption and excessive noise (Paulston et al. 10). For the scene to represent ESL students’ real lives, however, it must not assume that students react to social events—even those involving drunken partygoers—in a universal fashion. In this case, however, the American college stereotype merely replaces the perspectives of non-Americans: the drunken, college party-goers resist all attempts to end their drinking spree. Whether that behavior represents a rehearsal for real-life certainly depends on the sociocultural identities of those involved in the role play, but regardless, the ESL students receive a predetermined “meaningful, real-life” situation to model.

Other ESL curricula have also reduced students’ identities to an ethnocentric generalization, particularly those that explicitly serve adults. Structural based curricula for adult ESL students reveal an obvious failure to recognize the contingency of students. However, this is to be expected inasmuch as structural approaches to ESL instruction emphasize the acquisition of grammar over the practice of realistic communication. Still, structural curricula have included drama as an instructional tool. Mary Hines wrote Skits in English as a Second Language for beginning adult ESL students, and she includes “tightly controlled” stage directions and dialogue in an effort to teach grammar structures. Each of her skits focuses on selected grammatical principles and comically ignores the notion that the dramatic script likely has no connection to students’ own experiences. Each skit is also accompanied by a cartoon illustration, with mostly white characters seemingly modeled after the Archie comic strip. “How Many Minutes Are Left?” teaches the structures “there are” and “how many,” but does so in the context of a second-grade classroom. Obviously, only one student can portray the teacher, so the rest of the adult students who take up this skit must portray eight-year-old children.
Motivated by competency-based literacy projects that emerged in the 1970s, survival ESL curricula emphasize the acquisition of language that will enable students to successfully complete real-life tasks. Auerbach and Burgess observe that survival curricula must always be accountable for demonstrating situational and communicative realism. Moreover, their critique of survival curricula identifies several areas in which role plays are used to reify social structures that disempower immigrants and refugees. In addition to presenting middle-class values and economic status, survival drama exercises have prescribed limiting social roles for students, “teaching them the corresponding language of subservience” (Auerbach and Burgess 158). While ESL practitioners frequently praise role playing improvisations for their initiation of dialogue, many survival texts close down the possible meanings associated with reality-based scenarios. Instead, the texts offer specific suggestions for action or explanations that validate the current social reality, even when that reality oppresses immigrant and refugee students (Auerbach and Burgess 158-60).

ESL scholars have not universally accepted role playing and the general practice of drama. Al-Arishi reports that drama reached its highest use within ESL classrooms during the 1970s and early 1980s in conjunction with a curricular emphasis on communicative realism, but that since then scholars have taken issue with its utility for real-life communication practice. Questions have been raised regarding the efficacy of role play exercises to enable the learning of actual language structures (Al-Arishi 340). More significant to the mission of a communicative ESL curriculum are critiques that question the applicability of role playing exercises to students’ actual lived experiences. Al-Arishi explains, “The very specificity necessary in a role-playing situation which replicates a distinct situation in the real world may work against the general communicative needs of the
students, resulting in the students’ seeing the trees, but missing the forest” (340). David and Terry Piper indicate that the “fictional pretenses” of role plays may distance students from the meaningful language they need to practice (83). Their subsequent suggestion for drama in the ESL classroom proposes dramatic texts that feature roles that students will likely pursue in their respective lives (85-87). Unfortunately, Piper and Piper recommend that ESL instructors propose the functional roles that students will rehearse. Al-Arishi further questions whether students practice “natural” communication behaviors within role play exercises, particularly because drama generates an artificiality that may misrepresent the typical behaviors of students. Another problem with role playing involves the passive nature of the student audience. In fact, several ESL practitioners report that students express boredom, work on other assignments, or prepare for their own role plays rather than attend to the role play being performed (Al-Arishi 344).

This chapter provided a critical reading of language pedagogy’s tenuous lineage. As a history that has negotiated between structural, subject-centered and communicative, learner-centered approaches, the course of language pedagogy can be viewed as problematic inasmuch as it has consistently ignored its students as embodied participants with diverse and distinct sociocultural identities. The grammar-intensive curricula that dominated language instruction and ESL classrooms for much of the twentieth century upheld the purity of linguistic structures but ignored both how those structures might be used by students in their respective lives and how the sole emphasis on structure represented a distinct ideological position. The communicative ESL pedagogy that emerged during the 1970s recognized the importance of meaningful English practice and thereby prescribed communication behaviors that responded to specific sociocultural situations. However, its sociolinguistic description
In theory, critical pedagogy, particularly when operationalized as a pedagogy of critique and possibility, provides a means to address the always ideological interests served by ESL instruction. By exposing the ideological interests that underlie any educational practice, critical pedagogy addresses the constraints, oppressions, and motivations that students and teachers face within those practices. Moreover, critical pedagogy addresses these obstacles via its project of transformation, a project that attempts to enlist education as a tool for comprehensive social change. Critical pedagogy provides a natural pedagogical fit for language instruction, which itself is always consumed by ideological concerns. It is not, however, exempt from critique. Critical pedagogy cannot reconcile its own rationalist tendencies, its presumption of an altruistic, socially-conscious, yet authoritative instructor, or its failure to translate its theoretical assumptions into efficacious classroom practices. Although critical endeavors within the ESL classroom have successfully incorporated social critique within the language classroom, rarely have ESL instructors managed to negotiate their language instruction obligations with their critical perspectives of resistance and transformation. Critical pedagogy in the ESL classroom has reconciled the ideological vapidity of traditional language instruction but, like other critical pedagogical efforts, has neither addressed its capacity to make tangible progress toward social transformation nor its own ideological biases.

In the next chapter, I look to performance as a potential answer for the problems posed when ESL instruction and critical pedagogy are fused. Within both traditional and critical ESL classrooms, instructors have enlisted performance for a wide range of language and prescription did nothing to critique or transform the potentially oppressive sociocultural contexts in which non-native English speakers communicate.
instruction methods, including role plays, small classroom dramas, and theatrical skits. In chapter 3, however, I suggest that performance be considered as more than an isolated instructional method. Given its connection to the acts of pedagogy and language use, I propose that performance be extended as both a theory and a method for executing critical-pedagogy within the ESL classroom.

Notes

1 While my literature review addresses several widely implemented approaches to language instruction (e.g. Audio-Lingual, Direct, Communicative Competence), I do not describe a series of eclectic methodologies that emerged during the 1970s when communicative competence was upheld as the ideal for language learners. Among these are Community Counseling Learning, the Natural Approach, Rapid Acquisition, the Silent Way, Suggestopedia, and Total Physical Response. See Charles Curran’s theoretical explanation of Community Counseling Learning in Counseling-Learning in Second Languages. See Stevick for a description of the method in use. See Krashen and Terrell for an explanation of the Natural Approach and Krashen for a full treatment of Monitor theory, which justifies the Natural methodology. Winitz and Reeds provide a detailed account of the Rapid Acquisition method. Earl Stevick explains both the theoretical underpinnings and classroom techniques of the Silent Way. See Georgi Lozanov’s Suggestology and Outlines of Suggestopedy for an explanation of the metaphysical Suggestopedia approach. Jane Bancroft describes American adaptations of the method. Both James Asher and Gina Doggett explain Total Physical Response as an attempt to reduce students’ stress in acquiring English.

2 The history of language pedagogy in the United States has also been linked to the student populations being served at particular historical moments. Though most language teaching methods could be classified as structural until the 1970s when communicative approaches gained favor, the “politics of need” can also be used to chart when and why a particular method was adapted for a particular population (Yalden 8). The transition to communicative ESL pedagogy, for example, coincided with the influx of immigrants from Asian, African and Central American countries (Adamson 28).

3 Otto Jesperson’s 1904 text, How to Teach a Foreign Language, is frequently cited as an immediate precursor to the Audio-Lingual method. While Jesperson’s techniques and theoretical underpinnings do match many of the tenets of that method, he also provides a cogent critique of the Grammar-Translation method, though he does not name it explicitly. Jesperson’s central argument against the isolated use of grammar instruction and vocabulary acquisition concerns the tendency to remove a language from its context. “We ought to learn a language through sensible communication; there must be (and this as far as possible from the very first day) a certain connection in the thoughts communicated in the new language” (11). Jesperson felt that traditional methods of language teaching erroneously separated grammatical structures and vocabulary from any meaningful content. In response, he called
for language lessons that connected structures in ways that made semantical sense. His own method, although very much a system of repetition, mimetic drills, and memorization, attempted to connect a target language to students’ interests. For a critique of the Grammar-Translation method’s tendency to isolate language structures, see chapter 2 (pages 11 – 22) in How to Teach a Foreign Language. Jesperson follows this critique with a recommendation for a “meaningful” reader for learning languages (chapter 3, pages 23 – 39).

4 Earl Stevick’s advice to ESL teachers illustrates the reduced role of students. Stevick responds to the “problem” of ESL learners participating in free conversation by implementing communicative restrictions. “These restrictions, or ‘controls,’ restrain the student from trying to do too much too soon—from getting in over his head and floundering. As the student grows more proficient, we relax our controls one by one” (26). Stevick further admits that the justification for using controls comes from the teacher’s attempt to reduce or prevent students from making communication errors. He advises, “Remember that whenever your student makes a mistake, he is practicing one” (emphasis in original, 26). Despite his commitment to students’ situations in adapting curricula, Stevick’s oral ESL pedagogy does not recognize students as active agents in the learning process. That is, the use of controls and mimicry in the classroom locate the student in a passive position as follower, reducing students’ identities as distinct, acculturated English learners to a formula.

5 Diller summarizes both the theoretical foundation and the various teaching methods of what he terms “rationalist” language pedagogy based on Chomsky’s generative grammar. He designates at least two methods as illustrating a rationalist linguistic theory: Gouin’s Series method and the direct methods of Berlitz and de Sauze. Gouin’s approach was modeled on children’s native language acquisition. Diller observes that the chief advantage of the Series method lies in its primary focus on vocabulary and a natural organization pattern for learned vocabulary (100). See chapter 3 of Diller’s text for a detailed history and critique of the Series method. Berlitz and de Sauze, though they developed their methods separately, are most frequently cited as proponents of the direct method that excludes the use of students’ native languages. Berlitz went on to establish a number of language schools bearing his name. Diller attributes the direct method with generating “meaningful sentences” and the ability “to think in the foreign language” (101). See chapter 7 of Diller’s text for a thorough explanation of the direct method.

6 Hymes references four criteria in describing a person’s communicative competence:

1. Whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible;
2. Whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available;
3. Whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated;
4. Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually performed, and what its doing entails. (emphasis in original, 281)
Any person who uses a language, claims Hymes, communicates with the above criteria in place as a filter. Competence thus refers to one’s ability to discern and implement the above characteristics when communicating.

Berns’ eight-item criteria list is supplemented by Finocchiaro and Brumfit’s 22-item comparison of the Audio-Lingual method and a functional-notional methodology. As a method based on the pursuit of communicative competence, the functional-notional approach allows for contingency on the part of classroom exercises, as long as the ideal of getting one’s meaning across is upheld. The context of an interaction underlies any instruction regarding the communication appropriate for that event. Comprehensibility is favored over perfect pronunciation. Errors provide valuable learning opportunities in the construction of meaningful language. Students consistently interact with each other, always focusing on means of communicating their unique meanings. See Brumfit and Johnston, pages 91-93, for an overview of the functional-notional approach to communicative language instruction.

It is important to note that role playing is not the only theatrical exercise prescribed for communicative language instruction, only the most ubiquitous. Other recommended activities reveal theatrical elements as well. Paulston, for example, suggests social formulas, dialogues, problem-solving, and community oriented tasks (“Developing”). Social formulas and dialogues position students in hypothetical roles and ask them to practice either scripted, conversational conventions or semi-scripted dialogues (52-3). Problem-solving exercises require students to solve a problem by communicating within a group. Here, students must assume the temporary roles of persons directly involved in the stated problem (57-60). Community oriented tasks require students to communicate with native speakers outside the classroom in order to locate some piece of social information, such as how to open a bank account (55-7). In this case students engage in actual communication with native speakers, but any potential negative consequence (embarrassment, inability to communicate, nervousness, etc.) carries less weight since the communication only occurs for a classroom assignment. See Yalden’s chapter 4 for a description of other types of communicative exercises, including information transfer and interactive tasks.

My application of critical theory to critical pedagogy references the work of the loose affiliation of theorists who comprised the Frankfurt School. In his review of the Frankfurt School, Henry Giroux concentrates on the contributions of Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, who founded the Institute for Social Research which initially housed the school of thought. Giroux explains that in spite of the absence of a universally shared philosophy, there were several shared assumptions within the Frankfurt School: “the common attempt to assess the newly emerging forms of capitalism along with the changing forms of domination that accompanied them” and “an attempt . . . to rethink and radically reconstruct the meaning of human emancipation, a project that differed considerably from the theoretical baggage of orthodox Marxism” (Theory 7). See Giroux’s chapter, “Critical Theory and Educational Practice,” for a review of the Frankfurt School and its contribution to the critical pedagogy movement.

See Henry Giroux’s review and critique of several influential reproduction theorists (Theory 78-86), namely Louis Althusser, Samuel Bowles, and Herbert Gintis. Althusser’s

11 This proposal rests on two significant assumptions. First, “all men are intellectuals.” That is, any person can and does “participate in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought” (Gramsci 9). Yet the official intellectual class hold elite positions within society from which they “both create and transmit the specific conceptions of the world and the values of the hegemonic ideology which is to some extent incorporated into the consciousness of all classes” (Weiler 15). Second, schooling is the most significant site of influence in the creation of the official intellectual class. As Gramsci explains, “School is the instrument through which intellectuals of various levels are elaborated” (10).


13 See Robert Phillipson’s Linguistic Imperialism for an explanation of how the English language has been used to exercise cultural and social imperialism throughout global history.

14 Dennis Baron’s The English-Only Question provides a historical context for the English-Only movement in the United States and identifies the often problematic arguments launched in its favor within legal and educational arenas.

15 Nina Wallerstein’s out of print book, Language and Culture in Conflict: Problem-posing in the ESL Classroom, offers an extensive treatment of Freire in the ESL context.

16 Wagner offers a concise overview of educational drama as well as accounts of how drama has been used in the teaching of reading and writing. In Development through Drama, Brian Way explains drama as a tool for developing a full human capacity for life and offers a series of drama exercises that explore a wide range of human attributes (concentration, the senses, imagination, speech, emotion).

17 See Savignon’s Communicative Competence: Theory and Classroom Practice for a full description of the “Theatre Arts” component. However, Berns offers a summary of the entire curriculum on pages 90-92.
CHAPTER 3
CRITICAL PERFORMATIVE PEDAGOGY

“The claim that teaching is a performance is at once self-evident and oxymoronic” (Pineau, “Teaching” 4).

Without too much embarrassment, I can recall my first experience as an instructor within a college classroom. I was a graduate teaching assistant of the lowest sort: an assistant to a large lecture course assigned to lead a smaller group of students through exercises and activities that illustrated the lead instructor’s lectures. I took great pride in this assignment. I was twenty-two years old, a summer removed from my own undergraduate coursework. I remember walking through a series of self-motivation talks prior to entering the classroom for the first time. “Remember,” I told myself. “You are quick-witted. You interact with people well. And, if needed, you can talk loud.” Though I distinctly recall the taste of bile accumulating in my mouth upon entering the classroom, I was also confident that I could create a dynamic learning space. Accustomed to dull, lifeless lectures, the students would no doubt be thrilled to have me, a student of Performance Studies. Never mind that this was a Small Group Communication course. I was a performer. I had an audience. I would perform.

In many ways, my initial teaching expectations and actions—largely based on a careful critique of my own undergraduate professors during the previous four years—reduced teaching to the sort of “dog and pony show” that Pineau identifies as lacking depth. Unwittingly, I had reinforced the “style without substance” stereotype that has been attached to performative pedagogy (“Performance” 129). I understood my performance training as a necessary resource in captivating my student audiences. If I taught (or, in my case, guided activities) with enough enthusiasm, creativity, and humor, students would learn more, learn
easier, learn better. Admittedly, both education-based and performance-based research has generated more sophisticated bridges between performance and pedagogy than I was capable of then. Yet as Pineau has documented, those connections have only recently engaged theoretical or practical innovation. In the last fifteen years, educational research has increasingly relied on performance as a metaphor, a method, and a paradigm, but has not done so in a way that illuminates the “value of performance as a generative metaphor for educational phenomena” (Pineau, “Teaching” 6). Much of this research calls on performance to generate methods for classroom instruction, with a significant number of the studies using the “actor” and “artist” metaphors to reconstruct the identity of an educator as a performer who necessarily engages a student audience via acting techniques (Doyle; Kraemer; Rives; Rubin). Pineau’s concern with these metaphors lies in their limited scope: “[A]n exclusively teacher/performer-centered model cannot begin to mine the richness of the performance metaphor, and in fact, can function to close off heuristic interdisciplinary dialogue” (“Teaching” 7).

The recent call from performance scholars to engage a critical performative pedagogy (Pineau “Performance;” Warren “Promise”), one that combines critical pedagogy with performance praxis, can also be applied to specific academic contexts, including the ESL classroom. While ESL practitioners regularly incorporate performance methods into their language instruction, they have neither theorized nor engaged performance as a critical pedagogical instrument. The focus of this chapter is to articulate performative pedagogy as a solution to the problems posed by practitioners who engage critical pedagogy within the ESL context. In the subsequent discussion of education and performance research, I seek to answer several fundamental questions that arise from the intersection of critical pedagogy
and performance: What is a performative pedagogy? How might it also be a critical pedagogy? How does it alter the act of classroom instruction? How is it used to construct/theorize the process of schooling? Given the relative novelty of performative pedagogy as a theoretical and practical construct, as well as equivocation regarding the terms “performance” and “performative,” the need for definitions is pressing. How performative pedagogy gets defined determines its practice in the classroom and its usefulness for performance and education scholars. If the construct is to operate out of the Performance Studies tradition, definitional concerns must address the discipline’s commitment to critical analysis and embodied, participatory learning.

My initial college teaching experience and my assumptions regarding the value of performing for students betray a reductive understanding of performance and pedagogy. In this view, I was merely interested in how to construct the act of teaching as a performance, which I meekly defined as the demonstration of skills for an audience. My construction of a performance identity to cope with my teaching anxiety led me to view the classroom as a stage and the students as a theatrical audience. While this metaphor holds value as a descriptive device, it does not invoke the rich connections that performance scholars have explored by using the term “performative pedagogy.” As performance scholars have argued, performative pedagogy does not necessarily emerge from the use of performance methods to teach a course. Nor does performative pedagogy occur when theatrical metaphors replace traditional educational terminology within the classroom. Performative pedagogy happens amidst the conversation between critical pedagogy and performance theory. More specifically, performative pedagogy emerges from performance scholars’ concern with process and embodied action. The performative, as I explain it in relation to educational
practices, references a *doing* that takes place in the construction of both classroom identities and classroom knowledge. Like J. L. Austin’s notion of “performative” utterances, performative pedagogy concerns the action taken within the classroom to construct knowledge—and the contingent process that such action invokes—rather than the dramatic manner in which information is stated within the classroom (6-7). Throughout this chapter, I explore performative pedagogy as “less the product of theatrical intervention or the object of spectatorship than the process by which meanings, selves, and other effects are produced” (Pollock 20). The “performative” within performative pedagogy thus marks education as both a process of *doing* (of creating knowledge) and the embodied, performance-inspired means by which such doing occurs.

In this chapter, I first connect performative pedagogy to the Performance Studies tradition. I assert that performative pedagogy shares the Performance Studies discipline’s commitment toward inclusiveness. Performative pedagogy also operates as a contested concept, in part because of the wide appropriation of performance into classroom practices and theorizing. Both these attributes enrich performative pedagogy as they insure the possibility for re-invention and debate in the classroom practices of educators. Second, I critique the means by which performance has been used to inform teacher training, classroom methodology, and educational theory, and I deny that these practices constitute a performative pedagogy. In this section, I criticize applications of performance to pedagogy that rely on metaphors of the teacher as performing artist or drama exercises in the classroom for their basis in an “impoverished sense of performance” which “diminishes the complexity of educational interactions” (Pineau, “Teaching” 7). Third, I define performative pedagogy as a meeting of critical pedagogy with performance theory and practice. I articulate critical
performative pedagogy as a body-centered practice, as resting on improvised, contingent
dialogue, and as invoking a healthy sense of risk for both teachers and students. Fourth, I
consider Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) as an exemplar for my definition of
a critical performative pedagogy. I argue that TO compares more favorably than do other
performance practices in fulfilling the central criteria I lay out for a critical performative
pedagogy. Finally, I argue that critical performative pedagogy should be applied to the ESL
context, and I explain how performative pedagogy is congruent with language instruction.

Performative Pedagogy and Performance Studies

As a concept emerging from, co-opted by, or considered within the confines of
Performance Studies, performative pedagogy necessarily reflects the discipline’s history. To
say this invokes the discipline’s attraction to corporeal performance, the analysis of
discursive texts, and the cultural efficacy of performance. Performance scholars study and
practice aesthetic communication events, which Ronald Pelias and James VanOosting
identify through any of the following conditions:

(1) The initiator(s) of the communication event intends it to be viewed as
aesthetic. Regardless of the innate qualities of the performance text or
context, and regardless of the response of an audience, an aesthetic
intention alone provides sufficient rationale for performance study.
(2) The performance event itself displays features generally recognized as
aesthetic. This condition may be met apart from a “performer’s” intention
or the perception of a specific “audience.”
(3) The respondent for a communication event willingly assumes an audience
role and responds to the initiators as performers. (emphasis in original, 221)

The above criteria free the term “performance” to be observed in an expanse of activities,
including sites of pedagogy, but also require a strict responsibility by performer, audience, or
critic to identify “aesthetic intent, quality, or effect” (Pelias and VanOosting 221).
Pelias and VanOosting, of course, operate from within the framework of the Speech Communication (or Communication Studies) discipline. That discipline has housed the oral interpretation, expression, and elocution traditions, all of which focused on literature and performance and, at least chronologically, preceded the Performance Studies paradigm. Pelias and VanOosting, therefore, explain the identity of the Performance Studies discipline via a concentric model that locates performance of literature at the center and other acts of cultural performance (storytelling, rituals, social dramas, everyday actions) on outer, widening circles (229). Their reading of the discipline privileges performance of literature as an activity that has historically held the potential for a “communal impulse” toward interdisciplinary conversations but that “was kept in check by canonical authority and artistic conventions” (228). My location of performative pedagogy within Performance Studies links the construct to the performance of literature tradition, a tradition whose primary interest since the late 1800s has involved the relationship between a text and the performance of that text.

At varying times within this history, the texts to be performed were confined to a literary canon while the performance styles were confined to rigid prescriptions. For example, the approaches advocated by both elocution and expression schools from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century attempted to establish pure, natural methods of performing literature. In their attempt to privilege the meaning of literature, elocutionists such as Thomas Sheridan advocated a rigorously systematic approach that carefully detailed precise body instructions for how one might perform literature in a natural, conversational fashion (Edwards 530). The expression movement led by S.S. Curry argued that literature was best performed by allowing a literary text to infiltrate one’s psyche. After truly
experiencing a work’s effect on one’s mind and spirit, a performer would be moved to perform the work in a natural way (Edwards 532-3). Oral interpretation, especially by the middle of the twentieth century, encouraged performances of literature that began with careful analysis of a work and concluded with performance actions that suggested the meaning of the work to audience members but did not mimesically represent the work. Audiences thus became active psychological participants whose own interpretation completed the construction of meaning for any given performance (Taft-Kaufman 161). All these movements concerned themselves foremostly with either literary texts or the performance of those texts. If one views the Performance Studies discipline as emerging from this performance of literature tradition, then the foundations of that tradition—text and performance—assume a central role in contemporary performance research.¹ Performance scholars now include both literary and non-literary texts as objects of study and recognize performance not only as a method of enacting or embodying those texts but also as a legitimate object of study, as a theoretical framework for considering how texts are created, and as an act of cultural efficacy (McKenzie 30).

Performative pedagogy can be viewed as an exercise in the tenuous relationship between text and performance that has historically occupied oral interpretation-turned-performance scholars. At its core, performative pedagogy involves a text (or collection of texts) ubiquitously located in educational sites. As cultural texts, education and the schooling process are themselves performatively generated, as I will argue later in this chapter. In this analysis, therefore, the text is a performance. Performative pedagogy also concerns the performances through which this educational text is embodied, particularly the efficacy of such performances and the methodological manner in which they are executed.
Thus the underlying ingredients that have held the attention of performance scholars and their disciplinary history are also located in performative pedagogy.

The Performance Studies discipline is also defined by an epistemological commitment toward inclusiveness. The performance studies umbrella rejects “the privilege of academic authority,” instead recognizing the potential for aesthetic communication in any speech community, utterance, performer, or audience (Pelias and VanOosting 221). Further, performance scholars operate from an embodied, participatory methodology. Performance methodologies demand “physical, sensuous involvement in a performance event,” all the while stimulating “personal responsiveness, somatic engagement, and cognitive analysis” (Pelias and VanOosting 221-22). Performance is also viewed as “an essentially contested concept” (Strine, Long, and Hopkins 183). Performance effectively resists efforts to narrow it down to either a particular or a generalized arena, whether within one discipline or several, precisely because its nature depends on arguments over its definition, qualities, and applications. Far from permitting an uncritical, relativistic understanding of performance, where anyone might label anything a “performance,” an essentially contested view of performance requires performance scholars to identify carefully and defend their various uses of the term. Strine, Long, and HopKins indicate that such discussion leads to “a fuller understanding of the conceptual richness of performance” (183).

An understanding of performative pedagogy that originates in the Performance Studies discipline must deal with all these concerns. It must maintain open borders when defining performance within the realm of education; it must also justify how the term “performance” is used in particular education sites. If pedagogy becomes another context to be included under the Performance Studies interdisciplinary umbrella, then it must be
incorporated—and thus defined—in a way that avoids establishing finite boundaries. Marvin Carlson concludes that “[p]erformance by its nature resists conclusions, just as it resists the sort of definitions, boundaries, and limits so useful to traditional academic writing and academic structures” (189). Citing a conversation with Joseph Roach, Carlson refers to Performance Studies as an “antidiscipline,” inasmuch as it constitutes neither a new field of study nor an interdisciplinary study (189-90). As an area existing in transit, within a liminal space between various disciplines, Performance Studies considers events and behaviors that “are” performances and others that can be viewed “as” performative (Schechner, “What is Performance” 361). That is, there are aesthetic events that cultures traditionally label performances, and there are other events that operate performatively by exaggerating, masking, or otherwise altering some behavior for some intended effect. Performance Studies embraces both what is conspicuously marked as performance and what can be seen as performance though it may be “unmarked” as such (c.f. Phelan).

A tendency toward inclusivity can be observed in the most recent discussions on performative pedagogy to emerge from performance scholarship. John Warren argues for three performative modes in his vision of a performative pedagogy (“Body” 258-59; “Promise” 2-4). First, a performative mode of analysis allows for teachers and students alike to consider how their lives are constructed via ongoing, embodied, performative practices. Second, a performative mode of engagement uses classroom methods that privilege and engage the socio-historically contingent bodies of participants in the classroom. Finally, a performative mode of critique enlists the teacher’s body and “performativity as a way of speaking” in responding to student work (“Promise” 3). Warren’s vision, then, exposes pedagogy to the wide spectrum of concerns considered in many performance classrooms.
My vision of critical performative pedagogy is one that privileges the body, mind, and spirit of educational bodies. My vision includes teaching politics and giving students the tools necessary to see what forms those politics [take]. My vision also makes space for them to see the political in every pedagogical situation, regardless of whether that teacher foregrounds it. My vision calls for a balance between democratic collaborative pedagogy and teacherly authority, allowing every educational subject to carry expertise in different areas bred through experience while not denying the teacher’s necessary role as the guardian. My vision of critical performative pedagogy values the transformative, the critical, the reflexive, the bodily, and the belief that with possibility there is hope for all students. ("Promise" 7)

Warren no doubt offers an idealistic vision, one that necessarily calls for editing and re-writing the curriculum, specificity to discrete classroom contexts, and prudent restraints by teachers. Regardless of its hopefulness, the above conception of performative pedagogy illustrates an important tie to the Performance Studies discipline. It is a pedagogy that has been defined expansively rather than narrowly. In discussing the concept within performance discourse, scholars have opened performative pedagogy to the broad, inclusive umbrella that appears in discussions of performativity, performance theory, and performance practice.

In her definitional essay, “Teaching Is Performance:Reconceptualizing a Problematic Metaphor,” Pineau draws connections between performance and pedagogy in the areas of instructional narrative, teacher metaphors, kinesthetic learning, and critical pedagogy, but in no way does she limit the usefulness of performative pedagogy to these areas. Pineau’s central argument—that earlier conceptions of performance in pedagogy have separated performance method from performance theory—relies on the presupposition that inclusivity enables scholars, instructors, and students. The promise of opening the borders of any definition rests in the potential for interdisciplinary exchange, where significant ideas from one discipline might initiate new understandings of phenomena contextualized in another
discipline. Pineau concludes that the blending of performance with pedagogy opens the education field to the insights of the performance discipline: “[T]he inclusionary impulse in performance studies allows us to ask in what ways educational phenomena open themselves up to performance-centered research. How might the disciplinary knowledge of performance studies enrich pedagogical uses of performance as both metaphor and methodology?” (“Teaching” 9).

Pineau further illustrates the inclusiveness of performative pedagogy by turning to Dwight Conquergood’s four-pronged definition of performance research. Though he refers to the particular context of performance ethnography, Conquergood introduces the concepts of poetics, play, process, and power as significant to any performance project. Poetics references the “fabricated, invented, imagined, constructed nature of human realities” (“Poetics” 83). Conquergood thus connects the identities of cultures and individuals to fiction. Play suggests that “improvisation, innovation, experimentation, frame, reflection, agitation, irony, parody, jest, clowning, and carnival” regularly operate within cultures. Conquergood notes, “As soon as a world has been made, lines drawn, categories defined, hierarchies erected, then the trickster, the archetypal performer, moves in to breach norms, violate taboos, turn everything upside down” (“Poetics” 83). Process acknowledges that culture cannot be contained in “static structures and stable systems with variables that can be measured, manipulated, and managed.” Instead, “culture is transacted through performance. Culture becomes an active verb, not a noun” (“Poetics” 83). Finally, power refers to the “site of struggle where competing interests intersect, and different viewpoints and voices get articulated.” Power calls attention to the “politics, history, ideology, domination, resistance,
appropriation, struggle, conflict, accommodation, subversion, and contestation” that pervade cultural activity (“Poetics” 84).

When Pineau locates these four concepts in performative pedagogy through narratives of her graduate students’ experiences, she further acknowledges the benefit of the “inclusionary impulse in performance studies.” The notion of educational poetics undermines the traditional Truth model of pedagogy, which asserts that education is enmeshed in the business of asserting and pursuing truths. Performative pedagogy adopts a poetics that “privileges the creative and constructed dimensions of pedagogical practice.” Pineau explains that performance enables pedagogy to resist the “linear accumulation of isolated, discipline-specific competencies” in favor of a joint, processual construction of student/teacher narratives that critically consider, then re-consider various points of view (“Teaching” 10).

Applied to the classroom, performative play disrupts traditional pedagogical practices by privileging “experimentation, innovation, critique, and subversion” (Pineau, “Teaching” 15). Play references the embodied, participatory dimension of performance and allows participants to explore possibilities without the ramifications of everyday life. Pineau connects play to performative pedagogy in two ways. First, because play occurs within its own space, specifically constructed for experimentation and possibilities, it becomes a practical means of approaching “dangerous” topics: “Issues of racism, sexism, and homophobia can be explored more candidly within the relative safety of the performance frame than is usually possible outside of the classroom” (“Teaching” 15). Second, when viewed from a theoretical position, play allows for a critique of traditional educational codes. Conquergood asserts that the trickster’s use of play encourages self-critique and calls
attention to the “vulnerability of our institutions,” activities that might initiate transformation (“Poetics” 83). Play might then be used to deconstruct the structures of power within educational culture or to explore the efficacy of a trickster-performer to initiate change within educational practices.

A performative pedagogy further recognizes the processual tendency within the classroom. As process, pedagogy unfolds, mutates, and responds. As product, pedagogy asserts a single vision of what constitutes productivity. Conquergood relies on action metaphors to characterize his notion of process in performance: “energies, flux, flow, chorus, ensembles, voices, polyphony and cacophony” (“Poetics” 83). Process introduces contingency to the classroom. Teachers instruct, research, manage, discuss, negotiate, listen, encourage, and as process-centered agents, they might enact all these simultaneously. Viewed as pedagogical method, performance process acknowledges that there is much to be learned in the act of doing. The construction of the product becomes as important as its result. Pineau suggests the notion of process be used to rethink the “interdependent, instructional roles” adopted by teachers and to encourage performance-centered techniques for the classroom (“Teaching” 18).

Issues of power and authority form the basis for connecting performance to critical pedagogy. Both performance and education scholars have forged interests in the critique and transformation of social institutions, and both frequently target power as the entry site for their critiques. Peter McLaren’s call to recognize the politics inscribed on the bodies of teachers and students, and his recognition of schooling as ideological ritual performance further solidify the link between critical pedagogy and performance (“Liminal;” School). Pineau clearly illustrates the locus of power in performative pedagogy in both classroom
practice and pedagogical theory. Using performance studies classrooms as prime examples, Pineau points to frequent discussions of race, class, gender, and sexuality, the dialogic engagement of “multiple . . . modes of experience,” collaborations between teachers and students during performance workshops, and a natural “blurring [of] the arbitrary boundaries between social and educational contexts” (“Teaching” 21). Theoretically, Pineau encourages critique of the corporeal inscriptions of power that teachers and students carry with them into the classroom: “What roles and rules are prescribed for participants at varying levels of the organizational structure? . . . . What performative conventions reinscribe differences in power, despite our attempts to create a democratic and emancipatory classroom environment?” (“Teaching” 21).

Like the constructs of performance and performativity, discussions of performance and pedagogy are not confined to a single academic unit, nor are they limited to cross-disciplinary discussions between education and performance scholars. Varied applications of performance to pedagogical theory and practice emerge from varied disciplines. Performance and critical education scholars have used the label “performative pedagogy” to reference their juxtaposition of performance theory or method with pedagogy. But neither have defined nor operationalized performative pedagogy along similar lines. Performance scholars stipulate that performative pedagogy is a critical pedagogy (Pineau “Performance;” Warren “Promise”). Some education scholars have been satisfied to advocate performance as a metaphor for instruction and instructional training or as a tool for classroom exercises (Dawe; Hardy; Lessinger; Rives; Rocklin). As Strine, Long, and HopKins assert, performance is an essentially contested concept, a notion the authors transfer from W.B. Gallie’s assessment of art and democracy. Performance scholars “recognize and expect
disagreement not only about the qualities that make a performance ‘good’ or ‘bad’ in certain contexts, but also about what activities and behaviors appropriately constitute performance and not something else” (183). Similarly, performative pedagogy takes on attributes of the essentially contested concept, in large part because disagreement always already exists concerning what constitutes performance and how it is to be used. Fusion of performance and pedagogy thus varies. With numerous operational and theoretical definitions of performance in use by scholars across several disciplines, the resulting mixtures of performance and pedagogy serve a wide range of purposes, not all of which agree in principle or practice. In fact, as I argue in the next section, not all applications of either performance theory or performance method to pedagogical contexts constitute meaningful illustrations of performative pedagogy.

To illuminate further the inherent disagreement that emerges when performance is applied to pedagogy, I point to differences located within recent definitions of performative pedagogy and descriptions of performance in the classroom. Warren’s principal motivation in reviewing recent discussions of performance in pedagogy is to privilege the body as a political site of education. His conception of performative pedagogy creates a classroom in which “the body serves not only as a performing ideologically-saturated cultural being, but also as an enfleshed being situated in education—as a body that is capable of learning viscerally” (“Body” 258). Thus, Warren presents a “both/and” pedagogy that encourages performatively constituted theories of education while also embracing the “power of enfleshment” that occurs in classroom performance practices (“Body” 264). A critical performative pedagogy adopts performance as an analytical tool, but counters that analysis
by engaging students in embodied performances of their own. In this sense, performative pedagogy becomes a means of critique and of knowing.

Contrast Warren’s critical vision with the emotional celebration of performance located in Leon Lessinger’s editorial introduction to a special issue of Contemporary Education twenty years earlier. Lessinger boldly asserts, “Teaching is an act of performance; in order to be a better teacher, one must first become a better performer” (5). Yet, Lessinger’s focus in describing how performance is used in the “Teaching as a Performing Art” teacher training program lies in the affective appeal of performance. In this pedagogy, teachers are successful because they use performance to generate an emotional environment in which students acquire knowledge via the “expression of feelings” rather than “cognitive assimilation” (5). Ironically, Lessinger offers a performing arts pedagogy that eliminates the students’ freedom of emotion by instilling a classical “master-pupil” classroom situation.

The heart of the pedagogy of the arts is one-on-one, the master and the acolyte, the mentor and the apprentice, the maestro and the ensemble. Always the goal in the pedagogy of the arts is the ideal, the perfect product, the error-free process, the beautiful performance. Always the mission is growth, health, nurture, and commitment. (5)

Any emotion generated through a performing teacher’s classroom artistry is intended to reify the knowledge diligently passed down from master to pupil. In this sense, performance becomes an instrument of hegemony that approximates Boal’s critique of Aristotelian theatre. Arguing that traditional theatre produces a psychological catharsis in audiences that casts them as passive recipients of the drama’s message, Boal calls for a theatre that activates the spectators (Theatre). When viewed as a “performing art,” pedagogy serves a cathartic function that inhibits true democratic participation in the classroom, but encourages a passive
following of the master teacher. As Lessinger adds, “In each case the ‘teacher’ is one who, knowing, shows the way in performance” (5).

A third consideration of performance within pedagogy pushes for the injection of performance methods into classroom exercises. Edward Rocklin clearly articulates performance as a methodological decision.

The crucial decision for every teacher, then, is not whether to think of teaching as a type of performance nor whether to use a performance model, since even the classic straight lecture is a performance (it is, of course, a dramatic monologue), but rather to decide (or consciously fail to decide) which type of performance to choose. (153)

Rocklin calls for teachers to opt for performance as a teaching methodology because it pushes students to participate in a dramatic experience that might “reactivate that natural curiosity, energy, and hunger for mastery in action that the school system has so effectively taught them to suppress” (153). Other scholars in varied disciplines illustrate how performance might be specifically chosen for the classroom. A literature course is transformed into a play-writing workshop in which groups of students adapt and then perform passages from Charles Dickens’ Great Expectations (Kraemer 174). A sociology of education course, required for education majors, includes a “drama project,” in which students construct a performance piece that addresses fundamental questions regarding the sociology of education (What is a school? What is a curriculum? What is teaching?) (Hardy). An interdisciplinary course in social movements relies on performance as its mode of inquiry while also positioning social movement performances as its object of inquiry. Students engage in role-playing, improvisation, enactment, and production and performance of their own texts (Fuoss and Hill).
As a contested concept, performance is malleable. That is, performative pedagogy can be applied with a wide range of motivations and to an even wider range of disciplines. Though not all uses of performance in pedagogy are critical, democratizing, or even representative of the term “performative pedagogy,” the ubiquity of performance definitions, coupled with an equal abundance of pedagogical standards, allows for frequent definitions, methods, and adaptations of both performance and pedagogy. As previously noted, performance can be viewed as the strict enactment of theatrical behaviors and, therefore, can be applied to a pedagogy that presupposes that an educator’s success is based on the careful adaptation of a performing arts metaphor to the classroom (Rives). This view, however, should not be construed as performative pedagogy. Performance has also been viewed as enmeshed in politics, cultural struggle, and power. Such a position does lead to a critical performative pedagogy, one that calls for analysis of the body politic—“the politics smeared upon and read from bodies in the cultural and institutional space of the classroom” (Warren, “Body” 258). Performance can further be defined as a method committed to engagement and knowing through doing. Educational practices that create experiential encounters that involve students in learning through performing reflect another trait crucial to performative pedagogy: its inherent corporeal participation (Fuoss and Hill; Harrison-Pepper).

A healthy struggle for identity thus emerges from these varied, and sometimes competing, applications of performance to pedagogical theory and practice. I view this struggle as productive. Though performance can, at times, become “all things to all people,” scholars who analyze or co-opt performance never escape the responsibility of justification. As contested concepts, performance and, by relation, performative pedagogy simultaneously resist and require definition. By defining and defending their use of performance in
pedagogy, scholars reveal their motivations and ideologies. Further, by announcing their intentions, scholars expose their versions of performance-inspired pedagogy to critique. In this sense, subsequent definitions of performative pedagogy resist the danger of relativism, where performance always enhances the classroom and enables student learning. Through a careful articulation of what constitutes performance and how it shapes pedagogy, scholars provide the criteria by which their pedagogies are to be judged. In the following sections, I compare two fusions of performance and pedagogy, one that reduces the potential of performance in the classroom, and another that I label “critical performative pedagogy” given its simultaneous commitment to performance methods, capacity for critique, and desire for embodied, contingent dialogue.

Reductive Views of Performance and Pedagogy

I measure the efficacy of any application of performance pedagogy against standards present within the Performance Studies discipline. Namely, I am concerned with the ways in which any definition of performative pedagogy reflects the fullest potential for cultural efficacy: embodiment, critique, and transformation. In this section, I criticize pedagogies that reduce the potential of performance to achieve these aims. Pineau explains the difficult terrain that scholars already face in addressing performance as an educational metaphor. Performance can be viewed as “highly problematic,” notes Pineau, “if not overtly polemical to institutionalized assumptions about the purpose of education and one’s function as an educator” (“Teaching” 4). In a cultural milieu that still associates performance with “pretense, artifice, deception, affectation, and entertainment,” technological and industrial metaphors are an easier fit for education (Pineau, “Teaching” 4). So when performance is co-opted loosely into education—when theatre, for example, is quickly equated with a
classroom lecture—performance, in general, may be further demonized. I critique two such cases of performance and pedagogy in this section. The first case is the most frequent misuse of performance in an educational context and occurs when performance is narrowly constructed from an actor-centered perspective. The second case, though less disruptive, involves the isolated promotion of performance theory or performance praxis without recognizing the need to include both in a performative pedagogy.

A frequently occurring view of performance in pedagogy holds the educational experience as a theatrical event, privileging the role of the teacher as an actor or performing artist. As Pineau indicates, scholars who promote this perspective wholly commit to performance, and yet ultimately construct “the weakest cases” (“Teaching” 6). The primary focus of studies that re-vision educational phenomena in performative, and more specifically, theatrical terms lies with the teacher-as-actor or teacher-as-performing artist metaphor. Typically emerging from education research, these studies turn to performance metaphors in order to identify the most productive methods of instruction or instructional training. As brief exemplars, articles by Charles Rives and Harry Dawe demonstrate the basic functions of the teacher-as-performing artist metaphor. Rives argues for a pedagogy of the arts, and specifically, a pedagogy of the performing arts, to enhance teachers’ classroom instruction techniques. Dawe asserts teaching as a performing art and then calls for a bold re-working of teacher training to resemble the artist studios that fine arts students encounter. Both these articles take up the question of teaching practice; both locate their chief concerns in a methodology that demonstrates dramatic performance by a teacher. Yet Pineau identifies a significant limitation in adopting this approach: “Performance is reduced to style, and further, to a particular style of enthusiastic theatricality employed to energize one’s communicative
behaviors” (“Teaching” 6). To this critique, I add four additional concerns. First, a teacher-as-performing artist pedagogy reduces the potential for the student-audience to act, relegating students to a passive “audience” position. Furthermore, the balance of power remains significantly in favor of the teacher-artist. Third, the move to equate theatre and education results in a careless division of the classroom context into a series of performance tools to be wielded at the discretion of the teacher-artist. Finally, the teacher-as-performing artist perspective ignores performance process in favor of performance product.

During the 1970s, the College of Education at the University of South Carolina developed the “Teaching as a Performing Art” teacher education program. The program epitomizes the reductive, artist-centered model of performance by focusing solely on the teacher to the exclusion of the students. Leon Lessinger, the dean of South Carolina’s College of Education during the inception of the program, explains its underlying assumptions:

We accept the similarities that exist between teachers and performing artists. Both have a place to perform; both have a variety of performance styles and modes; both have an audience, a body of literature, and an instrument for use in performance. That the “instrument” is self-plus-performance skills in all the performing arts makes acting’s comparison to the art of teaching even more meaningful. (emphasis in original, 6)

While Lessinger’s transposition of teaching onto performing accurately identifies key similarities between the two, it also functions to close off the potential for authentic dialogue in the classroom. Certainly a pedagogy of the arts does not intend to eliminate the role of the student. In fact, a teacher-as-performing artist in this pedagogy is specifically charged to “motivate” or “cause” performance in students: “If he fails to cause performance in the others, he fails to teach” (Rives 8). Moreover, teachers are charged to adapt their instructional materials to function as a dramatic performance that will move “the audience
from passive receivers of knowledge into active participants in learning” (Rives 8). The problem with the above conception of audience activation is that it envisions students as comprising a theatrical audience, a problematic connection that ignores genuine student agency.

Rives acknowledges that student audiences are frequently captive rather than voluntary, particularly if a course is required for a student’s curriculum track. Still, he locates no problem with extending the theatrical audience metaphor, noting that “the difference is not considered to be significant because a captive audience still validates the teacher’s role enactment and provides cues for guiding his performance” (8). Rives fails to acknowledge the possibility that students will not validate their teacher’s dramatic performances. If viewed as theatrical spectators, students become susceptible to the Aristotelian catharsis that Boal warns against. Within a traditional theatre, spectators empathize with characters (in the case of performing teachers, with the instructional roles they witness): “the spectator assumes a passive attitude and delegates the power of action to the character. Since the character resembles us . . ., we live vicariously all his stage experiences. Without acting, we feel that we are acting” (emphasis in original, Theatre 34). Once spectators empathize with characters, the next logical progression becomes catharsis, where spectators purge themselves of “antisocial elements”; having experienced the life of the character onstage, spectators no longer need to experience the same event for themselves (Boal, Theatre 46). In a performing arts pedagogy, student audiences are placed in the position of being entertained by a performance that contains the essential knowledge they are to acquire and accept. In this sense, the teacher-as-performing artist works to create cohesion with or empathy in an audience for the purpose of reducing that audience’s resistance to
academic content. And, as McLaren notes, “students will often uncritically accept theatrical antics from teachers as a surrogate for true instructional liminality,” a move that leaves students in a position of pure spectatorship. This passive position promotes the acquisition of “knowledge about things rather than of things in relation to other things (knowledge as lived experience)” (emphasis in original, “Liminal” 166).

Still, the performing arts model presented in the South Carolina teacher education program provides for direct participation by students. As Rives explains, the performing arts pedagogy uses an ensemble performance, which he defines as “a group-teaching practice in which the entire body of students is involved in preparation for group performance. All members of the teaching-learning group are involved so that the performance can take place” (7-8). The ensemble performance introduces the possibility that students take responsibility and exercise genuine agency. Student learning is wrapped up in student performing, a fundamental practice in performance studies classrooms. Problematically, Rives’ engaged performance activities do not preclude an instructor from effectively shutting down student agency. As evidence, Rives’ teacher-as-performing artist metaphor calls for group performance by teacher and students, but simultaneously limits, directs, and authorizes the emergent performances. Rives’ description of ensemble performance in action illustrates a reduced role for student spectator-performers.

The role of the teacher in relation to the audience in ensemble is to provide structured material, develop the individuals’ skills for performance, and lead the group so members learn to work together. . . . The teacher utilizes the student’s drive to be active, to explore, and to experiment when providing opportunities for each student to contribute successfully to the ensemble effort. The teacher performs both for and with the audience as he guides the learning towards the development of desirable understandings, attitudes, and skills. (8).
At the same time that students perform, they are “structured,” “developed,” and “utilized.” Finally, performance becomes a means to a pre-established outcome: the acquisition of “desirable understandings, attitudes, and skills.” Although well intentioned, the performing arts pedagogy presented here ultimately removes true agency from the student. Any move to re-locate students within positions of action through performance serves already institutionalized outcomes. In this sense, performance reinscribes the educational norms that privilege the teacher as the key holder of knowledge and power.

Recognizing that an important difference between theatre and education lies in the role of the respective audiences, Louis Rubin asserts that the “student is a coperformer rather than a vicarious onlooker.” Still, this only leads him to call for teacher training in “interactive improvisation” so that teachers can more effectively function as playwrights in creating lessons, directors in guiding the various elements of the lesson, and actors in delivering the lecture (115-16). Though Rubin makes both interesting and accurate connections between pedagogical and theatrical experiences, his suggestions ultimately strengthen the position of the teacher as a solitary performing artist who only needs to recognize and react to the student audience.

The strength of the teacher-as-performing artist’s agency is further witnessed in the call for celebrative experiences. In their description of actions taken by “good teachers,” John Van Hoose and Richard Hult include the celebrative along with training and educative experiences as essential teaching objectives. While the training and educative experiences focus on practical life skills and critical thinking skills, respectively, the celebrative experience is best accomplished through a teacher functioning as performing artist. Celebrative experiences mark the “accomplishment of a challenging task or the acquisition of
a set of insights providing gratitude and joy. . . . It is a potent, memorable experience with lasting impact” (37). To provide such celebrative experiences, Van Hoose and Hult argue for performing art pedagogy. By mimicking the performing artist, teachers “work magic” in enlivening their academic content and heightening “a student’s sensibilities to the excitement of learning and discovery” (38). Thus teachers become responsible for the action of students. For a student to become activated in the classroom context, a performing teacher must first perform, thus stimulating the student to action.

Inherent in many definitions of teaching is the notion that students receive information from an instructor, but also learn to teach themselves in future situations. Definitions of teaching as a performing art often dramatically miss the point that teaching—and the educational enterprise in general—rests on the agency of students, both in the present tense of learning and in their future endeavors. Robert Travers adopts a performing arts definition for teaching, though he rejects any connection to specific arts such as acting, dancing, or oratory: “The thought that teaching is acting is, of course, nonsense” (14). His key connection between teaching and performing arts lies in the crucial relationship between a performer and audience, and he argues for a whole-hearted actor-training program based on the work of Constantin Stanislavski that develops a particular personality within teachers. The ideal performing artist personality, or performance role, is to be constructed through a sequence that includes character analysis, self-exploration, live rehearsal, and sustained practice (17-8). Travers’ connection to actor training is innovative enough—particularly his use of Stanislavkski in authenticating the teacher-as-performing artist role—but he never addresses the crucial issue of how such a role should engage students. What does the
performing artist metaphor enable the students to do? How does the role recognize students’ potential for agency?

Other definitions offer more specificity regarding how students are to be regarded, but they also fail to generate student agency, and at times, reject outright the notion that students have the desire to act. In a conference address to English educators, Oscar Haugh reminds us that students are our customers, and naturally, “we better know something about the people we are teaching” (250). In response to a student population with increased reading and writing deficiencies, Haugh calls on the teacher artist to masterfully organize and present academic content so that “learning can be maximized.” Above all, Haugh urges the English instructor to stand up to “that most demanding challenge: if the student hasn’t learned, then I haven’t taught” (251). Here, the teacher—in a revamped role of performing artist—holds the power to generate learning. Students become entirely dependent on their teachers.

Dawe argues that teaching is, in fact, a performing art and “that the selection, training, career guidance, working conditions, and mode of compensating practitioners should be patterned on the practices that characterize other performing arts” (549). His operational definition of the performing artist, however, elevates the artist well above any audience, including students, whom he views as “apathetic.” Dawe explains, “My view is based on the axiom that the person of the teacher is the essential ingredient in that mysterious interaction called teaching” (emphasis in original, 549). He characterizes teaching as a manipulation of an artistic medium, with students operating as the pliable material waiting to be molded by instructors. Even Dawe’s justification of his problematic term, “manipulate,” betrays his view of students as already determined, already fixed: “Manipulation may seem a
cynical term, but today’s students are, above all, apathetic. Their apathy reflects larger and largely intractable forces in the culture” (550).

Teacher training, particularly when culminating in a student teaching assignment, can reinforce the individualistic authority that prioritizes the performance of teachers to those of their students. Deborah Britzman argues that the student teaching model solidifies the notion that individual effort alone—or in Dawe’s view, a skilled performance—will insure teaching success, virtually ignoring the influence of the historicized contexts in which the teacher was schooled, the students live, and the school operates. She explains, “the university provides the theories, methods, and skills; schools provide the classroom, curriculum, and students; and the student teacher provides the individual effort; all of which combine to produce the finished product of professional teacher” (442). Further, the student teaching experience—a sort of final dress rehearsal prior to entering the classroom alone—can reinforce the notion that teachers singularly possess educational power.

During ethnographic research, Britzman discovered that student teachers relied on three cultural myths while negotiating the “overwhelming burden of responsibility as well as the promise of individual power” within the classroom (447). First, “everything depends on the teacher.” This myth references the necessity for control within the classroom and betrays “the institutional expectation that teachers individually control their classes” (448). In this view, teaching equals control. Second, “the teacher is the expert.” Teachers are seen as autonomous individuals who have compiled, gathered, and collected knowledge. This myth betrays a larger societal expectation: “teachers must be certain in their knowledge” (450). Third, “teachers are self-made.” As constructions of personal achievement, teachers appear as “completed products.” Thus, there is no need for educational theory. “[P]edagogy
becomes a product of one’s personality. As such, pedagogy is replaced by teaching style” (451). Again, the singular focus is on the teacher. Missing is any discussion of that teacher’s own ideological influences, both as a student and as a teacher in training. The student as a partner in dialogue, of course, is absent altogether.

A third problem resulting from the imposition of theatre onto pedagogy involves the mass appropriation and reorganization of the entire educational context as a series of performance tools to be used at the discretion of the teacher-as-performing artist. In a performing arts pedagogy, the delivery of the teaching performance is crucial. Under this paradigm, students learn best when they witness a masterful performance. To this end, proponents of the teacher-as-performing artist metaphor implore instructors to incorporate any theatrical tactic in their mission to enliven their lessons and maintain their audience’s interest. The classroom itself becomes a stage; master teachers are advised to construct the classroom space in a way that better serves the teaching performance. The classroom, of course, contains props (also known as audio-visual aids) which “bring the stage alive for a performance.” These are used to “provide the novelty needed to hold the student’s attention (Rives 8-9).” The academic content may even be adjusted to better reflect the performer’s desired performance mode. Most frequent, claims Rives, are first-person dramatizations, adaptation of parables, and analogies. Other dramatic tools include costumes, sets, props, and make-up (Rives 8-9). The most significant problem in this theatrical approach to the classroom has already been stated: the performance of the instructor is placed above the emergent performance of the students.

To this, Ralph Smith adds that the performing artist metaphor tends to detract from matters of academic substance. “If the acting analogy were carried to its logical extreme, a
teacher who took it seriously would never have to understand anything. Only lines would have to be memorized” (emphasis in original, 33). Further, the theatrical model on which the performing arts pedagogy relies requires that actors’ performances serve a larger, dramatic whole: the script. Smith argues that actor-centered models of teaching promote a unified, holistic view of education, when the act of teaching actually “proceeds piecemeal with numerous interruptions, back-tracking, repetition, drill, etc., all of which exhibits a pattern of relations that is something less than a dramatic whole” (34). Even the analogy of teacher as performer breaks down in Smith’s critique, as the teacher instead becomes a “director of the learner’s educational experience.” The director analogy is more plausible than an actor-centered conception, inasmuch as students are featured as the most important performers. Beyond that contribution, however, the analogy also buckles; teachers are no more directors than they are actors, argues Smith. Teachers have very different goals and functions than do theatrical directors, and students’ educational lives rarely approximate the carefully constructed plots of drama (34).

The primary interest of a teacher-as-performing artist pedagogy lies with the final classroom product: the delivery of a lecture performance that offers students “not only substantive material, but also appreciation, awareness, and insights” (Rives 9). When viewed as a product, pedagogical performance aims to stimulate an academic performance by students that is recognized in the demonstration of outcomes already determined by the teacher-artist. In pursuit of this objective, Lessinger, Rives, and other education scholars fascinated by performance terminology describe the performance of pedagogy in skeletal fashion. Rives explains,

Like performing artists, teachers have:
1. An audience to engage
2. A stage or place to perform
3. A literature to communicate
4. Modes and styles of performance to use
5. An instrument to “play” (7)

Rives makes no mention of the process that performers necessarily engage en route to producing their craft, nor does he acknowledge the value of that process as a separate educational experience.

Richard Schechner and Willa Appel observe that many Western performance scholars commit the same oversight, emphasizing the “show” over the process that precedes, engenders, and follows the show (4-5). Schechner and Appel describe the performance process as a “systematic sequence of occurrences” that include: “training, rehearsal (and/or workshop), warm-up, the performance, cool-down, and aftermath” (5). The performance product occupies only a single moment in the process, and yet it is frequently the most heralded moment because it typically involves an external audience who witnesses and reacts to the performance activity. The training, wherein the performer enters as a “‘finished’ or ‘already made’ being” and exits as “psychophysically malleable,” constitutes the crucial remaking of a fixed human being into a performer capable of consciously reassembling various minute “strips of action” into recognizable new actions (Schechner, “Magnitudes” 41). The aftermath can produce reflexive consideration of the corporeal knowledge created during the act of performance as well as an examination of how a performance registered with a particular audience. In short, a focus on process recognizes the “emergent, temporal, contingent, provisional, indeterminate, dynamic, destabilizing” qualities of performance (Conquergood, “Poetics” 83).

However evocative theatrical terminology might be in describing pedagogy, the blind transfer of the “performance” label onto the classroom obscures the insights provided by
examining the process that envelops the classroom. Teaching emerges from a particularized training, and as I have already argued, that teacher training answers to ideological motives. Moreover, if teaching is to be read as a performance, it cannot be read as a performance that operates from a fixed script. If teaching is a performance whose aim is to activate its student audience to engage a specified topic, then the performed lecture cannot be already assumed to progress in a given fashion that anticipates students will respond in a given manner. Viewed as process, pedagogical performance operates from a position of contingency, answering the unpredictable responses of students in a way that calls into question their identity as passive, receptive audiences. In fact, the teacher-as-performing artist’s instructional methods might also enter into considerations of what constitutes meaningful content for a particular performance. Performance process foregrounds the ideological bodies that teachers occupy and the ideological bodies that teachers encounter within the classroom. Performance process calls attention to the conversations that erupt during the construction of, the delivery of, and the aftermath of the pedagogical performance. Pedagogy as a performed art shifts to the present tense and gets renamed pedagogy as processual performance.

Another case of pedagogy that ultimately limits the potential of performance can be seen in the work of scholars who invoke the label “performative pedagogy” to describe educational practices that feature performance theory or performance method. Rarely, however, have theory and method been fused into a single practice that rewrites pedagogy in the name of performative critique, engagement, and analysis, while addressing issues of power, dialogue, and vulnerability at the levels of course design and practice. Granted, the performative pedagogy described here is an expansive one, but its significant contribution to
educational contexts occurs through its dual approach: pedagogy is theorized and practiced performatively. Pineau points to useful contributions from performance scholars such as Fuoss, Hill, and Harrison-Pepper who have documented their performance praxis in the classroom, and education theorists such as McLaren who leans on performance theory to critique classroom practice. In this section, I examine the limitations of relying solely on performance method or performance theory.

Pineau traces her efforts to join performance and pedagogy to early faculty development workshops that she labeled, “teaching as performance.” From that limited conception of the teacher-as-actor, she progressed to a perspective that included the performative dimensions of the collaborative teaching-learning process. Still, Pineau asserts the need for “more than a common language or a set of generative metaphors” in the meeting of performance and education. She calls for a “shift from performance as instructional metaphor to performance as critical methodology for investigating and engaging in the work of teaching and learning” (“Performance” 129-30). Such a shift exposes the limitations of singularly promoting performance theory or method in pedagogy. Though the benefits of experiential learning—learning that occurs as a result of embodied, direct engagement with course content—through performance have been documented, performance scholars have not frequently addressed how that learning is situated into a larger performative, pedagogical frame. How does performance also influence the course design? How can performance benefit mundane educational practices: teacher-student interactions, syllabus design, evaluation, lectures?

Any number of scholars who bring performance assignments to the classroom might serve to illustrate both the benefits and the limits of a performance praxis-driven pedagogy
Fuoss and Hill offer one of the strongest defenses for including performance assignments within any academic course. They ground their performance-centered approach to teaching social movements on the following pedagogical assumptions: education should function to empower students; empowerment occurs when students acquire knowledge; knowledge consists of two types—“knowledge of pre-existing ideas and knowledge of how to produce ideas” (79). Then, Fuoss and Hill argue that by including performance assignments and by studying performance within academic subject matter such as social movements, students obtain both types of knowledge; students consider existing texts and then produce their own through performance. Missing, however, is a discussion of how the entire experience of studying performance as an object of inquiry and then engaging performance as a method of inquiry might be framed as a politicized act of performance itself. By turning to a reflexive, performance theory-based critique of the educational practices already at work within the classroom, instructors and students come to know and critique via performance.

Performance theory allows instructors to address issues of empowerment directly. Performance scholarship has frequently been concerned with bodily inscriptions of power: Whose performances bear the marks of authority? Whose performances are void of authority? It’s not clear whether Fuoss, Hill, and other scholars who implement performance praxis already construct their curriculum, lectures, and, indeed, their entire classroom contexts, in light of performance theory that recognizes the ideological inscriptions on the body. Pineau suggests that performative pedagogy address the body in three interrelated ways. The first, the performing body, is easily demonstrated through the performance projects that scholars such as Fuoss and Hill include in their syllabi. The next two, however,
inject theory into performance method. The ideological body focuses attention “on what a 
body does in the classroom and what meanings we might ascribe to those actions.” If 
pedagogy is re-thought as a process of schooling the body, then certainly issues of ideology 
will enter instructors’ curricula (Pineau, “Performance” 131). The ethnographic body, claims 
Pineau, privileges the acute observations necessary for collaborative learning to take place. 
If students and teachers are always already inscribed with ideology, careful observation of 
those bodies in action can yield powerful insight into how to negotiate and/or empower 
participants (“Performance” 132).

A related limitation of an over-dependence on performance method within the 
classroom occurs when instructors confine performance to the genre of drama. Clar Doyle’s 
version of critical pedagogy incorporates published plays across the curriculum in an effort to 
raise the critical-consciousness of students. Don Kraemer’s “performance pedagogy” occurs 
within literature classrooms where the instructor plays the role of “Director/Facilitator, 
suggesting what students might do with a text, asking them to rehearse a sequence of roles: 
among them playwright, director, actor, spectator, and literary critic” (emphasis in original, 
174). Both these applications of drama in pedagogy serve the mission of a liberated, critical 
pedagogy. Doyle’s primary concern is to demonstrate how drama can be used “to examine 
the imposed assumptions behind [students’] aesthetic and social worlds” (65). Kraemer 
rejects the instructional role of the “Magisterial Lecturer,” who tells students “what to learn 
or providing what they need to know” (174).

Yet when instructors equate the production of theatre within a classroom to 
performative pedagogy, they neglect much of the contingency championed by performance 
scholars. Drama can easily function to close down an audience’s range of interpretation,
though it does not have to (Boal Theatre). And while performance certainly occurs within
the realm of theatre, it is not confined to that sphere. As Pelias and VanOosting point out,
performance can be viewed as aesthetic communication, which invokes a series of “open-
ended conditions:” “the singular perspective of a performer, a text, or an audience, or from
the interaction among all three within a given context” (221). Performative pedagogy cannot
easily be confined to the live production of drama within the classroom, particularly when a
more inclusive view of performance invites examination of cultural and social practices as
they emerge within students’ and instructors’ own, contingent lives (Fine and Speer 381).
Though dramatic scripts are rich with historical, cultural, and social values, as noted by
Doyle, when used in a critical pedagogy, they can generate a historical, cultural, and social
value system for students. Doyle’s admirable objective—to search for “emancipatory
openings and not the reinforcement of great literature”—would be better served by
expanding her conception of performance. Rather than only having students resonate with
the social issues that they locate in drama, Doyle might also ask students to infuse the scripts
with their own, value- and culture-loaded performance behaviors from everyday life. In this
manner, students might rehearse possibilities for transforming constraints in their own lives,
while examining the constraints experienced by the characters in a play.

Lastly, performative pedagogy has been constituted along theoretical lines alone. As
Warren observes, theory-heavy infusions of performance into pedagogy “spend considerable
time descriptively accounting for performance as a metaphor for educational practice, yet fail
to discuss performance as method.” Warren’s call for theories of performance to be matched
with constructions of performance methods envisions “critical engagement, where the
students’ and teachers’ bodies enter the classroom as powerful sites for learning” (“Body”
Though theoretical extensions of performance into pedagogy have not openly denied the importance of the body, they have not frequently argued the necessity for enfleshed engagement either. Sherry Shapiro documents a call within critical pedagogy to reclaim the body as a politicized site of knowledge, but indicates a general absence of specific examples of the liberated body at work within the classroom: “Indeed, some of what has been written is at such a high level of abstraction that it provides a language far removed from the purported concreteness of embodied lives” (80-81).

Hilary Davis reviews feminist educational theory that critiques two significant risks of the traditional Cartesian mind/body split in pedagogy: the manufacturing of “docile bodies” and “disembodied minds” which betrays an androcentric bias. Ultimately, Davis concludes that the mind/body split cannot be avoided within Western educational practices and that “efforts to transcend it may prove counter-productive, inevitably producing only new forms of discipline and self-regulation” (542). The need for a performative pedagogy that recognizes the import of the body while also activating the body can be seen in Davis’ frustration with “the lack of guaranteed pedagogical strategies” that might instigate transformation. Philip Corrigan narrates his formal English schooling as a construction of the elite, masculine body: “All I am trying to say is that bodies matter schooling. They/we are the subjects who are taught, disciplined, measured, evaluated, examined, passed (or not), assessed, graded, hurt, harmed, twisted, re-worked, applauded, praised, encouraged, enforced, coerced, consensed” (210). While Corrigan astutely reads his elitist schooling as a pedagogy that accomplishes its means “through the work done on, to, by, with, and from the body,” he does not offer a corrective pedagogy that enables critical reflection and agency for the disciplined student body (211). This is where the benefits of critique that emerge from a
theory-heavy performative pedagogy run out. Though performative critique might certainly lead to reform praxis, that move can only be negotiated via a joint project of performance theory and performance method.

Yael Shalem provides another example of a theory-rich, praxis-poor performative pedagogy. Shalem summarizes the use of performative pedagogy in the work of critical pedagogy scholars as a “pedagogy for disappearance” (57). In her view, performative pedagogy resists systemization by privileging the particular meanings of students—the personal, social, and cultural meanings that identify students in acute historical moments (53). In that sense, performative pedagogy cannot be fixed, planned, or easily developed. Once a performative pedagogical moment occurs in a classroom, it cannot be repeated, for its essence is wrapped in the sociocultural specificity of the moment itself. All the individual reactions of students and the instructor are situated in time and space. From a theoretical position, Shalem and the scholars she cites accurately observe the ethical utility of performance as a perspective that recognizes the contingency and situatedness of any event. The next logical progression in Shalem’s version of performative pedagogy, however, would engage participants’ bodies in an effort to capitalize on the personal, social, and cultural meanings inscribed therein. As McLaren argues, “knowledge is performatively constituted,” and as such, the body is a site of struggle, the terrain on which ritual knowledge is marked (emphasis in original, “Liminal” 168). If, operating under a performative pedagogy, teachers encourage students to exercise and explore their personalized meanings, then students’ bodies—the media that serve as depositories for those meanings—naturally ought be foregrounded in classroom practices.
The strength of theorizing performance into pedagogy lies in the potential for a dramatic revision of classroom authority that hinges on the situatedness of students and teachers. Performance scholars and educational theorists have already recognized this strength, most notably by arguing that classroom practices should embrace the contingency that a performative view of pedagogy brings. In *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Peggy Phelan rests her view of performative pedagogy on a constant re-writing of power as it connects to the “one who makes the doing” (teacher/student) and the “one who makes the looking” (student/teacher) in regards to course material. Once a power relationship has emerged, even if it democratizes a previously restrictive view of who possesses and communicates knowledge, it must “evaporate and re-emerge, elsewhere,” or it will risk a new form of monolithic oppression (173-74). Phelan further views performative pedagogy as a pedagogy that rejects the foundation of “understanding.” Truth and understanding as tenets of pedagogical theory only promote disappointment when one recognizes that reality cannot be fixed or realized, and that the other and, more importantly, interaction with the other resist easy conclusion. The alternative occurs within a social performance, a “suspended performance” that gets enacted in the classroom, in society, and during interaction. Phelan explains, “Pedagogy must involve training in the patient acceptance of the perpetual failure of in/sight. . . . It is in the attempt to walk (and live) on the rickety bridge between self and other—and not the attempt to arrive at one side or the other—that we discover real hope” (174). By enacting an indefinite performance, one that can only be defined according to its contingency, we are able to undermine the flawed notions of a pedagogy “for acquisition and control.” Phelan never explains the contours of this performance—what it might mean for students and teachers entangled in contingent lives. And while the particulars of enacting a
performance-driven pedagogy are not the purpose of her text, her theoretical argument for performative pedagogy leaves more questions than answers regarding what this practice might look like.

Performative Pedagogy as Critique and Possibility

McLaren argues that education is a ritual performance and that instructors should behave as liminal servants, his term for teachers who incite students to become “cocelebrants in the learning process” ritual, itself characterized by “intense involvement and participation” (“Liminal” 165). McLaren also proposes that the ideal pedagogical event contains both modes of critique and possibility. His instructor-as-liminal servant “recognizes that knowledge is always constructed in a social and historical context in which there is always a struggle over the production of meaning, a struggle which reflects a still larger conflict over relations of power.” Further, the instructor-as-liminal servant works to construct a “new narrative through which a qualitatively better world can both be imagined and struggled for” (“Liminal” 170-71).

As I construct it within this section, performative pedagogy effectively manages McLaren’s dual position of critique and possibility. My view of performative pedagogy avoids the reductive tendency to transpose theatrical metaphors onto the classroom, and it embraces both performance theory and performance practice. As a mechanism of critique, performative pedagogy opens the possibility that students will recognize “that pedagogical practices stand in relation to a dominant ideology that defines what is accepted as legitimate knowledge, that constructs social relations around specific interests, and which upholds specific structures of inequality and asymmetrical relations of power and privilege” (McLaren, “Liminal” 170). Further, performative pedagogy encourages students to pose,
rehearse, and critique solutions to stated problems (Pineau, “Teaching;” Logan; Warren “Body”). Performance thus offers both theories in which to ground ideological critique of the schooling process (c.f. McLaren Schooling) and methodologies with which to execute maneuvers of transformation (c.f. Boal Theatre). Taken together, performance theory and praxis infuse a pedagogy with means of critique and possibility. Such a performative pedagogy also engages the principal concerns frequently addressed by Performance Studies scholars.

Scholars across the academy have advocated the injection of performance techniques or metaphors into the classroom. Only recently, however, have performance scholars argued for a performative pedagogy that invokes the sources of both terms that make up the concept: Performance Studies and education theory. Pineau asserts, “Performative pedagogy is more than a philosophical orientation or a set of classroom practices. It is a location, a way of situating one’s self in relation to students, to colleagues, and to the institutional policies and traditions under which we all labor” (“Performance” 130). To situate one’s pedagogy in a performative tradition assumes a thorough re-writing of one’s pedagogy: curriculum theory, curriculum design, and curriculum implementation must all bear the mark of performance theory and method. Pedagogy is inscribed with the traditions of performance scholarship. Warren’s call for three performative modes—analysis, engagement, and critique—can be seen as one way to fuse performance theory with method (“Body” 258; “Promise” 3).

Performance scholars have already demonstrated the particulars of how teachers might transfer these performative modes to the classroom. Performative analysis presupposes that performance is a viable object of study across the academy (Fuoss and Hill; Pineau “Teaching”). Performative engagement locates performance methods in the classroom
through the specific assignment of performance projects and the use of in-class performance workshops (Fuoss and Hill; Garoian Performing; Harrison-Pepper; Pineau “Teaching”). Performative critique recognizes the collaborative role of the instructor’s body when traditional forms of student evaluation take on performative dimensions (Alexander). In this section, I explore performative pedagogy as a critical performative pedagogy that enlists students’ and teachers’ bodies, that engenders contingent dialogue, and that requires its participants to engage in risky performance behaviors.

First, performative pedagogy theoretically and methodologically recognizes the body as a politically, culturally charged site of learning. Beginning with the assumptions that education is always an ideological process and that ideology is inscribed on the body, performative pedagogy locates the politics of education in a dialogue of bodies. Pineau explains, “Classrooms are spatial and temporal sites where bodies rub up against one another literally and metaphorically. Despite our best efforts to inhabit that space democratically, our bodies always, already, are molded by our different social and institutional status” (“Performance” 131). Evidence of the ideological body can be seen in the corporeal markings of class, gender, race, religion, geographic region, and, certainly, language that surface during mundane classroom interactions. Boal observes that our bodies always enable or inhibit our desires based on our respective social positions; “the combination of roles that a person must perform imposes on him a ‘mask’ of behavior” (Theatre 126). McLaren considers the body a site infused with ideology and always capable of revising that ideology. The “body/subject” is “a terrain of the flesh in which meaning is inscribed, constructed, and reconstituted. In this view, the body is conceived as the interface of individual and society” (“Schooling” 150). Within a performative pedagogy, students and teachers engage in
reflexive critiques of the social masks imposed on them and by them, but they do not end their self-investigations there. Within a performative pedagogy, students and teachers explore the plasticity of their ideological bodies, both alone and in relation to other, politicized bodies. Performance praxis enters here, as students and teachers consider—in bodily form—the limitations and possibilities of their bodies.

Within a performative pedagogy, teachers move beyond the identification and definition of the ideological bodies occupying the classroom. They also work to mobilize those bodies. McLaren describes the “pseudo-rituals” of education as instruction that lacks “the participatory ethos and binding solidarity of genuine ritual” (“Liminal” 166). Such schooling acts to coerce student bodies into participation within a process that renders them passive. McLaren claims that any knowledge produced via these methods “remained unembodied and hence removed from the students’ corpus of felt meanings” (“Liminal” 167). Conversely, a performative pedagogy recognizes student bodies as productive, agency-filled sites constituted by performative behaviors. Warren writes:

The body thus performs as a site marked by political, ideological, and historical inscription in the classroom, yet also serves education as a highly informed source of experiential knowledge that can, through performative engagement, act as a canvas for creative alternative possibilities through bodily play. (“Body” 257)

The body thus plays at least two important roles: a depository of cultural information accessible to both students and teachers alike, if they care to look closely at its constitutive identity performances, and a medium for agency, an active site that can engage transformation. A performative pedagogy must also recognize the body as “part of the curriculum,” as capable of experiential learning, and as an agent of change (Shapiro 141-42). A performative pedagogy contains “theories of experience,” which allow teachers to instigate
dynamic forms of participation by positively resonating with the dreams, desires, voices, and utopian longings of their students” (McLaren, “Liminal” 166). While a critical pedagogy relies on a theoretical critique of the existing social structures that become manifest in the classroom, a critical performative pedagogy calls on student and teacher bodies to execute that critique.

The significance of injecting performance into critical pedagogy, then, hinges on the means by which performance theory and praxis serve the interconnected goals of critique and possibility. As Boal’s theatre practice demonstrates, the body can generate reflection on both existing oppression and future alternatives. These goals are realized via experiential learning, an epistemological frame that Jerzy Grotowski describes succinctly: “Knowledge is a matter of doing” (qtd. in Conquergood, “Storied” 339). Grounded in the belief that doing performance generates useful knowledge for a student, performative pedagogy “struggles to recuperate the saying (event, conversation) from the said (inscription, reification)” (emphasis in original, Conquergood, “Storied” 339). Numerous cases of performance methodologies that privilege experiential learning have been documented in classrooms, both within the Performance Studies discipline and across the academy (Apple; Doyle; Fuoss and Hill; Garioan; Hardy; Harrison-Pepper; Logan; McMahon; Rocklin; Worley). All these cases operate from a model of embodied learning, which describes not only “the cognitive accumulation and reaffirmation of others’ views, but the enfleshment of fresh perspectives through bodily action which instigates affective and behavioral learning along with cognitive absorption” (Worley 137). It is certainly the hope of a critical performative pedagogy to instigate transformative action.
Shapiro’s critical dance pedagogy offers an example of an embodied performance process that leads to critical recognition and empowerment. In addressing the question, “How are women silenced?” female students in Shapiro’s dance workshop crafted written and bodily responses to readings and films associated with the silencing of women (by others or by themselves). Then, they developed a performance that choreographed their responses to this central issue and featured narrative pieces of their personal experiences. Shapiro summarizes the focus of the workshop and final performance as illuminating the body as subject rather than object, “where the body is no longer simply a vehicle for performance, but rather a being engaged in the attempt to make meaning in the context of one’s world” (158-59). Students constructed empowering dance pieces that invoked the psychosocial efficacy of performance (Howard; Langellier). As Shapiro reveals, “we have come to trust and support each other, creating a safe place in which to strip away our protective layers. It is a place within where we may find new understandings as we hear our own voices recall and speak the knowledge of our bodies” (158).

Privileging the body within a performative pedagogy thus invites the potential for both personal and public change. Psychosocial practices locate the individual as the context for performance in an effort to integrate the self within society in a healthy fashion (Langellier 64). For performative pedagogy, such practices directly engage students in bodily exploration of their politicized places within the classroom. How have the mundane rituals of the schooling process conditioned students’ bodies? How might those bodies resist such constraints? What would a schooling process that enabled, recognized, and otherwise privileged the personal, political inscriptions on students’ bodies look like?
As sociopolitical instruments, performance practices make deliberate attempts to effect social and/or political change or deconstruct the political and cultural values that underlie educational processes. Kay Ellen Capo categorizes sociopolitical performance as an ethical practice in that it encourages “open, rhetorical relationships with the audience” (34). On a meta-level, performance might activate a critique of discrete educational practices. On the level of academic content, performance might initiate questions regarding the cultural production of academic knowledge (Doyle 145-48). In addition, performance can always be fashioned to reveal students’ potential for action, the invariable possibilities that their rehearsals for real life have uncovered (Boal Theatre). More importantly to the definition of critical performative pedagogy argued here, the body acts as the site where all this critical reflection takes place.

Moreover, teachers’ bodies can certainly enter the performance frame alongside students’ bodies. Because performative pedagogy invokes critique of educational norms, teacher behaviors are already under examination. It is a pedagogy that calls attention to teachers’ instructional performances and the bodies that inhabit them. In recognition of the corporeal interaction that always occurs within any classroom practice, whether it functions as a true dialogue or as a series of commands, performance scholars/instructors have offered their own lived experiences in advance of or response to student actions (Alexander; Hammer; Shapiro). Barbara Hammer envisions any instructor who adopts performance methods or teaches performance-based academic content as engaging in the production of art. Shapiro describes a curriculum project that joins personal narrative with social critique through texts generated via memories of the body. Her project opens the instructor’s body to the critical gaze of performative pedagogy (82). Bryant Alexander offers up his own
politicized body in the mode of critique by adopting a critical poetic response to student performance assignments. By performing his critique, Alexander locates a means of matching the “language of the critic” with the “object of critique.” As he explains it, “[t]his method offers critique, while reflecting the specific skills and performative nature of a given assignment” (108). Performative pedagogy thus begins and ends with the living bodies that occupy the classroom, envisioning them as sites of constructive, critical exchange.

Second, performative pedagogy includes an improvised, contingent dialogue, a democratic conversation between teachers and students. The dialogue described here is embodied and unscripted (Conquergood “Storied;” Logan). Christie Logan questions the hierarchy of classrooms that secure a predictable result for almost every student-teacher interaction before they even occur:

A course begins and ends with the professor’s authority, from syllabus to final grades. I’m responsible for students’ education in this course, certainly; but why does responsibility equate with authority? As professor I’m presumably more expert in the subject matter than the students; but why does expertise equate with authority? And what is the expertise I’m providing? With each successive reworking of a course, despite my innovations, I’m communicating the same thing: “This is how you learn; I know because this has worked for me.” (emphasis in original, 182)

In response, Logan has adopted a performance-based classroom practice that she labels “improvisational pedagogy,” a term that invokes the play that occurs both within course assignments and the organization of the course itself. Within a performative pedagogy, dialogue always holds the potential to unsettle, disrupt, or rearrange. Play and improvisation take over as the means by which knowledge is generated; students and instructors learn through the process of shifting ground in relation to each other and in relation to the course material. Classroom interactions thus reveal a performance for disappearance, an event in which positions of power dissolve, integrate, and re-emerge, only to dissolve again. Phelan
explains, “Less monolithic, more local, and in perpetual motion, a continually performed power can be the ‘subject’ of pedagogical discourse” (173). Always, the power structures interrupted and rewritten through dialogue must disappear, must be rewritten again.

Dialogue further foregrounds the contingency associated with a performative pedagogy. If students and instructors approach one another as already situated within cultural and political envelopes, then an environment of possibility emerges. The organization of a course’s specific content—its readings, discussion questions, even assignments—cannot fully proceed without first engaging students. Culture and politics, particularly those that comprise the classroom, must always be permitted to influence curriculum design. If the performatively constituted identities and marked bodies of students are to be truly recognized, instructors must first interact with those bodies. And as Conquergood reminds us, the manner of that interaction frequently determines its effect: “Genuine dialogue insists on a face-to-face encounter because this turning towards the other, the second person, enables talking to and with, instead of about or for” (emphasis in original, “Storied” 342). What this dialogic approach suggests is not so much a provisional pedagogy (or even the absence of a syllabus), but a commitment to collaboration with the historicized bodies that occupy the classroom.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony is instructive here as it indicates a pure model for the dialogue sought in performative pedagogy. Bakhtin’s singular interest regarding the interaction between two people, whether occurring in an aesthetic text or in everyday life, concerns the pursuit of an ethical dialogue. Arguing that people cannot be reduced to a finalized formula, that a person cannot be determined by an interactant prior to the actual lived moment of interaction, Bakhtin calls for true contingent dialogue: “The genuine life of
the personality is made available only through a dialogic penetration of that personality, during which it freely and reciprocally reveals itself” (emphasis in original, Problems 59). While Bakhtin introduces polyphony to discuss the author-protagonist relationship within the novel, the theory might also be extended to the classroom, especially if the traditional teacher role is considered authorial and the student role is viewed as hero. Applied to the classroom, Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony invokes a “great dialogue,” characterized by a teacher who “affirms the independence, internal freedom, unfinalizability, and indeterminacy of the hero” (Problems 63). Students therefore engage in a “deeply serious, real dialogic mode of address, not the subject of a rhetorically performed or conventionally literary one” (emphasis in original, Problems 63). Polyphonic dialogue is seen when the author-teacher honestly approaches the student-hero, considering the student as an independent, separate consciousness. Polyphonic dialogue, of course, is more easily theorized than it is practiced, particularly within educational contexts occupied by as many as thirty student-heroes.

Performance methodology offers numerous suggestions for executing the crucial dialogue attributed to a critical performative pedagogy, though it should be recognized that pure polyphony does not inevitably emerge from these suggestions. First, the performance discipline has long advocated engaging the other within performance texts, whether those texts derive from literature or ethnographic fieldnotes. Pineau connects the discipline’s mission with “a sense of the other,” locating within the field a “commitment to engage multiple—often contradictory—modes of experience in an intimate, nonjudgmental, and dialogic manner” (“Teaching” 21). In an effort to stimulate the dialogue proposed above, performance exercises and assignments might be introduced that allow students to examine the various others—the culturally inscribed bodies of their classmates and teacher—they
encounter in both the classroom and in the course subject material. By talking about the
constitutive performance behaviors already displayed in their daily lives, students and
teachers operate from a performance-based framework, one that recognizes the situatedness
and constructedness of each individual.

Further, the use of performance workshops and rehearsals dissolves the boundaries
between teacher as critic and teacher as partner (Pineau, “Teaching” 21). If performance
methods are advocated, in part, for their contribution of playful, kinesthetic learning, then
those methods must be encouraged in the democratizing spirit of play. Play should be
recognized as a non-evaluative method by which serious learning can take place.² Pineau
asks, “If performance creates a play space of possibility removed from the culpabilities of
everyday life, would it not provide a valuable medium for confronting the ‘dangerous’ topics
of contemporary society?” (“Teaching” 15). Alexander’s “critical poetic responses” offer
another performance method that re-figures the traditional relationship between students and
teachers, where students “perform” and teachers “evaluate.” Alexander joins his students in
performance, both immediately after their own in-class performances and in the days that
follow their contributions during in-class discussion. Crafting a performative response to
student scholarship re-fashions Alexander as “an embodied, feeling, sensing respondent—to
self and other” (108).

The dialogue located within a performative pedagogy also “signals a shift from
product to productivity.” The process of engaging the other in conversation and embodied
performance generates knowledge (Pineau, “Teaching” 16). What matters during the
dialogic exchanges between student and teacher, student and material, and student and
student encompasses more than the production of a final project that is evaluated (an exam, a
The experiential process of engaging the body in critical reflection takes on importance as a “way of knowing.” What matters, then, are the moments on the way to the product, the steps in the performance process that make up the “rhythms, nuances, and kinesthetic idiosyncrasies of human communicative behavior” (Pineau, “Teaching” 16). Dialogue privileges the product and the process, particularly the latter because the processual moments contain the vivid contingency of human interaction, the moments when students engaged in performance approach the other honestly. To open up the classroom to process, particularly through performance, requires a particular view of pedagogy that recognizes the inherent good in experience, regardless of the achievement of an intended outcome (Parks 56).

Third, performative pedagogy exposes its participants to risk. Both teachers and students operate in vulnerable positions within a performative pedagogy. Because it is a pedagogy that rewrites the traditional power structures that exist within the classroom, teachers and students are called on to both release and grasp authority in new ways. Teachers must surrender their traditional authority and be willing “to be surprised, to risk border-crossings” (Conquergood, “Storied” 338). Performance can be linked to “threshold experiences,” those borderlands that Conquergood identifies as “exciting, risky, and scary” and which restructure classroom power (“Storied” 338). Performative pedagogy sets aside the singular responsibility of a teacher to hold absolute knowledge, to control classroom interaction, or to operate from always preexisting objectives.

Those indeterminate spaces between moments of experience, the liminal places occupied during the process of coming to know, become the preferred positions for both teachers and students within a performative pedagogy. Necessarily, those borders are
unstable, uneasy, uncomfortable. Authority within this pedagogy becomes a paradox: teachers sacrifice elements of their traditional authority, but do so in an attempt to empower students to take control of the knowledge socially constructed within the performance frames erected in class (Orner, Miller, and Ellsworth 77). As Orner, Miller, and Ellsworth argue, teachers still must assert authority within any critical pedagogy, though its paradoxical intent lies in sacrificing the finality of the teacher’s voice in favor of the student’s emerging critical voice. Performative pedagogy, therefore, operates from a risky base of authority; like other critical pedagogies, it calls authority, as it refers to those who possess and disseminate knowledge, into question.

During a graduate course on literature and the Holocaust, Shoshana Felman, a Yale University professor, assigned several testimonial literary texts from Holocaust survivors. Following their reading of the texts, the students viewed video autobiographies of survivors. What happened next illustrates the risky negotiation of power that the performative pedagogue faces. Felman reports, “the class itself broke out into a crisis” (qtd. in Orner, Miller, and Ellsworth 78-9). The scheduled dialogue that was to follow the viewing did not occur; students were silent. In the following week, students began talking to Felman privately regarding their experiences of viewing the tapes. Students expressed difficulty with their roles as direct witnesses to the Holocaust survivors; the experience positioned them as “witnesses to the Holocaust” but left them without a voice to respond (Orner, Miller, and Ellsworth 79). Felman responded with a paper assignment for the next class meeting. She asked students to write their experiences of witnessing, to testify about their inability to answer or respond to the survivor’s testimonies. Thus, the teacher’s authority in this case was “a ruptured and partial authority.” As Orner, Miller, and Ellsworth describe: “Felman
had no authoritative answers to the students’ crises or to the Holocaust. She herself passed through answerlessness. The intended pedagogical and epistemological framing of her class was broken, exceeded” (82). Felman’s response, the required testimonial writing assignment, illustrates the sort of tenuous authority that occurs within a critical performative pedagogy. The paradox of asserting one’s authority in an effort to diminish one’s authority, “the pedagogical relation of manipulating her students into taking (partial) responsibility for responding to their unexpected encounter with the Holocaust,” gets played out on uncertain terrain amidst uncertain student reactions (emphasis mine, Orner, Miller, and Ellsworth 82).

This revision of power within the classroom becomes risky not only for teachers, whose very identity politics are destabilized, but also for students. In McLaren’s ethnography of a junior high school in Toronto, he asserts that students passively accepted the academic authority of instructors: “[S]tudents become inured to the teacher as a prison guard or hegemonic overlord rather than experience the liminal dimensions of the pedagogical encounter. As a whole, students appear to be sufficiently critical to accept, but not to criticize, the dominant modes of pedagogical discourse” (“Liminal” 166). A move to performative pedagogy revokes any notion of passivity within the classroom. Performance is grounded in action, experimentation, and risk. It requires the participant to assume power, a move that may be unsettling to students accustomed to being entertained by their teachers. Moreover, performance does not anticipate fixed outcomes; the process signifies as loudly as the product. For students, the indeterminate process of performance—the very liminal space from which their own critical voices might emerge—can be uncomfortable. Rocklin quotes a student in a Shakespeare course who disliked the contingency of his in-class performance workshops: “I’ve felt this way every time you start one of these activities: you never tell us
where we are going, or why we are doing the activity, and I always resist it, and then once we are doing it I like it, and when we discuss it I discover so much” (158). The processual aspect of performance naturally invites risk and, therefore, heightens the possibility of student resistance. Resistance, however, should be viewed as a healthy byproduct of performance, “an integral part of the learning process, not a sign of our students’ apathy, ignorance, or refusal to learn” (Rocklin 159).

The genuine dialogue present within a performative pedagogy further necessitates that both parties encounter risk. For students, performance practices that are “body-centered and critically community-based” are opportunities to engage in experiential learning and to put themselves, their bodies and identities, on display (Warren, “Promise” 5). For teachers, performative pedagogy invokes a willingness to “experiment with [their] own identity(ies), to problematize [their] own place in the emerging system, no longer secure” (Logan 183). Teachers have reacted to this call through embodied critiques, responding to their students through performance (Alexander). Teachers have also recognized that the “personal is pedagogical.” As Logan admits, “If my students have agreed to tell a crossroads story, I tell one too. . . . In the collaborative classroom my identity is as provisional as anyone else’s” (183). bell hooks links teachers’ willingness to participate in the risks of classroom disclosure to the surrender of the “all-knowing, silent interrogator” role. hooks understands the classroom as a site of empowerment for students and for teachers and urges teachers to “practice being vulnerable in the classroom, being wholly present in mind, body, and spirit” (21).

Warren explains that body-centered pedagogical practices are not the norm in educational settings: “This means that when a student enters my classroom where I ask for
bodily engagement, students may be rightly skeptical and educationally unprepared for this kind of intellectual labor” (“Promise” 5). Boal describes the initial difficulty he faced in using theatre as a problem-solving method to address the illiteracy of peasants and workers in Peru:

They have quite likely never heard of theater and if they have heard of it, their conception of it will probably have been distorted by television, with its emphasis on sentimentality, or by some traveling circus group. It is also very common for those people to associate theater with leisure or frivolity. (Theatre 127)

If one facet of a performative pedagogy engages performance as a means of rehearsing solutions for real-life problems, then it is imperative that participants view performance as capable of authenticity or, at the least, capable of producing authentic alternatives for real-life. Yet as Jonas Barish documents in The Antitheatrical Prejudice, authenticity has historically been positioned opposite performance: “The search for authenticity involves a denial of theater, because the theater itself is a denial of reality” (451).

Fortunately, performative pedagogy also works to reduce the risk associated with employing one’s body within the classroom. Because the body is privileged in this pedagogy, students whose bodies already signify via race, gender, age, physical ability, or sexuality might recognize their own bodies, historically viewed in “at-risk” terms, as sites of “critical interrogation and reflection” (Warren, “Promise” 5). Boal’s recommendation for reducing resistance to performance methods involves an organized series of body exercises that inductively construct an argument for every participant’s corporeal potential. Because performance starts with the body, Boal first recommends exercises that encourage participants to recognize the potential, limitations, and influences on their respective bodies. Through a deconstruction of performers’ muscular structures, the initial exercises aim to
increase the performers’ consciousness of their respective bodies. What must occur within any application of performance to the classroom, then, is a recognition of and reaction to the risk associated with engaging one’s body in critical pursuits.

Theatre of the Oppressed as Performative Pedagogy

The particular criteria through which I identify critical performative pedagogy—engagement and analysis of participants’ sociohistorical bodies, dialogic interaction, the recognition of risk, and mutual commitment to critique and transformation—can all be located in the theatre practice of Augusto Boal. His Theatre of the Oppressed personifies the simultaneous attention to performative theories and practices of the body. In this section, I review Boal’s practice by tracing the directions that TO has taken over the last half century and by outlining Boal’s theoretical position in terms of both sociopolitical and psychosocial performance practices. I also argue that TO is comparatively advantageous to other approaches to performative pedagogy.

TO presents an interesting case for performance scholars inasmuch as it is a practice that continues to evolve. Adrian Jackson, translator of three of Boal’s books, characterizes the transient nature of Boal’s practice: “Viewed over its forty-year history, the work glides naturally, organically, from the sociopolitical to the socio-individual to the individual-political and back again—but is always rooted in practice, and it is always theatre” (Rainbow xviii). In his native Brazil in the 1950s and 1960s, Boal focused on using theatre for political action, and more specifically, on offering the people of Brazil a protagonistic means for change in society.³ As Boal declares in the opening line of Theatre of the Oppressed, “This book attempts to show that all theater is necessarily political, because all the activities of man are political and theater is one of them” (i). Boal’s theatre practice involves “transforming
the spectator into actor,” and he offers a four-part plan in Theatre of the Oppressed for achieving this end. The first stage of Boal’s poetics, “knowing the body,” involves recognizing the body’s “limitations and possibilities, its social distortions and possibilities of rehabilitation” (Theatre 126). Here Boal is concerned with spectators deconstructing the muscular structures that are formed in their everyday work and social life. The premise of these introductory exercises lies in the corporeal influence that social actions produce in the human body (Theatre 127-130). Next, in the “making the body expressive” stage, Boal engages spectators in games which allow them to express themselves bodily, without sound. Boal’s aim in this stage is to continue the spectators’ process of distancing themselves from their habitualized social bodies (Theatre 130-131). These initial stages orient spectators to a fundamental idea within TO: the body is expressive, and as such, can communicate through the language of theatre.

In the third stage of Boal’s poetics, “theatre as language,” spectators view theatre as a “living and present” language (Theatre 126). This stage involves dramatic scenes collaborated by spectators and formal actors and includes forum theatre exercises. Forum theatre requires spectators to leave their seats, intervene in the dramatic action of a play, and attempt to correct some social wrong as it is portrayed onstage. Finally, “theater as discourse” involves a series of techniques that spectators-turned-actors might use to address or to rehearse solutions for particular social issues. Two techniques that are used in this phase of the TO system include the dramatizing of stories and issues found in a newspaper, what Boal calls Newspaper Theater, and Invisible Theater, in which scenes are presented in public spaces for people who are not knowing spectators (Theatre 143-44). Though Boal offers this four-stage pattern as a somewhat specific strategy for achieving sociopolitical
change, his life-long practice of TO has typically been adapted to the particular situation in which it is applied and thus has not always followed this early prescriptive plan (c.f. Boal’s TO legislative work in Brazil).4

When Boal transferred his practice to Europe in the 1980s, for example, his emphasis on transforming communities through social and political action necessarily shifted to a psychosocial focus. Citing the need for individuals to overcome internalized oppressions, which he termed “cops in the head,” Boal combined his political theatre with therapeutic methods. He notes, “In Latin America, the major killer is hunger; in Europe, it is drug overdose. But, whatever form it comes in, death is still death” (Rainbow 8). In The Rainbow of Desire, Boal describes the various exercises he adopted in his psychosocial application of TO.

He divides his Rainbow exercises into three categories: prospective techniques, introspective techniques, and extraversion techniques. Prospective exercises focus on external representation of oppressions or obstacles, even those oppressions that originate as “cops in the head.” Here Boal is concerned with a group of participants constructing a community through the discovery of shared obstacles. The introspective techniques follow the prospective and shift focus to individual oppressions, those individual instances of “cops in the head.” Having constructed various relationships between the participants, their oppressions, and the various characters (roles) they play in their everyday lives, Boal moves to the analysis of a single protagonist (participant). Others participate as spect-actors, connecting to the volunteer protagonist through identification (“I am exactly like that”), recognition (“I am not like that at all, but I know exactly the sort of person it’s talking about”), or resonance (“I am not like that, but I would like to be”) (Rainbow 68-9). The final
category of rainbow techniques, extraversion, offers means for rehearsing for tangible action, the final stage prior to re-entering life with possibilities for transformation. The extraversion techniques are improvisations, games, and shows that practice solutions for oppressions.

Recently, Boal has returned to his explicitly political roots through his theatrical legislative work in Rio de Janeiro. In his latest text, Legislative Theatre: Using Performance to Make Politics, Boal describes the juxtaposition of TO into the local legislative process in Rio de Janeiro. His theatre company’s support of a Worker’s Party candidate resulted in Boal’s election to office in 1992 as a vereador (legislator) in Parliament. Boal used theatre exercises to involve the Worker’s Party and the general public to initiate local concerns that might be addressed by proposing legislation. The process of “writing laws” became tied to theatrical games and exercises, the end result of which were laws or decrees proposed before Parliament. Several laws introduced by Boal were passed by Parliament, including legislation that improved the health care provided to the elderly in city hospitals and laws that offered the blind improved access to city streets. Pollution, discrimination based on sexual orientation, and protection of crime witnesses were other issues improved by the Worker’s Party theatre legislation (Legislative 102-4).

Boal also extended his theatre practice to the United States and maintains ties to centers for the Theatre of the Oppressed in Rio de Janeiro, Paris, and New York. Boal has also attended the Theatre and Pedagogy of the Oppressed conference held annually in Omaha, Nebraska to conduct TO workshops with attendees. Numerous groups have adopted TO techniques into their community-related theatre projects, including David Diamond’s Headlines Theatre and Michael Rohd’s Hope Is Vital. Seattle Public Theatre began in 1988 and a year later initiated its Theater of Liberation program that is based on Boal’s practice.
The Theatre hosted workshops directed by Boal in 1997. Its extension of Boal to the Seattle community includes monthly forum theatre performances that feature topics suggested by audience members and an annual workshop involving homeless youth (Plotkin “Theatre”).

Philip Auslander observes that Boal always makes explicit his commitment to the human body as a site for social action, but that “Boal has not theorized the performing body in any continuous or systematic way” (124). While Boal writes openly about how the body should operate within TO, he offers little theoretical description or defense for his practice. Therefore, I follow Auslander’s example and connect Boal’s written explanations for how certain techniques should be practiced to the ideological and psychological theories with which they best align. Specifically, I connect Boal to theories of sociopolitical and psychosocial performance.

Boal operates from the ideological stance that all theatre is political, if only because all human action is inherently political. This position echoes the claims of postmodern ideological critics who have frequently argued that communicative acts are inherently sociopolitical acts inasmuch as they can be deconstructed to reveal underlying power structures. In reviewing postmodern thought, John McGowan observes that postmodernism “demonstrates that purity and autonomy are illusions” insofar as “texts . . . always contain the very elements that they most wish to deny possessing” (20). McGowan points to the key project of deconstructionists as undermining the socio-historical conditions that construct the self, society, and culture. Postmodern critics frequently observe dangers within the Western intellectual tradition. Grounded in capitalism, Western social order silences ideologies and groups that might threaten its singularity. McGowan explains, “Such a strategy entails not only the control of internal ambivalence and conflict, but also the establishment of the
agent’s goals as superior to the different goals of other social actors, as above the requirement to take them into account” (19). Postmodern deconstructionists use the monolith of Western culture as an agent against itself, searching for evidence that society has been constructed through particular ideological means. Deconstructionists rely on such evidence to enable the recognition of different, oppositional strategies for organizing society.

Boal moves one step beyond deconstructionist critics in arguing that theatre is a practical exercise in changing existing oppressive social structures. Boal critiques the use of traditional, Aristotelian theatre along the same grounds that guided Brecht’s critique. When theatre aims to produce a cathartic experience in its audience, the observers become passive recipients of the drama’s message. Audience members identify with the characters onstage and the drama of their lives, but leave the theatre having purged themselves of such identification. Therefore, the theatrical experience becomes a psychological catharsis: people can go to the theatre to release emotions which might, in real life, be better used for social or political means. Boal suggests that when audience members recognize potentially subversive aspects of a character onstage, the process of catharsis purges “the extraneous, undesirable element which prevents the character from achieving his ends. This extraneous element is contrary to the law; it is a social fault, a political deficiency” (Theatre 32).

Refuting Aristotle’s claim that poetry is separate from politics, Boal summarizes Aristotle’s stance toward theatre as a powerful silencing agent that restricts audiences: “Aristotle constructs the first, extremely powerful poetic-political system for intimidation of the spectator, for elimination of the ‘bad’ or illegal tendencies of the audience” (Theatre xiv). Boal further observes that all is well for those holding power in an Aristotelian theatre, precisely because they make the laws (Theatre 24). For the powerful, catharsis becomes a
corrective for audiences who might question the social order being depicted onstage. Boal follows Brecht in calling for an end to the social stability of cathartic theatre: “Brecht wants the theatrical spectacle to be the beginning of action: the equilibrium should be sought by transforming society, and not by purging the individual of his just demands and needs” (Theatre 106). The theatre practices of Brecht and Boal are both informed by the postmodern tendencies to avoid “repose,” to demonstrate instead “the ways in which society loses its equilibrium,” and to push society towards transition (Theatre 105). It is here, in the realm of social transformation, that Boal extends deconstructionist critiques of existing social structures to sociopolitical practice.

TO operates with a transitive relationship toward its audience: “transitivity is not merely tolerated, it is actively sought—this theatre asks its audience questions and expects answers. Sincerely” (Legislative 20). Boal begins by acknowledging a key principle in his poetics: theatre is a language that can be acquired, just as any linguistic language can be acquired. More importantly, theatre is a language that all people possess (Theatre 121). The fundamental objective of TO focuses action on the spectator: “the spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or think in his place; on the contrary, he himself assumes the protagonic role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change—in short, trains himself for real action” (Theatre 122). Thus, the theatre is not a passive site. Instead, the theatre becomes a site for rehearsal of social action that will, in fact, be carried out. Spectators are re-named “spect-actors” in an effort to characterize their new role as active participants on- and offstage. Boal declares, “I believe that all the truly revolutionary theatrical groups should transfer to the people the means of production in the theater so that the people themselves may utilize them” (Theatre 122).
The shift from spectator to spect-actor calls attention to an audience member’s self-conscious function of both watching oneself in action and doing some action. Boal defines theatre as an inherently human activity because it involves “the art of looking at ourselves” (Games xxx). Viewed this way, “all human beings are Actors (they act!) and Spectators (they observe!)” (Games xxx). Boal claims that theatre, and I might add performance, “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—see itself in situ: see itself seeing” (emphasis in original, Rainbow 13). The act of performing engages reflexivity and, therefore, enables those who perform “to imagine variations” and “to study alternatives.”

Auslander locates the value of Boal’s self-conscious view of theatre in TO’s practical applications, which are seen when spect-actors analyze their sociopolitical circumstances through body-oriented theatre exercises (124). The spect-actor’s body is inherently ideological. It is molded by socio-historical conditions, and as such, is a “mechanism of oppression” (Auslander 128). Auslander draws parallels between Boal’s concept of the ideological body and Marx’s view of socio-historical influence:

Boal adopts Marx’s base-superstructure model according to which consciousness is determined by material relations; the first step of his method, therefore, is to free the body, our most basic connection with material life, from the “social distortions” imposed upon it by the oppressors’ ideological discourses. (128)

Several of Boal’s games and exercises demonstrate the potential for performance methods to generate experiential knowledge of the ideologies sculpted on the body. In the “Ritual Gesture” technique, for example, performers demonstrate physical actions that belong to a social ritual. Boal defines ritual negatively as an imprisoning, constraining, authoritarian code which can be used as an instrument of oppression (Games 184). In this technique,
performers and spectators recognize the involvement of their bodies in the construction and sustenance of the restraining ritual. Boal’s “Games of Mask and Ritual” require performers to reproduce the physical behaviors of their colleagues in a way that illuminates the psychological motivations behind those behaviors. A volunteer moves and talks in a normal fashion while the remaining performers reproduce the volunteer on their own bodies. With this series of games, Boal examines the “social necessity determined by rituals” that condition the masks people portray in their respective lives (Games 139-148). A significant byproduct of TO, then, involves its capacity for critical analysis of both the politics that shape the body and the politics maintained by the body.

Further theoretical extensions of Boal’s TO can be made to Brecht and his concern with actors who recognize the socio-historical influences of their physical actions. Auslander links Boal’s use of social masks in his theatre exercises to Brecht’s notion of Gestus, the expression of sociopolitical relations within any given gesture (129-30). Both Boal and Brecht see the body as a product of sociopolitical conditions. Brecht pushes actors to expose and critique those conditions onstage so that audience members might be aware of and re-consider the ideological reality of all characters and actions in everyday life. Boal, conversely, insists that TO creates a site for considering any number of solutions for sociopolitical oppressions: “We never try to find which solution proposed is the ‘correct’ one. I am against dogmas. I am for people becoming more conscious of the other person’s possibilities” (qtd. in Taussig and Schechner 29). Still, Auslander locates an ideological commitment within TO. Boal’s ideological body is able to “step aside momentarily from its necessarily ideological regimens to try on others for size. This is not necessarily with the intentions of adopting them, but as a means of exploring other configurations” (130).
TO also contains evidence of a psychosocial orientation, especially in the “cops in the head” techniques, all of which attempt to encourage people to analyze and overcome internalized oppressions. Boal maintains that his “cops” notion moves TO from its original focus on politics to the fringes of psychology, a move he describes as necessary in order to enable those who are unable or unwilling to address sociopolitical ills.

There are many people who dare not participate in a strike or other political action. Why? Because they have cops in their heads. They have internalized their oppressions. The cops are in their heads, but the headquarters of these cops are in the external reality. It is necessary to locate both the cops and their headquarters. In this instance, we are at the border of psychology, but always on the side of theatre. (“Cop in the Head” 35)

As with all Theatre of the Oppressed activity, Boal’s cops in the head techniques aim for transforming the spectator into “a protagonist of the dramatic action so that s/he can apply those actions s/he has practiced in the theatre to real life” (Boal, “Cop in the Head” 36).

Theoretically, Boal offers three hypotheses by which TO can be considered a psychosocial practice. First, societies contain ideas and values that are transmitted to people through regular, mundane social interaction. Boal calls this osmosis, and his techniques aim to reverse the submissiveness with which people internalize the social pressures they encounter (Rainbow 41). Second, a spect-actor belongs “completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image” (Rainbow 43). Boal calls this concept metaxis. After creating images of an oppressive reality within an aesthetic space, and subsequently interacting with those images, the spect-actors should return to the reality of the oppression and enact their rehearsals. Metaxis describes the practicing in a “second world (the aesthetic), in order to modify the first (the social)” (Rainbow 44). The third hypothesis, analogical induction, calls attention to the “sympathy” between spect-actors; “the oppression of one is the oppression of all” (Rainbow
Boal insists that the Theatre of the Oppressed “is the theatre of the first person plural” (Rainbow 45). All participants should, therefore, locate a way to connect to the protagonist spect-actor in a scene, either through identification, recognition, or resonance (Rainbow 68-9).

The central task for Boal’s cops in the head practice is to uncover oppressions. Jackson views problem-posing and problem-analyzing as potentially therapeutic activities: “Looking at the problem is in itself therapeutic: it is a step toward doing something about it. A therapy which continually throws light on problems, a variety of different shades of light, is by definition more dynamic than one which seeks (and stops at) a solution” (“Introduction,” Rainbow xx). Jackson’s definition of therapy as self-exploratory has been challenged by a reading of Boal’s cops in the head practice that criticizes its normalizing effects. Boal acknowledges that he opposes catharsis in Theatre of the Oppressed on the grounds that catharsis makes audiences passive, accepting, and numb to the norms of a potentially oppressive social structure. Yet his exercises in The Rainbow of Desire rely on catharsis as a primary tool. Jackson refutes Marxist critiques of Boal’s cops in the head practice by observing that TO has always held the potential to help both individuals and their societies: “Therapeutic is not necessarily a synonym for normalising or societising” (Rainbow xxi).

In The Rainbow of Desire, Boal modifies his critical stance toward catharsis and reconstructs it to include a means by which spect-actors can purge themselves of harmful internalized oppressions. The purging that Boal spoke out against early in his career differs from the one he presents in cops in the head exercises. Aristotelian catharsis represents the problematic purification of people’s “desire to change society,” while catharsis in TO acts to
purge that which blocks or prevents people from acting (Boal qtd in Taussig and Schechner 27). TO works toward individual and social change, and for this to occur, obstacles that prevent such change must be eliminated or purged. Catharsis becomes an ingredient for transformation, not for stabilization of society.

To illustrate the needs of the individual, Boal offers the parable of the “Political Master Swimmer,” a story that points to the errors of a theatre practice that privileges only sociopolitical action. Upon discovering a man drowning in a pool unable to swim, the Political Master Swimmer, who is both a political activist and an excellent swimmer, refused to help. Instead, he tells the helpless man: “Excuse me, dear Sir, but I am a political Master Swimmer and you are nothing but a single individual. When there are at least twenty of you drowning together, then I will be at your service, ready to help you and save your life” (“Political” 134). Here, Boal indicates the need for a division of his practice (it is both political and personal), as well as its primary emphasis on people. My consideration of immigrant ESL students in this study necessitates just this sort of dual focus in applying Boal’s techniques. The spect-actors in this study have both internalized oppressions and external sociopolitical obstacles. The cops in the heads of ESL students are evidenced by their own reports of uncertainty and extreme self-monitoring when communicating in English. Sociopolitical deterrents include the social prejudices which they face when communicating with employers, searching for jobs that they have previously worked in their native countries, communicating with their children’s teachers, and negotiating purchases of consumer goods at various stores.

Jackson locates the significance of Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed in its analytic quality. That is, TO participants locate tools within their own bodies that promote awareness
of their specific psychosocial and sociopolitical problems. Moreover, the practice attempts to get something done; it is a theatre of doing. As such, the Theatre of the Oppressed pushes participants to create, evaluate, and test solutions to their respective problems. Jackson characterizes the benefits of TO as initiating participants to admit and express dissatisfaction with life situations that do not fully serve their psychological or material needs: “Its essential declared goal is happiness, but not happiness as a static condition, a laid-back nirvana, happiness as a busyness, as aliveness, a full capacity, a firing on all cylinders. When it is working people often seem to leave the workshops with a clarity and a sense of determination to sort things out” (“Introduction,” Rainbow xxiv). The objective of TO, then, lies with the participants who engage it. It is a practice that locates its participants as active, as capable, and most importantly, as problem-solvers.

When cops in the head exercises are applied to therapeutic contexts, participants benefit from the open-ended structure of the workshops. Because TO does not conclude with a single solution or an act of counseling closure, participants remain autonomous and therefore empowered. Jackson refutes the concerns of psychotherapy practitioners who object to TO participants going off “with so many thoughts buzzing in their heads” (“Introduction,” Rainbow xxv). He acknowledges that participants seek closure within any given workshop if that is what they want, but locates the strength of TO in its adaptability to its participants’ desires and goals: “People certainly leave with things to do, the job is only started, there is no doubt about that—but that is as it should be. Being over-protective can be patronising” (“Introduction,” Rainbow xxv).

Viewed as an instrument for the classroom, TO represents a best case performative pedagogy inasmuch as it contains both critical and transformative functions. I have
identified performative pedagogy as a juxtaposition of critical pedagogy and performance theory and practice. At their core, both these elements pursue dual projects of critique and transformation. As I explained in chapter 2, critical pedagogy takes the traditional schooling process to task for its defense of the ideological status quo. Critical pedagogues illustrate the potential for resistance that comes when teachers and students jointly explicate and reconstruct the ideological frameworks on which education has historically rested. The goal of critical pedagogy, then, is to transform the schooling process in a step toward a larger move of transforming society. The strength of critical educational theory lies in its persistent exposure of the dominant material practices at work in the classroom.

However, critical pedagogy has not consistently offered grounded, pragmatic means for transforming either the classroom or society. In part, this shortcoming can be attributed to the expansive project that critical pedagogues have placed before themselves. Performance scholars frequently share the goal of exposing the ideological strategies wielded by dominant groups in society, but have expanded their scope to include any range of performative behaviors and performances. Performance scholars have also located concrete means by which their ideological critiques can be channeled into hopeful transformative practices. By using performance as a tool for cultural efficacy, performance scholars offer an embodied, rehearsed means of constructing revised social practices.

As a hybrid of performance theory, performance practice, and critical pedagogy, performative pedagogy must locate efficacious modes of critique and transformation. Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed offers a concrete means of accomplishing both these objectives, a task that other ventures of performance into pedagogy (or pedagogy into performance) have failed to complete. TO begins with the physical activation of participants’ bodies. Boal
argues that “the human being is a unity, an indivisible whole:” the physical and the psychological cannot be separated (Games 61). By first engaging participants at the level of their physical bodies, TO stimulates participants to recognize acutely the capabilities and disabilities of their bodies. More importantly, TO stimulates participants’ reflection on the material practices at work on their respective bodies. Performative pedagogy’s pursuit of critical reflection thus gets played out in TO on the physical bodies of its participants, both students and teachers.

Next, TO activates the critical perspectives that it has encouraged by engaging participants in performance experimentation to discover potential means for combating an acknowledged social oppression. TO concludes with a rehearsal for transformative action rather than a passive discussion of the ideological constraints that participants have identified. Other movements of performance into pedagogy do not accomplish the critical and the transformative functions that performative pedagogy must pursue. For example, the application of performance metaphors to the classroom that piqued the interest of educators in the 1970s does nothing to challenge education as either an ideological or culturally oppressive practice. In fact, the transposition of performance with teaching terminology reifies the status quo. Students are coaxed by performing teachers that knowledge and the schooling process are monologic. Regardless of how entertaining the pedagogical teaching performances become, the teacher retains authority, and the ideology that underlies education is never questioned.

Performance scholars such as Fuoss and Hill demonstrate the potential that performance holds to transform a classroom into an empowering site where students obtain knowledge of historical ideas by examining performance and then create their own ideas via
They situate performance as both an object of study and a means of producing knowledge. When applied to the classroom, TO also accomplishes this task inasmuch as participants explore the historical performances already enacted on and by their own bodies and then craft performance responses to the personal or social oppressions they have identified. Academic content, what Fuoss and Hill label “knowledge of pre-existing ideas” (79), always gets translated through the first person within TO. If TO is used to address some idea or theory grounded in the history of a particular academic discipline, students try on the idea and explore it within their own bodies, a process that may trigger further resonation regarding students’ respective corporeal identities. Theatre of the Oppressed manages an additional move that distinguishes it as performative pedagogy. Because TO always operates in an embodied, reflexive mode, teachers and students may also consider the schooling process itself as a performative construction. That is, as students and teachers begin to explore the ideological influences on their respective bodies, they may easily direct that corporeal critique to their in-class behaviors to examine how education is performed and how that performance either enables or disables.

Performative pedagogy also reflects the pursuit of dialogue, an improvised, contingent, and embodied conversation between classroom participants. A number of critical educational scholars have argued for an expanded dialogue within the classroom, particularly one that would serve to unsettle the politics of power traditionally inscribed on teachers’ and students’ bodies. Shalem, for example, suggests a “pedagogy for disappearance” that foregrounds the contingent, historical event that characterizes every classroom interaction as unique (57). Phelan argues for dynamic contingency when she considers the power relations between teachers and students as the enactment of an indefinite, “suspended performance”
(173-74). TO also rests on dialogue, but allows that dialogue to be activated within the bodies of its participants. Transported to the classroom, TO necessarily provides opportunities for both spoken and corporeal dialogue. All TO exercises require a response from an external observer; as one spect-actor constructs a performance image or scene, other spect-actors respond with their own images and actions. Following all of Boal’s games, exercises, and shows, a joker figure guides a group discussion of what spect-actors observed, interpreted, and felt during the process of performance. Dialogue thus occurs at two distinct moments and through two distinct modes within Theatre of the Oppressed: during performance as corporeal dialogue when spect-actors arrange and rearrange their bodies in relation to each other and during a cool-down session as spoken dialogue when spect-actors reflect on their corporeal interactions.

TO upholds the strenuous criteria that I have placed on performative pedagogy by committing to the corporeal, by enabling dialogue, and by invoking risk through the requirement of physical and psychological participation. Boal’s practice avoids the pitfalls that have victimized other extensions of performance into pedagogy by proposing bodily means of addressing the dual project of critique and transformation. As a pedagogical practice, TO personalizes the schooling process. TO allows for all knowledge—knowledge of historical ideas and knowledge that constructs new ideas—to emerge on the historicized bodies of spect-actors, the teachers and students who engage Boal’s exercises within the classroom. This final trait enables a widespread application of Theatre of the Oppressed not only to projects explicitly dedicated to social change, but also to any educational context regardless of academic content that concerns itself with critique and transformation.
Critical Performative Pedagogy for the ESL Classroom

As seen in the frequent call for critical approaches to English as a Second Language pedagogy, the ESL discipline has already recognized the politicized nature of both language and language instruction. In the last ten years, many ESL scholars have integrated critical theory into their pedagogy, arguing that language instruction operates between a continuum of reifying and critiquing normative social structures. The discipline has thus moved beyond a mere communicative paradigm, where pragmatic communication practice in the classroom means rehearsing various social situations that students frequently encounter. As I indicated in chapter 2, the disciplinary history of ESL can be staged as a pedagogical problem, one that has shifted between privileging linguistic structures to accommodating learners’ real-world communicative needs. The move to critical pedagogy recognizes that ESL instruction is always an ideological venture and that ESL instruction demands a critique and transformation of any ideological structures that inhibit learners. However, ESL scholars have not readily enacted that critical project. Scholars have theorized but have not adequately grounded critical pedagogy into ESL curricula.

I argue that performative pedagogy offers an embodied means for transforming the ESL classroom into a site of social critique and transformation. Performance exercises are not uncommon to ESL classrooms, where they typically operate as mechanisms for experiential learning. ESL scholars have moved in the direction of embodied, hands-on learning experiences by taking issue with the communicative curricula that emerged during the 1970s, which they have criticized as impractical and disconnected from students’ lived experiences. In response, scholars have articulated a move toward classroom practices that draw on ethnographic, participatory, and action research methods. Boal’s Theatre of the
Oppressed, of course, fits these criteria. However, the problems associated with performance as an instrument of the communicative ESL framework that is usually manifested in traditional role playing exercises have gone unchecked. Al-Arishi observes that instead of revising the use of performance activities in the ESL classroom, practitioners are replacing them with dyad and small group conversations, language games, problem-solving activities, and even traditional grammar exercises (337). That is, some ESL practitioners have moved away from using performance methods in their classrooms. Rather than rejecting performance altogether as a method, I propose that ESL scholars turn toward a critical performative pedagogy, which would enable both a critical theoretical position and a grounded, experiential methodology for language instruction. My argument for fusing the ESL field’s continuing interest in critical theory with a performative pedagogy rests on three observations. First, language, the principle subject of ESL curricula, is performatively constituted. Second, a performative pedagogy naturally resolves many of the contradictions to critical pedagogy that previous performance approaches have presented. Third, performative pedagogy offers a means for effectively managing the tension between critical educational theory and grounded language instruction.

The notion of performance inherently fits the study and acquisition of language because language is always already immersed in performative acts. ESL scholars have already referenced performance to a limited degree. Ferdinand de Saussure’s structural theory of language, which characterized phonology as an analytic system (langue) and syntax and semantics as contingent and unsystematic (parole), offered ESL practitioners a linguistic basis for their prescriptive pedagogy throughout much of the twentieth century (Adamson 11). Noam Chomsky also divided the systematic structure of language from the actual use of
language, though his generative grammar attempted to systematize semantics as well (Adamson 24). Both these structural approaches recognized that language in use—what can generally be termed the performance of language—was neither easily structured nor predictable. In reaction to this limitation, ESL instruction turned toward theories of communicative competence, which maintained that speakers could study and acquire applied linguistic principles that indicate when a given utterance is appropriate (Adamson 26). Sociolinguistic theories of communicative competence thus focus on the highly contingent performance that emerges when speakers interact with each other, including how speakers negotiate the varied competence of their interactants.

By arguing that language is performatively constituted, however, I refer to more than the recognition that grammar rules are indeed distinct from speaking rules. Within a performative pedagogy, language might be viewed through a lens of performativity, a lens that projects performance behaviors as universal to humanity. Schechner explains, “Performativity—or commonly, ‘performance’—is everywhere in life, from ordinary gestures to macrodramas” (emphasis in original, “Magnitudes” 45). Aside from connecting language acquisition and use to the tradition of Performance Studies, this perspective focuses attention on the performative construction of language. Language can be viewed as coming into being through the act of performance. That is, though grounded in syntactics, phonology, and semantics, language does not exist outside the actions of people, who are themselves grounded in culture, politics, and history. All the culturally appropriate and structurally systematized rules of a language depend on a crucial doing, an act of performance by subjects whose own identities are enmeshed in respective performances. In an ESL classroom operating from a performative pedagogy students might first consider how
their own identities are marked by discrete performance practices, observable to the general public. For example, Alberto, a Colombian immigrant in an adult ESL class I have taught, might consider how his fashionable clothing disguises his present occupation as a painter inside industrial plants. Alberto might also question how his spoken English, particularly his limited vocabulary, reflects/disguises the occupational role of graphic artist that he held in his native country and currently seeks to regain in the United States. In this limited example, I suggest that language never escapes its performative use by subjects already constituted by still other performative practices (such as physical appearance, gender, sexuality, education).

A view of language as performatively constituted, then, calls into question systematic approaches to language instruction, even if those approaches privilege the socially appropriate behavior specific to a given culture or situation. As a product of performance, language emerges in the historical present of subjects’ contingent identities and interactions. Therefore, performative pedagogy in the ESL classroom operates from a challenging paradox: language cannot be systematized outside of the discrete performances enacted by historical subjects, and yet the acquisition of any language presupposes that a minimal grammar of syntax and phonology be studied and memorized. I am not suggesting that a performative ESL pedagogy would ignore the grammatical, phonological, and semantic structures regularly performed in English speaking contexts. I am arguing, however, for a pedagogy that recognizes and carefully considers the social performances that have established any such regularly occurring language structures. Rather than approach the English language as an “it” to be acquired or digested, a performative ESL pedagogy would situate the language within a series of historicized contexts: social, political, and cultural. Students in the ESL classroom might then view their educational project as an attempt to
negotiate their own performatively constituted identities within the larger frame of a performatively constituted language.

In *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin constructs a theory of performativity for language. In his view, particular linguistic utterances that he names “performatives” carry out concrete actions (6). A promise, for example, comes into being through a performative utterance. The performative, “I promise you that I will be on time,” brings to life a verbal pact between two people. Performativity offers further insight into language, then, by examining the actions that particular utterances accomplish. Judith Butler extends the performative act of language to considerations of the power that such acts assert. Butler explains, “If the power of discourse to produce that which it names is linked with the question of performativity, then the performative is one domain in which power acts as discourse” (emphasis in original, 225). Butler, however, locates the power with which a performative brings actions into being in the performative’s citation of earlier utterances. That is, the authority of the subject who issues a promise is not located within the individual’s singular will but within the long history of promises made prior to the given interaction. Language, as Butler explains, “has a history that not only precedes but conditions its contemporary usages,” calling into question the originality or ownership of the individual who issues an utterance (227).

For ESL learners who aim to use language actively and pragmatically in their respective lives, the citational chain of utterances must be recognized, for it is this history that reveals the norms appropriate to the use of any given utterance. The agency of an utterance rests not with the particular speaker who issues a performative but with “the conventions of which it is a repetition” (Butler 12). All ESL learners can be viewed
separately in terms of their respective identity performances. Their daily use of the English
language, however, rests on the rich collection of utterances that comprise the historicity of
the language, a collection that reveals how the language has signified throughout a series of
discrete moments inevitably invoked when the language is used.

Erving Goffman offers an additional lens through which to examine language as a
performative construction. Goffman’s theory of impression management asserts that the
negotiation of one’s publicly presented identity occurs through a social performance which
has some effect, intended or not, on an observer. In fact, Goffman identifies performance as
“all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous
presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers”
(22). Extended to our present discussion of language, impression management implicates the
use of language as an action that always potentially signifies to others and, therefore, always
potentially functions in some way within society. Given Goffman’s definition of social
performance as behavior before an audience that in some way affects that audience,
individuals may enter into performance without intention (Carlson 38). This latter assertion
carries considerable weight for a performative ESL pedagogy, inasmuch as students might
view language in terms of its social effects on a concrete audience. Language can be seen as
an instrument that accompanies other communicative behaviors in the construction of a
social performance that carries tangible social consequences, both for the actions of others
and for the negotiation of one’s own identity. When students in an ESL course are
immigrants and refugees who historically enter the United States in a position of
disadvantage, their social performances and the implications that follow them assume a
critical level of urgency. As a performative construction crafted by non-native English
speakers, language both signifies to a social audience and partially determines how those speakers negotiate their needs and desires.

More directly, when an individual performs language, that performance has been viewed as both requiring and invoking social interaction. That is, language can be viewed as performative inasmuch as it exists within a “constant state of becoming” within a larger social context shared by interactants (Holborow 28). Both Volosinov and Bakhtin view language as dialogic, as inherently bound to the act of communication that occurs between people. Bakhtin considers the utterance as the most basic unit when considering language: “Language is realized in the form of individual concrete utterances (oral and written) by participants in the various areas of human activity” (“Problem” 60). Utterances reference acts of linguistic communication that link two individuals within a larger system of referential meaning. Michael Holquist explains, “The Bakhtinian utterance is dialogic precisely in the degree to which every aspect of it is a give-and-take between the local need of a particular speaker to communicate a specific meaning, and the global requirements of language as a generalizing system” (emphasis in original, 60).

Utterances respond to both a particular speech genre—the collection of “thematic content, style, and compositional structure” that delimit how language gets used in given contexts—and our personal motivation for communicating (Bakhtin, “Problem” 60). Moreover, the addressee always influences the utterance; utterances adhere to speech genres in an effort to facilitate the addressee’s understanding of a message. Volosinov thus characterizes language as a “two-sided act:” “It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant. As word, it is precisely the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addressee and addressee” (emphasis in original, 86). Viewed
from the perspective of the utterance, individuals enact language as a performance by concerning themselves with the final accumulation of both generic and personal motivations. Bakhtin claims that people construct speech with an acute awareness of their final utterance product:

> We do not string words together smoothly and we do not proceed from word to word; rather, it is as though we fill in the whole with the necessary words. Words are strung together only in the first stage of the study of a foreign language, and then only when the methodological guidance is poor. (“Problem” 86n)

Approaching language as a performative construction enables ESL learners to concentrate on their use of language in social contexts. ESL learners approach language as a contingent action that always depends on the “uncertain ground between people,” the “specific time and place of the language participants,” and the “broader aggregate of conditions under which that particular community of speakers operates” (Holborow 30).

Second, a performative pedagogy resolves the difficulty that ESL practitioners have faced when trying to implement experiential learning methods. Exercises in educational drama have found a natural fit in ESL classrooms, particularly because drama offers students a means of rehearsing communicative action for their respective real lives. Yet the fusion of critical theory with ESL pedagogy has exposed many drama approaches as nothing more than prescriptions for communication and in some cases prescriptions that reinforce a reductive view of non-native English speakers. Drama activities located within communicative or survival curricula—usually role plays—tend to group ESL students into generalized groups, proposing specific social contexts in which the students will likely interact and narrowing how they interact to a set of socially-based rules. A performative pedagogy also proposes performance methods within the ESL classroom. By grounding
those methods in a critical perspective, however, performance scholars are able to privilege the particular situations and the contested identities that ESL students represent. A performative pedagogy begins with the recognition that the body is contested, marked by various cultural influences, and challenged by ideologies within any process of schooling. McLaren explains, “The body/subject is not simply the product of a homogenous totality of discourses but rather a terrain of struggle, conflict, and contradictions” (“Schooling” 161).

Within a performative pedagogy, performance methods therefore pursue at least two objectives: exposing the language and acculturation processes as always ideologically derived and challenging student bodies to envision, then rehearse their own responses to the ideologies that constrain them. McLaren comments that the objective of the critical pedagogue is to “reveal to students how conflictual social relations . . . are actively inscribed in human intentionality and agency without reducing individuals to simply the static outcomes of social determinations” (“Schooling” 161). Though McLaren’s critical pedagogy envisions schooling as a process with very tangible, corporeal effects, it does not address the traditional teacher-centered mechanism for the construction of knowledge. The knowledge that emerges from his critical pedagogy may actively critique an oppressive social reality in which students live, but it does not necessarily originate from students themselves. Note the passive positioning of students reflected above in McLaren’s vision of critical pedagogy. Though their ideologically contested bodies are invoked, students receive any revelation regarding their social constructedness from the pedagogy itself. A critical performative pedagogy would invoke students’ ideologically contested bodies by engaging those bodies in performance.
Situated within a performative ESL pedagogy, performance methods would begin by asking students to explore how their bodies are both enabled and constrained by social institutions. This exploration would occur through the act of performance. Rather than only incorporating performance into real-life language practice, a performative pedagogy recognizes the efficacy of performance methods for critique. Moreover, a performative pedagogy does not prescribe social roles or communication behaviors for students, instead pushing them to discover the consequences of particular communicative actions through the performance of those actions. Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed offers a tangible performance practice for accomplishing these goals.

The initial stage in Boal’s theatre poetics, “knowing the body,” would serve to orient ESL students to the acutely personal and critical stances assumed in a critical performative pedagogy. The third stage of Boal’s poetics, “theatre as language,” would introduce ESL students to forum theatre and allow them to address the particular obstacles they face based on their contingent identities as non-native English speakers. Together these stages, extracted from Boal’s larger political theatre practice, illustrate the potential for a performative pedagogy that encourages both self-reflexive analysis of one’s always politicized language identity and communicative practice aimed at eliminating the social constraints one faces.

Finally, a performative ESL pedagogy naturally invokes the tension between critical theory and concrete language practice. The struggle between theory and practice is a familiar one to those working within the Performance Studies tradition, as that discipline has frequently been pulled in both these directions. In response, performance scholars have approached performance as a multifaceted phenomenon that can be characterized as an object
of study, a critical perspective, a methodology, or a means of acquiring knowledge. From this tradition, then, a performative ESL pedagogy might adopt the useful tactic of maintaining the tensive balance between critical theory and grounded language instruction. Rather than resolving the struggle by pushing classroom practices in either the direction of theoretical critique or formal language instruction, ESL pedagogues should adopt performance—in all its renderings—as a means of accomplishing both objectives.

In particular, performance should enter a critically-oriented ESL pedagogy as both a critical perspective and as an experiential methodology for studying, learning, and practicing English communication. As a critical perspective, performance urges a view of language as performatively constituted and politically charged. Further, a performance critique implicates those practices that legislate and/or teach language as instructive in the acculturation of non-native speakers. As an experiential method, performance offers a tangible means for practicing communication in a real, meaningful context. Proponents of drama in the ESL classroom have already argued this point. In the case of a critical performative pedagogy, performance methods escape the dangers of prescription and paternalistic decisions on what constitutes real, meaningful communication. Within a critical performance pedagogy, performance methods do not invoke embodied doing for the sake of doing. Students identify specific, tangible communication contexts themselves, and students rehearse communicative action within those contexts. The doing of performance in the ESL classroom thus occurs within a framework of social critique that questions how the communication practices rehearsed in any given exercise enable or constrain participants. In this way, the communication knowledge constituted during performance never escapes ideological analysis; it is exposed to an evaluative critique within and/or immediately
following the classroom exercise. Finally, both these functions of a performative ESL pedagogy—the critical and the methodological—are located within the act of performance itself. Far from being confined to a mere methodological or experiential instrument, the act of performance within the ESL classroom enables both social critique and tangible, transformative communication practice.

In this chapter, I have positioned performative pedagogy as a grounded, critical enterprise that fuses critical theory with performance theory and performance methodology. Performative pedagogy foregrounds the messiness of students’ and teachers’ identities as played out on their bodies and implicates every facet of the classroom. I proposed three criteria that allow for performative pedagogy to pursue the project of critical pedagogy—critique and transformation—in an efficacious, embodied fashion. Performative pedagogy requires a perspective of the classroom that recognizes the politicized bodies at work there, the improvised dialogue that binds those bodies, and the risk inherent to this dialogue. Performative pedagogy also addresses these criteria at the levels of course planning and instructional methods by situating education as largely performative.

The proliferation of performance metaphors, theory, and methods into the classroom does not signal the arrival of performative pedagogy so much as it does the ubiquity of performance as an interdisciplinary construct. Performance has been defined and inserted into a wide range of educational practices, but many of these cases have not invoked the potential that performance holds for social and cultural efficacy. One such context, the ESL discipline, has until now only explored performance as an isolated teaching method. While critical theory has dominated ESL pedagogy in recent years, the ESL classroom still operates as an impoverished site. Critical ESL pedagogues have not located a means by which to
activate their project of social critique and transformation while maintaining the disciplinary emphasis on language acquisition.

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that performative pedagogy represents an embodied, efficacious means for carrying out critical pedagogy. Specifically, I positioned performative pedagogy as a practice that can address the obstacles that critical pedagogy has faced within the ESL classroom. Theories of the performative provide a number of means by which to consider language as a performance action that originates in unique, particularized social contexts. More significantly, performance methods provide concrete, embodied practices that ground critical theory in participants’ bodies and expose those bodies as potential instruments of transformation. I offered Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed as a discrete performance practice through which to do performative pedagogy. TO always privileges participants’ bodies, and because ESL instruction frequently forgets that participants’ bodies are the sites at which language is activated in everyday life, TO presents a useful reminder of the body’s efficacy. TO pursues the projects of critique and transformation on a corporeal terrain in hopes that participants might re-fashion their bodies in positions of agency as regards their respective oppressions. TO represents a means of turning a reflexive eye towards the ESL schooling process, questioning that process for its underlying ideologies and its suggestions for how language matters in society. Of course TO accomplishes this critical reflexivity via performance exercises that require participants to enlist their bodies as instruments of critique and learning. Thus far, my argument for using Boal’s TO as a performative pedagogical bridge between critical theory and ESL instruction has only asserted the efficacy of this practice. In the remaining chapters, I consider an
extended ESL case study that tracks my experience using TO as a performative pedagogical tool within a community-based ESL program.

Notes

1 In his book Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance, Jon McKenzie traces Performance Studies to at least two academic traditions: oral interpretation and theatre studies. McKenzie argues that the move to Performance Studies drastically altered the focus of scholars working from both traditions, but in different directions. For oral interpretation scholars, the shift to Performance Studies signaled a heightened interest in “embodied practices” and offered “new bodies to analyze and new methods with which to do so” (47). Still, McKenzie observes that discursive practices remain at the fore of oral interpretation-trained performance scholars’ work, a feature that reflects their historical concern with the analysis of literature. For theatre studies scholars, the shift to Performance Studies marked an emphasis on embodied practices, but without the attention to literary texts that their oral interpretation counterparts maintain (47).

2 Harrison-Pepper describes a course titled, “Ritual, Play, and Performance,” in which she identifies numerous approaches to incorporating play across the curriculum. The course situates theoretical reading assignments within performance workshops so that students might be “persuaded” by their bodies and “so that they might uncover deeper meanings and personal understandings of these phenomena” (143). Harrison-Pepper adopts the title “Dramas of Persuasion” for her performance pedagogy techniques to reference this process of persuading one’s body of its potential for experiential knowledge.

3 When Boal was exiled from Brazil during that country’s authoritarian regime, he extended his theatre practice to other Latin American countries in the early 1970s, particularly Peru and Argentina.

4 In Legislative Theatre, Boal describes an example in which participants did not accept his standard pattern of exploring the expressivity of the body before constructing oppressive and solution images. The Street Worker’s Union, comprised of twenty-five men and one woman, resisted the early body exercises on the grounds that theatre threatened their machismo. Boal quickly moved to image work, in which the Union members constructed images of their political interests, and found the group was much more interested in using their bodies to portray pictures of the Union before and after they took control. The lone woman, incidentally, did not back down from the men as evidenced by Boal’s characterization of her frequent claim, “Sure, I am a woman, but I’ll stick my dick on the table with the best of them” (Legislative 41-43).

5 Jackson refers to criticism of Boal’s cops in the head practice that labels it “bourgeois individualism” (xxi). This critique argues that the exercises delve too far in the world of therapy and do not promote spect-actors to act tangibly in their respective societies. Interestingly, Daniel Feldhendler indirectly refutes this critique in his comparison of Boal to Jacob Moreno, the founder of psychodrama. He views Boal’s cops in the head techniques as
a sociopolitical practice because it does not establish a clear therapeutic frame: defined client and therapist roles, a specific work task of relieving a client’s psychological pain, and a predetermined time frame for the therapy work (94).

6 TESOL Quarterly, the academic journal for the ESL discipline, demonstrated the widespread interest in critical ESL pedagogy with a special issue in 1999 (Volume 33, Issue 3).
CHAPTER 4

EXPERIMENTING WITH IMAGE THEATRE: DOING BOAL IN AN ESL WORKSHOP

October 30, 2000
Does Boal communicate as a helpful method for those interested in “book” ESL or even spoken ESL? . . . It seems thus far that I’ve been involved in blindly convincing or trying to persuade participants that Boal exercises are helpful.

November 30, 2000
One problem I’ve faced in conducting the performance workshops seems to be that participants have already solved the smaller problems, and so all our discussions are retrospective. The problems they mention are relatively small, concrete obstacles seemingly overcome by learning enough English. I’m wondering if the bigger problem of learning English does not submerge underlying difficulties that many or all face. Maybe this poses something of an ethical question too, as I try to negotiate through this desire to pull the “ultimate English-related problem” from my magic Boal hat, while the real source is rather small: just language. Am I trying to reinvent the wheel?

December 13, 2000
Does the success of a Boal-based workshop hinge on the homogeneity of the group? . . . I have not yet seen absolute indifference to anyone’s stated experience, but as Aledia points out, “I would like to work on those small problems [that some participants introduced], but also larger problems.” Could the drop-out/attrition rate be attributed to a low level of participants connecting with the goals of the workshops? Boal insists that TO be dedicated to the participants, but what if the participants want a non-TO format? That is, what if they entirely resist liberation pedagogy? This has not happened yet, but it might explain some hesitance and lack of consistency in attendance.

February 15, 2001
Participants seem to resist the embodied exercises and will usually talk through their ideas (for example, in a forum session) rather than show/enact them. Image exercises have been transformed into talk-driven forum work, but the focus is almost always on TALK and not the image.

The above are journal notes that I recorded during the three ESL performance workshops I directed. In each case, I was sorting through the problems of adapting Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed as a performative pedagogy for an ESL audience. In an effort to test my hypothesis that TO does, in fact, represent the best case for doing performative
pedagogy in an ESL context, I struggled to articulate how TO might simultaneously serve the
interests of critical pedagogy, performance theory and practice, and a larger ESL curriculum.
I was familiar with doing Boal. And I was familiar with doing ESL pedagogy. My
immediate challenge, however, was doing Boal as ESL pedagogy.

I have already argued that the ongoing pedagogical problems observed in ESL
pedagogy—the narrow focus on linguistic structures, the vision of communicative
competence as a static, digestible skill, and the difficulty of resolving critical theory with
tangible teaching methods—can be addressed within a performative pedagogical framework.
My focus now turns to illustrating how performative pedagogy via Boal’s Theatre of the
Oppressed plays out in the ESL context. My entry into a community-based ESL program
presented a context within which my argument could be tested. I maintain that performative
pedagogy addresses the problems that ESL pedagogy has historically encountered. My
fieldwork experience within an ESL program, however, led me to somewhat tempered
realizations regarding the final efficacy that TO holds for carrying out critical pedagogy’s
critique/transformation project. While Theatre of the Oppressed holds instructional value
and the potential for consciousness-raising within ESL classrooms, its installation within
those sites must persistently recognize the goals and criteria of both performative pedagogy
and language acquisition. Boal’s TO practice, I discovered, cannot be blindly transposed as
performative pedagogy onto an educational site that pursues a learning outcome—the
acquisition of the English language—that has been traditionally measured through
standardized tests. Any version of performative pedagogy must be sensitive to the crucial
criteria that define the concept: attention to performance process, contingent dialogue, and
opportunity for embodied, performed critique and transformation.
In this chapter I describe and interpret the first half of my fieldwork process of adapting Theatre of the Oppressed for a community-based ESL program. My documentation of three eight-week performance workshops articulates my initial effort to translate image theatre for the ESL context, an effort that relied largely on Boal’s traditional four-stage poetics of the oppressed process (Theatre 126). My dual intent is to explore the efficacy of image theatre as a performative pedagogical tool for ESL and to illustrate the difficulty of doing a Boal-based performative pedagogy within a workshop context. This chapter calls attention to the need for immediate and ongoing revision that I encountered while conducting the TO workshops. I scrapped my early plan of following Boal’s four-stage poetics of the oppressed, for example, when participants demanded more practical, language-related sessions. I did not eliminate my heavy emphasis on image theatre, however, and as a result I discovered the limitation of this tool for the ESL workshop context. I begin by describing the physical and temporal fieldwork scene for the performance workshops. Next, I offer thick description of the workshops, characterizing in succession the TO exercises that I implemented and participants’ responses to them. Following these narratives, I interpret the workshops by exploring three connected events: participants’ general resistance to performance (particularly image theatre); negotiation of the dissonance between my intended social empowerment objective for the performance exercises and participants’ expectations that the workshops would enhance their linguistic competence; and participants’ tendency to internalize their respective language-related obstacles as “cops in the head.”

The Fieldwork Scene

From a chronological perspective, the performative ESL pedagogy project included four distinct phases that spanned four seven-week ESL class sessions from October 2, 2000
to May 2, 2001. The first phase occurred during a three-week trial workshop in October during which I began to solicit participants. During these three weeks, I attempted to lay the groundwork for subsequent analysis of the social obstacles participants experienced while learning and using English. To this end, I guided participants through a series of body exercises taken from Boal’s TO as a small-scale training regimen for the later performance work we would engage. Next, for all of November and several weeks of December 2000, I led a seven-week performance workshop that was initially interrupted by a lack of participants. During this full-length workshop, participants openly discussed their respective language-related problems and began using Boal’s forum theatre to analyze those problems.

The third fieldwork phase began in January 2001 and included five weeks of a performance workshop before I took over as an instructor in an intermediate-advanced ESL class for two weeks in late February. The workshop portion of this fieldwork phase was not well attended and primarily featured small group discussion and image theatre exercises. I used my brief stint as an instructor during this phase to orient students to Boal’s TO and to introduce several forum theatre exercises. Finally, I constructed a forum theatre-based performative pedagogy to teach the same intermediate-advanced class for an entire eight-week session during March and April 2001. This fourth fieldwork phase featured a series of forum theatre exercises centered on issues that students discussed as relevant obstacles in their daily use of English. My brief, chronological fieldwork account becomes significant in light of the changes that marked each passing month of the performative pedagogy project. While the fundamental goal of the project remained consistent—to test the utility of performative pedagogy in an ESL context—the means by which I achieved that goal
gradually evolved in relation to the participants who joined the project and their stated language-related concerns.

During the first three phases of the fieldwork, I used Boal’s TO as a guide for a performance workshop. For one hour, twice and sometimes three times a week, I guided participants through various performance exercises that addressed the obstacles they identified in acquiring English. The one-hour workshops were scheduled at 5:30 p.m., immediately before the participants’ 6:30 p.m. ESL classes began. Throughout the entire fieldwork process, I raced from a community college course I taught that ended at 5:00 p.m. in order to make the workshop on time at 5:30 p.m.. I usually arrived just minutes, and sometimes seconds, before the workshop began after cramming a fast-food dinner down my throat. I mention these personal details to call attention to the context in which the performance workshops operated. I was not the only one rushing to make the meetings on time. The majority of the participants did not arrive until 5:45 p.m.; others did not come until 6:00 p.m.. At least a few participants told me early in the workshops that they worked and were coming directly from their jobs. Others reported that they depended on friends or family for transportation, making it difficult for them to arrive on time. Promptly at 6:30 p.m. and sometimes a few minutes before, an administrative worker in the ESL school would ring a bell, signaling that it was time for all ESL students, including those participating in my performance project, to report to their respective classes. As might be expected, time became a significant obstacle for the workshops. Not only were most of the participants and myself frequently tired and hurried after leaving other jobs, we also had a very limited time frame in which to operate.
I do not believe that the scheduling of the workshops drastically altered their outcome. I do, however, believe that our abbreviated time frame influenced both the manner and the content of the workshops. The ESL program director and I both recognized the potential for time constraints when we scheduled the workshops at 5:30 p.m.. We both feared that participants might find it difficult to work during the day and then attend an ESL program for three and a half hours, three nights a week. However, given that most participants worked during the day or only had access to transportation in the evening, the small block of time immediately before the ESL classes was the most logical choice.

Because it depended entirely on participants’ experiences and voiced concerns, my agenda for the workshops required complete and ongoing participation. I recognized that participation would determine the efficacy and success of this project. Boal’s performance practice and the critical educational theory that I invoked in constructing the performative ESL pedagogy experiment both assume a high level of commitment from participants. Ernest Stringer’s action research paradigm explains the sort of participation needed for this project. Stringer describes participation within a critical research project as enabling high levels of “active involvement,” allowing participants to “perform significant tasks,” offering “support for people as they learn to act for themselves,” encouraging feasible plans of action, and interacting “personally with people rather than with their representatives or agents” (32). I anticipated that participants would first identify the content for the workshop by sharing their personal experiences with learning and speaking English. I further expected that participants would maintain interest in the project long enough to analyze and propose solutions for the problems they initially identified. That is, I assumed that participants would
assume the roles of stakeholders ("those whose lives are affected by the problem under study") in the performative pedagogy project (Stringer 10).

The abbreviated workshop meetings and their awkward scheduling created pressure to get through the performance exercises in an efficient manner. Two participants who remained in the workshop for several sessions, Aleida and Yomaira, reported that other participants were anxious to talk, to practice their conversation skills. Though they may have understood the justification for practicing Boal’s image theatre and working with the body, participants viewed the hour prior to their traditional ESL classes as an opportunity to improve their speaking. I noticed that participants initially linked the performance project to their traditional ESL classes and then acted accordingly. Early in the project, participants assumed the traditional role of students by addressing me as “teacher” and frequently asking me to correct their grammar and/or pronunciation during conversations. Participants usually sat opposite me, leaving me alone on one side of a very long table. To the casual observer, the seating arrangement probably appeared more suitable for a classroom lecture, not a performance workshop.

The workshops themselves were held in a newly constructed administration building that housed the diocese’s entire community services organization. The administration building serves as the headquarters for all Migration and Refugee Services offices, including the ESL program offices and a single ESL classroom. Most of the ESL classes are taught in an adjacent building that the ESL school rents from the diocese. The workshops were assigned to a narrow conference room in the administration building, about twenty feet by thirty feet, dominated by the presence of four conference tables pushed together to form one long, rectangular table. Upholstered cherry wood armchairs were arranged around the table,
leaving about three feet of space between the table and the walls. A cherry wood chair rail lined the walls of the room, and four or five more armchairs were usually arranged against the walls in various locations. At the back of the room, a sink and an under-the-cabinet refrigerator were tucked into a corner. At the head of the room, a cherry wood cabinet that matched the other wood pieces encased a dry erase board. A small wooden crucifix hung above the cabinet near the ceiling.

The room’s name, the Board Room, and its furniture signified its normal daily function. Our use for the space—a workshop in which participants would engage in performance exercises—did not easily fit the room’s arrangement, much less the room’s size. The ESL classroom in the same building was also available, but was furnished with hard plastic chairs on either side of long student tables. It provided even less room than the Board Room space. As I already mentioned, the other rooms used for ESL classes were rented from the Catholic diocese, and they were frequently in use until 6:30 p.m. for other diocesan events. Having worked in the ESL school previously, I understood the difficulty in obtaining meeting space and decided early on that I would try to fit the workshop performance activities into the Board Room as best I could. This meant pushing the long heavy conference tables against the walls prior to each workshop session and creating an open space about twelve feet by twenty feet. This also meant avoiding the interruptions of custodial workers who frequently vacuumed directly outside the door to the Board Room while the workshop was in progress and who occasionally entered the room to empty trash cans and dust the furniture.

As comfortable and attractive as the Board Room’s furnishings are, the design and appearance of the room itself contributed to a passive environment. For example, I found it
difficult to get myself out of the large armchairs to initiate performance exercises after sitting for ten or fifteen minutes during discussion of participants’ experiences or while waiting for participants to arrive. Participants usually reclined in the chairs, appearing relaxed and comfortable while talking about their experiences. Once we all were finally up and moving, the conference tables were difficult to move, and the open space that remained after pushing the tables against the walls allowed only four or five people to move at one time. Though likely not the largest influence on participants’ reluctance to engage in some of the movement and image exercises I planned for the workshops, the formality of the room’s décor and arrangement contributed to participants’ expectations that the project would include substantially more roundtable discussion than physical activity.

Workshop One: Performer Training and Image Theatre

The first workshop—what I’ve termed the trial performance workshop—followed an open invitation that I made while visiting the two advanced ESL classes in the school. During my brief classroom visits, I solicited volunteers by demonstrating an image sculpting exercise taken from Boal’s practice, the “Image of Transition” (Games 173). When students in both classes that I visited readily participated in the sample exercise, I reconsidered my earlier plan of conducting a focus group discussion session during the first workshop. Within those brief visits, students demonstrated an active interest in using body images to represent their respective experiences. I, in turn, quickly adapted my original plans to include systematic training in Boal’s theatre poetics. I revised the workshop to reflect the careful body training evident in Boal’s practice. I did not shun conversation during the initial workshop, but my revised agenda spent considerably more time with performance exercises than it did with focus group discussions.
The entire trial workshop lasted three weeks and included six one-hour meetings. Following my visit to solicit participants for the project, seventeen people expressed interest. Eight attended the first workshop meeting. Four participants, all females, remained in the trial workshop: Adela, Aleida, Rosalina, and Yomaira.\textsuperscript{1} The trial workshop began several weeks into one of the ESL program’s seven-week sessions. As stated earlier, the primary purposes of the trial workshop were to identify potential problems that participants face in learning English and to begin orienting the participants to Boal’s TO. To that end, the workshop began with training exercises and games taken from Boal’s \textit{Games for Actors and Non-Actors} and progressed through image theatre exercises. Using the \textit{Games} text as a manual, I selected a series of exercises that would serve as systematic performance training for the participants. Michael Rohd’s \textit{Theatre for Community, Conflict and Dialogue} also guided my planning for the workshop. Rohd recommends a general three-part sequence for community, problem-solving theatre projects: warm-ups, bridge activities, and activating material. Warm-up activities, claims Rohd, serve three functions: “to get a group of people playing together in a safe space, to energize that space, and to create a sense of comfort in the collective doing of specific and structured activities” (4). Bridgework readies participants for final, problem-solving theatrical scenes by taking “advantage of the energy generated during the warm-ups and . . . [begins] focusing on imagination and issues” (Rohd 49). In the last stage of Rohd’s sequence, activating material is used to construct theatrical scenes that motivate participants to discuss alternatives to problems depicted there.

To fulfill the goal of performance training, where participants would become familiar with the practice of Boal’s image theatre and recognize its analytic potential in subsequent workshops, I began with exercises that explored the expressivity of participants’ bodies.
Boal argues that the actor’s body is already mechanized upon entering a performance space because it is a body subjected to repetitive actions according to social and occupation roles (Games 40-41). A teacher, for example, utilizes only certain muscles in performing the task of teaching. The repetitious cycle of standing before a class, gesturing during a lecture, scrawling notes on a chalkboard, and writing comments on students’ papers is inscribed on the teacher’s body. This cycle involves the same movements day after day. Boal thus begins his actor practice with a “de-mechanisation” process, “the re-tuning (or de-tuning) 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” (Games 41). I included “Sensory Exercises” during the first meetings of the trial workshop to re-orient participants to their natural bodies, outside of the social pressures inscribed on those bodies (Boal, Games 42). For example, working from a Boal suggestion, I asked participants to imagine they had eaten a sweet dessert and then directed them to respond physically to their imagined sensations (Games 42).

Next, I moved to the “Mirrors Sequence” and the “Modeling Sequence,” two groups of exercises that figure prominently in image theatre work (Boal, Games 121-29). Mirroring requires participants to become the exact mirror reflections of a subject played by another participant. However the subject moves, the mirror image follows (Boal, Games 121). Modeling requires participants to construct images using the bodies of volunteers. Participants sculpt the bodies of volunteers into physical gestures, postures, and expressions that indicate the desired image, which addresses a theme relevant to the group (Boal, Games 127). Both these techniques are used in image theatre, particularly when participants create physical images of their internal and external oppressions. In Boal’s practice, mirroring and
modeling become the primary techniques by which actors achieve their craft and subsequently analyze their respective obstacles.

As I guided these exercises, I worked systematically, shunning conversation about participants’ experiences with speaking English until late into each meeting. In fact, because several of the modeling exercises required participants to concentrate on the expressivity of their bodies, I repeatedly demanded silence. Though in line with Boal’s practice, my continued use of silent movement and image exercises created neat divisions during the initial workshop. For the first half of each meeting, I would lead participants through Boal warm-up exercises, some with no clear connection to the struggles of speaking English. During the latter half, the group would engage an extended image exercise—sometimes without talking—that identified a particular obstacle shared by the group. Then, in the final minutes of the meeting, participants would discuss what they had constructed and what their images meant. Aleida and Yomaira eventually referred to the Boal exercises as “my research” and contrasted that research with the participants’ desire to talk. Aleida further characterized my research as disinterested in speaking: “. . . [U]ntil now, I believe that you do think that we do not have to speak good English to communicate, no? That’s what I think. I don’t know if it’s true or not. But I think if I try to explain with my body something, that person is not very interested.” Regardless of my stated intent to initiate discussion about participants’ obstacles, the participants’ perception of and reaction to the trial workshop revealed a clear distinction between showing ideas on one’s body and telling them aloud through words, a distinction that would contribute to the second workshop’s reorganization. Three specific moments from the initial workshop illustrate this trend.
The first moment came during the second meeting when I asked participants to form small groups and tell stories to each other about specific people with whom they have trouble speaking English. For this exercise, I adapted Rohd’s “Storytelling” technique, which he uses as a mechanism to increase trust among participants (44). Two groups formed, and for about fifteen minutes, participants told their stories. Aleida described her trouble working in a dentist’s office. Though she worked as a dentist in Venezuela, she was hired as a dental technician after moving to the United States. Communication with the Americans in the office puzzled her.

I was working for three months in a dentist office, and they were extremely nice. They were really open, and the first impression was good . . . they treat me very well. “Okay, we are really happy because you are here. Oh my goodness, a dentist is here, we are going to learn so much from you” . . . and all things like that. And I was happy the first day, and I was surprised because it was the first day in a dentist office. And I went alone to talk, but it was nice, but it was terrible. It was terrible because every day they start very happy with me, especially the doctors. But then, okay, I just was working in a place this size [demonstrating small closet-like space with hands], and just sterilizing instruments without do any other things. I was bored all the day. There was not a seat, a chair to sit, nothing, no? And anybody want to talk. Look, I know that everyone was busy, not all of the time. And they were nice, but I think why they were so nice, and they told me I have to do another thing, and they never tell me, “Okay, now you are going to do that, and now you are going to do . . .” never. And even, new people came to work, and they started to do the things I have to do. Why, I mean, I am not doing that things, for example, taking x-rays or impressions. That’s my job because they told me that’s yours, but I never did that. And I feel, “Okay.” The last, my opinion was “Okay, that is, this is discrimination.” I think this is discrimination. “How you are new and you are doing what I have to do. You don’t have to do that.”

Aleida’s narrative captures a significant obstacle that non-English speaking immigrants face in coming to the United States: the problem of employment, particularly within their own professions. In our workshop meeting, however, the story was left alone. After Aleida narrated her experience, the group immediately began training in mirroring and modeling
exercises. I intended to return to the stories and ask participants to sculpt images of the
people they described in their stories, but we ran out of time while constructing the images.
The individual stories were not shared with the entire group, nor did I return to them during
the next meeting.

The second moment came during the third workshop meeting and involved a lengthy
image exercise that focused on concrete places in which participants felt uncomfortable
speaking English. Xenia, a Russian participant who later left the group, offered to construct
a group image in response to an exercise I adapted from Boal’s image theatre. A ubiquitous
tool within image theatre, “Illustrating a Subject Using other People’s Bodies” requires a
participant to sculpt other participants into a body image that represents a selected theme
(Games 169). Xenia’s image featured a scene of a home in which she was a guest. Xenia
placed herself as protagonist in the center of the image, looking downstage right at a seated
male who glared and gave an authoritative military salute. Immediately stage left of Xenia
was another seated male who rubbed his stomach. Downstage left of Xenia were two
females, one seated casually in a chair looking away from a notebook, and the other leaning
over the seated female, one hand on her shoulder, looking very interested in the notebook.
This latter pair represented a disinterested child and an overly concerned mother.

Xenia constructed her image meticulously, and the subsequent discussion of the scene
turned quickly from attempts to understand the various characters to assessments of why the
protagonist might feel uncomfortable in the house. Xenia told us that she was a guest in this
house, and the only person paying her any attention was the military-like male, who actually
seemed more interested in using Xenia as a soundboard for his ideas than in conversing with
her. The image provoked questions of being ignored as a non-native speaker. Adela
remarked that this image might occur in any house, with or without a non-native English speaker. Yomaira called attention to the lack of communication that seemed apparent. Indeed, only one person looked in Xenia’s direction, and this was only with a rude glare. I interpreted this exercise as a success: the participants worked to construct a sophisticated image of an exigency with which they all had experience, and the image initiated subsequent conversation about why the problem existed. Yet in debriefing the trial workshop participants, I learned that participants never really enjoyed the image exercises nor felt comfortable doing them and were always anxious to talk about their experiences instead. In this case, however, I confined most of the talk to interpretations of Xenia’s image.

Finally, the third telling moment came during the fourth trial workshop meeting, which was our last opportunity to engage in image exercises because, following that meeting, the group decreased to three and then two members. I adapted Boal’s “Dissociation—Thought, Speech, Action” exercise, taken from his image theatre arsenal, for the meeting (Games 192). Boal describes the exercise in four phases: a still image that represents an oppression, an activation that allows participants to voice their interior thoughts, another activation that allows participants to talk to each other, and a final activation that enables participants to take physical action in response to all the monologues and dialogues just spoken (Games 192-93). In our adaptation, the participants created solo images to represent a specific obstacle that interrupted their pursuit of learning English. After all participants demonstrated their images, Aleida volunteered to create a group image that addressed the obstacle articulated by Thierry, an elementary school teacher from France. Thierry’s solo image depicted his lack of time for studying English. Aleida constructed all members of the group into various poses that indicated the general theme of lacking time. Adela was busily
typing at a desk upstage right. Thierry was rigorously working out with weights downstage center. Rosalina was dancing in a carefree fashion upstage left. Aleida positioned herself on a couch upstage center, watching television with her legs propped up and remote in hand. Then, in a series of three dynamisations, the participants were allowed to express their character’s thoughts, discuss their situations with other characters, and then move in an attempt to overcome their own or others’ obstacles.

In discussing the image, Aleida said she tried to place each person in actions that matched their own individually stated obstacles to learning English. For example, Rosalina’s obstacle was “ignorance,” and Aleida positioned her as the dancer, seemingly not caring about anything but herself. Thierry offered the obstacle “time,” and he became a zealous workout fanatic. Adela used the obstacle word “homeless,” and the typing pose indicated her obsession with work and her fear of poverty. Aleida’s own obstacle was “laziness,” and her position in front of the television reflected that problem. When the students vocalized the interior monologues of their images, Adela consistently worried aloud about a lack of money and described how much she disliked her job. Thierry continually repeated how confused he was with being stuck in a gym, while Rosalina stated that she cared about nothing but having a good time. Aleida did not have much to say aside from how bored she was with watching television. The second dynamisation allowed verbal interaction between the characters, but resulted in a repetition of the interior monologues spoken to each other. The final dynamisation allowed participants to move in an effort to amend their obstacles, but after about three minutes, the participants returned to their original positions and continued their activities. The exercise concluded with a lengthy discussion of the participants’ characters and their own lived experiences.
Again, I calculated the image series as a success, primarily because participants had moved from solo images, into a group image, into an active scene, and finally into a group discussion. According to Aleida and Yomaira, however, the final discussion might have been possible without the image work. They reiterated the presence of a clear distinction between ESL participants’ desire for talk and my desire for theatre. Aleida, for example, admitted that she enjoyed several of the image training exercises, such as Boal’s “complete the Image” in which two participants rapidly improvise various physical images in response to each other (Games 130). As she noted, however, this was not an exercise intended to analyze participants’ English problems; it was a training exercise and was enjoyable in this capacity. What really mattered, Aleida claimed, was talking about problems and finding solutions to those problems.

Workshop Two: Image Theatre Resistance

Only two participants, Aleida and Yomaira, attended the first week of the second workshop in late October 2000, and I found myself starting over, creating a new performance workshop with new participants. I became frustrated with the lack of interest that the project had apparently generated, and I contemplated moving to another ESL site. When I finally regrouped and launched a second performance workshop, I made explicit adaptations to emphasize participants’ opportunities to talk about their experiences. I revisited three ESL classes to solicit interest in the project, and I distributed revised posters that emphasized the workshop’s conversational format. My original project agenda included conversation, but situated conversation within the frame of performance. During the second workshop, I emphasized conversation and used performance exercises that featured dialogue. Because I was primarily concerned with increasing and sustaining participation, I invited participants
from any level in the ESL school to join the project, and I eventually adapted the performance workshop to include forum theatre.²

I was particularly concerned with participants’ perception of the utility of the workshop’s image exercises. Aleida and Yomaira had both indicated that ESL participants were primarily motivated by the opportunity to practice their conversation skills. While I never intended to separate participant discussions from Boal-based performance exercises, the perception remained that the workshop consisted of two isolated components: “my research,” which became a tag for Boal exercises, and participants’ conversation practice. To alter this perception in the second fieldwork phase, I planned discussion sessions into every workshop meeting. Every meeting began with a conversation regarding language-related obstacles. This approach differed slightly from the previous workshop, in which participants engaged in various body-based, warm-up exercises prior to discussing their experiences with using English. During the revised workshop, the discussion sessions spanned thirty minutes, or one half of the one-hour meetings, and were followed by image exercises intended to provoke more discussion.

An example illustrates this trend. One of the early meetings in the second workshop began with a discussion of participants’ problems when speaking English and then moved into performance work. The seven participants in attendance described problems with pronunciation, understanding native English speakers, and articulating their native language thoughts in English. I then introduced an adaptation of Boal’s “Image of the Word” exercise (Rainbow 87). The exercise requires participants to articulate words that correspond with how they might feel when facing a self-described problem. A volunteer constructs a frozen image of one of the words using another participant’s body. Finally, the frozen image is
allowed to speak, expressing a psychological response to the problem (Boal, Rainbow 87). I included a brief set of rules: the sculptor could not talk to the image; the sculptor could mirror the desired image using his or her own body; the sculptor could physically sculpt the image.

The participants decided on the word “frustration” as representative of all the language problems they described during the discussion. Uriel, a middle-aged man from Colombia, offered to sculpt the image of the word “frustration.” Ana, who was from Mexico and a student in the highest level ESL class, agreed to play the image role. Uriel worked quickly and silently, but when he finished with the image, Ana appeared to be sculpted into a neutral body position. She stood upright, hands to her sides, with a faint frown on her face. Once Uriel completed his sculpting, Ana moved around uncomfortably. First, she placed her hands on her hips. She then shrugged her shoulders, sighed, and dropped her hands to her sides. I had specified to both Uriel and Ana that the image should be frozen so that other participants could study it from various perspectives. The group had no warm-up performance activities prior to this exercise, however, and I had not modeled a still image for the group because I feared that I might influence them to think a certain way about their language difficulties.

Next, I asked participants to discuss the probable thoughts and feelings of the “frustration” image, but few responded. Most stared at Ana with blank looks of confusion. I then asked Ana to dynamise her image by speaking aloud the thoughts that her image of “frustration” likely possessed. She began slowly, then gradually increased her rate: “I feel alone, frustrated, sad. I don’t know anyone. I want to cry. I’m crying. A lot of feelings together. I guess it’s horrible to feel this way, and I can’t stop this feeling.” She continued in
this fashion, speaking her thoughts aloud as soon as they came to her. At one moment, Ana appeared to ignore her audience; she spoke quickly, loudly, and with emotion in her voice. Soon after, however, she looked around at the other participants, began to blush, and slowed her speech down.

I sensed a breakthrough with the “Image of the Word” exercise. Participants had already talked about the specific language obstacles they faced (pronunciation difficulty, comprehension of English speakers, and translating thoughts into words), and they had characterized these obstacles with a shared feeling, frustration. At that moment, I hoped that participants understood the potential value of analyzing their language struggles through body images, and I asked small groups of participants to sculpt still images that reversed Uriel’s portrait of frustration, demonstrating how a non-native English speaker might look if the obstacle were eliminated. Two groups formed and worked on sculpting a single participant. Once again, though, the participants approached the images with hesitation. Ana seemed to understand the rules that I laid out for sculpting a still image. She did not talk while moving Uriel into a position that communicated confidence with speaking English. She modeled a stance for him and occasionally moved his arms to suit her image. Still Uriel and Phoufay, a male participant from Laos, continually talked about how the image should look. Phoufay verbally instructed Uriel how to stand.

The other group, which included Maryo, a participant from Sudan, Gloria, a participant from Colombia, and Juan, a participant from Mexico, constructed an image quickly, but did not use sculpting or mirroring techniques. Instead, Maryo and Gloria told Juan how to stand, verbally correcting him until he fit their image. The meeting concluded with a brief discussion of feelings and thoughts connected to the revised images. When I
asked Juan to voice the thoughts of his “confidence” image, he was noticeably reluctant. I
did not press him to respond, and the session ended soon after. This extended example
illustrates the standard pattern for much of the second workshop: participants openly
discussed their experiences with speaking English; I countered with an image exercise
intended to stimulate more talk; and the session concluded succinctly with little analysis of
the performed images.

After two weeks in the second workshop, participants seemed uneasy with the frozen,
speechless image work and more interested in the conversations that opened each session. In
a revised attempt to bridge the increasing division between these two elements, I focused on
Boal exercises that use live improvisations as entry points. I did not ignore image theatre as
a performative pedagogy tool, but I did carefully select image theatre exercises that allowed
for movement and dialogue. As the following example illustrates, Boal’s forum theatre, a
practice geared toward rehearsing solutions for real-life problems, offered a possible means
for bridging the perceived gap between performance and conversation practice. However, I
did not commit to forum theatre until I entered the ESL classroom, after an exhaustive
progression of image theatre exercises during which I discovered participants’ natural
inclination to inject movement into any frozen image and to talk during any silent exercise.
The following narrative describes the pivotal image exercise that led to this discovery.

During the third week of the workshop, I introduced a variation of Boal’s “Images of
the Image” exercise, in which participants respond through body images to a representation
of a shared problem (Rainbow 109). The exercise begins with a short drama that details a
problem, in our case confusion with opening a bank account. The drama is followed by
various static images constructed by participants that illustrate their interpretation of the
problem (Boal, Rainbow 109-10). Maryo opened our version of the exercise with a narrative that chronicled his difficulty in opening a bank account. Maryo relayed to the other participants the series of steps he took to understand the process of applying for and then using a bank account. When he could not understand the account application, Maryo took it home, carefully translated it into his native Arabic, completed it, returned to the bank, and opened an account. We then staged an improvisation of Maryo’s experience, with Phoufay playing a bank employee and Maryo playing himself in the protagonist role. The initial conversation between the two characters illustrated Maryo’s confusion with the account application process, particularly his difficulty in understanding the words used by the employee. Maryo entered the bank and asked to open an account. Phoufay asked Maryo questions regarding the account, and Maryo showed a puzzled look on his face before telling Phoufay confidently, “I do not understand. I will take the application home and then return it to you.”

My initial expectation for Maryo’s improvised scene was that it might encourage other participants to respond through image performances to their own similar experiences. I then hoped those images might spark participants to share more narratives so that the group might begin to analyze their experiences as problems to be solved. Maryo offered his own solution as soon as the bank application improvisation ended. As he reported to the group, “I took it step by step.” In refusing to accept his language barrier and the novelty of a bank account as problems, Maryo essentially re-categorized his experience as a sort of problem-solving project. To complete the project, he told us that he worked through a logical progression of questions and answers.
Question 1: How do I understand the questions on the account application?  
Answer: Take the application home, translate it into Arabic, and then complete it in English.

Question 2: How do I understand how bank accounts operate if I cannot understand what the bank employee says?  
Answer: Talk with friends who, as immigrants, have already been through the same situation.

Question 3: How do I understand the ATM machine?  
Answer: Ask the bank employee to explain, and if that doesn’t work, check with friends.

Question 4: How do I understand the process of filling out transaction forms?  
Answer: Again, ask for assistance at the bank, and when a teller does not seem willing to help, ask another employee.

The scene was cut short when we ran out of time, but Maryo’s brief improvisation offered more than a starting point for discussion. It modeled a way of thinking about mundane, problematic events for non-native English speakers. As he explained it, Maryo did not consume himself with worry, nor did he feel comfortable calling his situation a “problem.” For him, it was a new experience, and like any new experience, he learned its rules and expectations before trying to fulfill them. Maryo’s solution, which he presented alongside the problem, propelled the group toward Boal’s forum theatre, which we considered only briefly during the second workshop.

I introduced forum theatre during the subsequent meeting, but only after leading an image exercise to encourage participants to continue the pattern of considering the role, influence, and inhibitions of the body within any language obstacle. We began by discussing several communication obstacles that participants had addressed in previous sessions. Participants then selected problems related to talking on the telephone as the target obstacle for the meeting. During a previous discussion, several participants had talked about the
difficulty of understanding sales calls and medical appointment calls and of making
themselves understood to callers. Sara, a participant from Mexico whose four teenage
children also occasionally attended the workshops, pointed toward Maria, an elderly
participant from Brazil who spoke almost no English. Maria only spoke Portuguese during
the few workshop meetings she attended and relied on Sara to translate her messages for the
rest of the group. Sara indicated that Maria could not speak on the phone and always needed
help when the phone rang.

I suggested a hypothetical telephone scenario in which a salesperson calls a non-
English speaker, who attempts to understand and communicate. We used the scenario as the
focus for a revision of Boal’s “Image of the Word” exercise (Rainbow 87). In the
hypothetical scene, the salesperson attempts to persuade the non-English customer to register
for a long distance telephone plan. The non-English speaker cannot understand what the
salesperson says. I asked participants to describe words that characterized the thoughts of
both the non-English speaker and the salesperson. Participants described the non-English
speaker with these words and phrases: “fear,” “afraid,” “shy,” and “I try to catch as many
words as possible.” They described the telephone salesperson, conversely, in terms of
motivations: “He is interested in taking this person for the company. He is interested in his
self and selling.” “He talks very fast. He does not realize that I was on the phone. He
doesn’t care.” “He is just going to do his job no matter what.”

We then moved to image work. I guided participants through an image theatre
technique, “Illustrating a Subject with your Body,” in which participants express a theme in
the form of a motionless, silent image constructed on their own bodies (Boal, Games 164).
After modeling a still image of the non-English speaking protagonist using my own body, I
asked volunteers to make images of the protagonist. Three participants offered images. Aleida sat upright in a chair pushed close to a desk. She looked straight ahead as she covered her ears with her hands, a gesture that seemed to block the incoming sales call. Yomaira also sat in front of a desk. For her image, though, she tiredly rested her head on her right hand, and her face revealed a discouraged, sad expression. Her eyes and mouth both turned slightly downward. Maryo offered the third image of the protagonist, and he also sat at a desk. His simple image positioned him in a gesture of confusion. While scratching his head with his right hand, Maryo raised his eyebrows and lips in a questioning expression.

My purpose for constructing the protagonist images prior to introducing forum theatre was to encourage participants to consider how their respective language difficulties reside in their physical bodies. However internalized an oppression may become, it manifests itself in physical form by way of a person’s physical appearance, social mask, or mannerisms. Boal’s practice relies on this premise, and he proposes an embodied, participatory means for combating oppressions.

We can begin by stating that the first word of the theatrical vocabulary is the human body, the main source of sound and movement. Therefore, to control the means of theatrical production, man must, first of all, control his own body, know his own body, in order to be capable of making it more expressive. Then he will be able to practice theatrical forms in which by stages he frees himself from his condition of spectator and takes on that of actor, in which he ceases to be an object and becomes a subject, is changed from witness into protagonist. (Theatre 125-26)

Boal’s concern with revolutionizing the Aristotelian theatre, a theatre in which observers passively experience a catharsis while ingesting a drama’s message, can be extended to consider the daily lives of non-English speaking immigrants and refugees. Within American society, immigrants and refugees are largely confined to passive observer roles. That is, they are more likely to be acted upon than they are to act in the world. Their language level and
communication competence problematize their pursuit of occupational and educational goals. The image exercises were attempts to encourage participants’ self-reflection on the corporeal influence of their language status, particularly in preparation for a forum theatre session that would allow them to rehearse solutions for their respective difficulties.

I had originally planned to introduce forum theatre during the final fieldwork stages as a sort of culminating event. As I had conceived the project, forum theatre would conclude the performative pedagogical process, and would be preceded by image theatre-driven analyses of participants’ oppressions, which themselves would be preceded by extensive performer training exercises. Participants’ struggle to reconcile the body training with their concrete language goals during the first workshop, along with their resistance to image techniques during the second workshop, propelled the project directly into forum theatre. While conducting the workshops, however, I did not think of forum theatre as the sole means of adapting Boal as a performative ESL pedagogy. Although I introduced the practice to participants as early as the second workshop, I did not regularly use forum theatre until the fieldwork shifted to the classroom. I instead inserted forum theatre at the end of lengthy image theatre considerations of particular participant oppressions. The format for the final sessions of the second workshop and the for all the third workshop sessions thus resembled the following sequence: warm-up discussion of language-related obstacles; image theatre analysis of selected obstacles; and forum theatre rehearsal of proposed solutions to the obstacles.

Boal explains his forum theatre as a “sort of fight or game” in which audience members enter a dramatic scene in order to propose and rehearse solutions for specific, concrete social problems (Games 18). In Boal’s larger Theatre of the Oppressed practice,
forum theatre operates as a “living and present” language rather than a “finished product displaying images from the past” (Theatre 126). Following a sequence in which participants analyze their own bodies (recognizing the social influences on those bodies) and practice making their bodies expressive within games, Boal prescribes forum theatre to instigate direct intervention within some dramatic action that addresses concrete social issues (Theatre 126). The practice of forum theatre adheres to Boal’s objective for all his theatre poetics: “to transform the spectator into the protagonist of the theatrical action and, by this transformation, to try to change society rather than contenting ourselves with interpreting it” (Games 224). While Boal admits that theatre itself does not always constitute revolutionary action, forum theatre intends to rehearse for revolutionary action. Boal explains, “The truth of the matter is that the spectator-actor practices a real act even though he does it in a fictional manner. . . . Within its fictitious limits, the experience is a concrete one” (Theatre 141).

Forum theatre operates as an “artistic and intellectual game played between actor and spect-actor” (Games 19). Following a brief drama that focuses on a problem that affects participants’ lives, audience members are asked if they agree with the outcome of the drama, which typically illustrates a social obstacle or oppression that has not been effectively eliminated. When audience members express dissatisfaction with the original drama, the drama is repeated within a forum session. In the forum session, any audience member can stop the action of the drama by shouting “Stop!” The audience member may then replace any character and pursue any action that might eliminate the obstacle. Boal insists that replacement actors must continue the staged physical actions of their characters: “they are not allowed to come on the stage and talk, talk, talk” (Theatre 139). Moreover, all solutions
must be proposed on stage in action, not through suggestions voiced from an audience member’s seat. Actors who have been replaced remain on the sidelines as coaches to their replacements, correcting them if they misrepresent the original character’s motivation and will. The entire game is led by a joker, a “wild card” who explains the rules of the forum, monitors participants to insure they follow the rules, and encourages all participants to pursue as many possible solutions within the drama as possible. Boal also suggests that a “model of action for the future” be performed following the forum session to solidify the proposed actions generated in the forum (Games 21).

After explaining the motivation and rules of forum theatre, I asked the workshop participants to consider the telephone scenario that we had previously explored via images within a forum session. Aleida volunteered to play a long distance phone company salesperson. Yomaira played a protagonist who could speak no English. Frensly, a high school student from Mexico, played the protagonist’s friend who spoke limited English. The improvisation began with Aleida calling Yomaira on the phone and identifying herself as a representative of the AT&T Telephone Company. Aleida immediately asked Yomaira questions regarding her name, native country, and the money she spent on long distance. Though Yomaira told Aleida several times that she did not understand and that she could not speak English, Yomaira eventually answered her questions. Frensly instructed Yomaira, “Tell her you already have service,” but Yomaira was caught alternately between answering the salesperson’s questions and trying to express her confusion. The improvisation ended in a stalemate, with Aleida dominating the conversation and Yomaira repeatedly stating her confusion. Neither party hung up the phone during the improvisation.
I invited the audience to participate in a subsequent forum session. Once the forum began, Sara stopped the scene almost immediately and replaced Frensly as the friend of the non-English speaker. After a few minutes, Sara instructed Yomaira to ask the caller who she was, and Sara eventually spoke on the phone herself. When Sara handed the phone back to Yomaira without resolving anything with the salesperson, I stopped the scene to replace Sara. My motive in entering the scene was to encourage others to enter and to balance the effective attack that Aleida had mounted against Yomaira, but no one else interrupted the scene after I entered. I asked Yomaira to put the salesperson on hold, and when she did not, I grabbed the phone and told Aleida that she would have to wait for several minutes while I discussed the situation with Yomaira. I repeatedly asked Yomaira, “What do you want?” Her response was always, “I don’t know. I don’t understand.” I then informed Aleida that she was on speakerphone and that Yomaira would ask all the questions rather than the earlier pattern of persistent questions by the salesperson. The scene ended with no conclusion; Aleida consistently deflected Yomaira’s questions, redirecting them back to Yomaira, who remained confused.

The group then discussed the outcome of the rehearsed solutions and proposed others. Frensly suggested that the non-English speaker learn and repeat a single phrase: “I’m not interested right now, but I will call you back later if I am interested.” Aleida indicated that the protagonist had to know enough English to understand the purpose of the call before using that phrase. Yomaira then pointed to a phrase she had used during the forum scene: “I’m sorry. I don’t speak English.” She noted that this answer would stop the caller and that she would not have to worry about the content of the call. Aleida countered that the phone call may not be a solicitation. She described a friend who used the, “I’m sorry. I don’t speak
English” phrase when a nurse called to re-schedule her child’s physician appointment. When
the friend took her child to the appointment, she was confused by the change. Aleida
proposed that the protagonist learn and repeat another response: “Could you call back later?”
in conjunction with a specific time that a fluent English speaker would be available.

In an effort to rehearse these new solutions, Aleida and Yomaira returned to the
forum scene, this time with Yomaira always responding, “I’m sorry. I don’t speak English.”
Aleida persisted with the long distance sales pitch, but Yomaira always repeated her stock
response. The scene concluded when Aleida could not persuade Yomaira to purchase the
service. Both players claimed that they felt frustrated during the scene. Yomaira, though she
was not taken in by a sales solicitation, explained that she grew tired of being able to say
nothing except a single phrase, and Aleida admitted that she lost the authority she
experienced during earlier scenes.

The forum theatre session was the last performance exercise conducted during the
second workshop, and it generated more participation from a wider range of participants than
previous image exercises or group discussions. Participants performed theatrical roles within
the forum scene in a concrete, representational performance. While some participants
appeared awkward and reluctant during earlier image and warm-up exercises, they seemed
willing and energetic within their forum roles. Forum theatre offered a means for practicing
conversation in a realistic, pragmatic context. Though the image games and exercises I had
used in earlier workshop meetings centered around participants’ own stated language
obstacles, they frequently addressed those obstacles through embodied abstractions.
Participants were free to represent their respective obstacles on their bodies however they
wished during the image work, but the frequent restrictions regarding movement and
speaking seemed to render the exercises as less pragmatic for participants. Talk and action
 dominated the forum exercise, particularly because the participants focused on a
 conversation-related topic.

 During the second workshop, participants persisted in their tendency toward
 performance exercises that allowed speaking and movement. As a result, my initial three-
 part sequence for the project underwent transformation. I abandoned the performance
 training segment to focus on participants’ interest in particular language-based oppressions.
 Participants expressed considerably more interest in discussing their respective oppressions
 than they did in staging them via Boal exercises, an act that revealed their assumption that
 practicing English within a conversation would alleviate some of the obstacles they
 encountered. In light of this observation, however, I did not give up on image theatre. I
 instead introduced forum theatre as a performance practice that allows for significant
 conversation practice and turned to image exercises that opened with dramatic
 improvisations rather than still images. I continued this pattern into the third fieldwork
 phase.

 Workshop Three: Discussion-driven Performance Exercises

 The third fieldwork phase began in January 2001 following the ESL school’s four-
 week Christmas vacation and was interrupted by my cancellation of the performance
 workshop and subsequent entry into an ESL classroom. Attendance for most of the third
 workshop was dismal. During the first week, two meetings were canceled when only one
 student came, and only three participants attended the other. No more than six participants
 attended any workshop meeting, with most meetings having just four participants. The ESL
 program director reminded me that the school traditionally experienced low attendance at the
beginning of every calendar year, and I missed a week myself with the flu. The third workshop lasted only a month and included seven meetings. All these meetings featured group discussion regarding language obstacles, but given the consistently low attendance, I only initiated performance exercises during three meetings. I attempted to recruit more participants by redistributing workshop flyers, talking to ESL teachers, and calling previous participants who had stopped attending. Eventually, the low attendance prevented my planned expansion of the workshop into regular forum theatre sessions that would devise solutions to participant obstacles.

However, the abbreviated workshop was far from unproductive. Within lengthy conversations that dominated our meetings, participants explained their motivations for learning English, their respective communication-related problems, and their feelings regarding Boal’s practice. At first the discussions occupied our time while waiting for enough participants to arrive to launch a performance exercise. Eventually, though, even the meetings in which we did performance work contained substantial time for discussion. The participants’ detailed opinions and experiences eventually served as guidelines for the exercises and topics that I pursued in the intermediate-advanced ESL class. The third workshop thus became a testing ground for how to incorporate participants’ desire for conversation practice within Boal’s critical performance practice.

Four participants regularly attended the third performance workshop: Maryo and Aleida, who both attended previous workshops; Raquel, a Salvadoran college student; and Giorgio, a Peruvian college student. All four participated in performance exercises conducted during the workshop. For two weeks no more than three participants attended, and we spent the one hour sessions talking about participants’ experiences. I did not include
Boal exercises until the final meeting of the workshop’s second week when four participants attended. During this meeting, Raquel offered a narrative about a New Year’s party at which she struggled to have a conversation with the American guests. After she explained her experience, I initiated an image exercise to explore her discomfort through performance. Raquel reported that she felt awkward and nervous while at the party. She knew only one person there, her cousin, and no one else spoke her native Spanish. Moreover, at the time of the party she had been in the United States for less than a month. In response to this narrative, I asked the participants to create a still image that demonstrated Raquel’s uncertainty regarding whether the American guests understood any of the few words she spoke. I modeled the exercise after Boal’s image technique of “Illustrating a Subject with your Body,” and I demonstrated the technique with my own image (Games 164). Standing erect, I held my hands over my ears and grimaced. Aleida followed with a head-scratching gesture and a puzzled expression on her face. Next, I asked Raquel to sculpt Maryo into a frozen image that depicted her own party frustration. This exercise was Raquel’s first encounter with Boal, and she said that she was confused by my instructions. After I made several attempts to explain to her the purpose and rules of constructing images in Boal’s practice, Raquel told me she could not do it.

I quickly abandoned the image exercise and moved on to an adaptation of forum theatre, with Raquel improvising a conversation she had with an American male at the party. Maryo improvised the role of Raquel’s conversation partner, and both sat in chairs with their bodies turned slightly inward toward each other. Throughout the improvisation, Raquel said very little and answered Maryo’s questions with single words. Maryo eventually became irate, and he adopted a sarcastic tone when Raquel did not understand his questions. Maryo
demanded that Raquel explain why she could not understand his simple questions, particularly when he asked her about her favorite drink.

During the forum session that followed, I stopped the scene and replaced Maryo. I attempted to return to Raquel’s earlier description of the party, in which the man did not seem so hostile as he seemed confused and awkward. I even adopted a sympathetic demeanor. The scene concluded when neither Raquel nor myself could think of anything else to say. I felt uncomfortable with the continued silence that occurred during the conversation, and Raquel rarely looked at me. Another forum session followed, and I maintained the role of Raquel’s conversation partner. Aleida quickly replaced Raquel and immediately asked me to slow down my rate. She then informed me that she had only arrived in the U.S. a week ago and that it was difficult for her to understand English speakers. I acknowledged her request, and we continued our conversation at a slower pace. After the forum exercise, the participants, led by Aleida, briefly discussed the solution for a non-native speaker who is uncertain of whether an American conversation partner understands him or her. Aleida repeated her forum recommendation: the non-native speaker should clearly request that the American slow down and announce his or her difficulty in speaking English. Neither Maryo nor Raquel commented on Aleida’s solution.

Future performance exercises in the third workshop became easier and generated considerably more discussion than this first series, but the problem of having too few participants clearly affected the outcome of this and other exercises. With only four people present for the initial exercise, including two who had not experienced the brief performance training conducted in earlier workshops, it became difficult to sustain the forum scenes for any considerable length. I eventually abandoned my role as joker or facilitator to enter the
scene as an actor. I recognized the potential problem of an American speaker influencing the outcome of the suggestions proposed in the forum, and I consciously avoided replacing Raquel as the protagonist. Still, my leaving the facilitator role left no one outside the scene to encourage others to jump in with additional suggestions. Of course, only two spect-actors were available during the forum, certainly not enough to generate a wide range of corrective actions for the obstacle. Realizing the need for a larger and more active participant pool, I postponed further forum exercises and did not introduce forum theatre again until I entered the ESL classroom.

The workshop’s second performance encounter came almost two weeks later after I returned from an illness. With six participants present, the workshop’s largest attendance, I initiated two image exercises. During the first exercise, only Raquel and Maryo were present, while the other participants arrived in time for the second exercise. Adapting Boal’s “Image of Transition” exercise, I asked Raquel and Maryo to construct images that signified how they felt about studying English (Games 173). Boal describes the “Image of Transition” as a way to construct an argument through visual means (Games 173). First, a group sculpts an image that signifies a single oppression they all experience in their lives. Next, the group constructs an ideal image, a vision of what the world looks like for the members once the oppression is removed. Finally, the group returns to the oppression or real image and transforms it into the ideal. Using sculpting techniques, participants consider the changes that must take place to move from the oppression to the ideal image (Games 173-74).

Because only Maryo and Raquel were present, I asked them both to construct individual images for the psychological obstacles they faced while studying English. Raquel enclosed herself in a box formation using four chairs. The walls suggested by the chairs
allowed almost no movement, and Raquel stood expressing a puzzled gesture, her fingers outstretched, pressed to her temples. She expressed her thoughts aloud while assuming the image. “I can’t speak. Maybe I am afraid to speak because a lot of words I don’t how to say. I know how to write, but you don’t write and pronounce in the same way. I can’t explain. It’s like I can’t move the walls. I can’t get out of the walls. It’s like I’m locked.”

Maryo’s image included movement. While standing at a table, he pointed at an open book while scratching the side of his head with his index finger. Maryo repeated the pointing and head-scratching gestures three times, interrupting each gesture by shaking his head back and forth in confusion. I then requested that Maryo eliminate the movement in his image, and he sat in a chair at the same table, looking downward at the book. He placed his right hand down on the table in front of him, his fingers spread covering the book. He looked at the book with a blank gaze, while scratching his head in a gesture of confusion.

In the next phase of the exercise, Raquel and Maryo formed the ideal images that represented the removal of their obstacles. Raquel stood in the same location as before, but this time the chairs were gone, and she had plenty of space around her. She stood upright, and raised her hands palms inward in front of her body about two feet from her face. Maryo returned to his seated position at the table, smiled, and leaned back in his chair as he held his palms upward on the table in a gesture that resembled an open book. The dynamisation steps, during which participants move from oppression to ideal images, did not follow Boal’s directive that participants avoid speaking in the image of transition exercise. I asked Maryo to assume Raquel’s oppressed image so that Raquel could discover ways to move between the oppressed and ideal images. Once he assumed the image surrounded by chairs, Raquel offered him verbal instructions for his transition:
Move the walls first, you know? But get out the . . . from this space that he feels. First, moving one chair, then the others. Have to learn more for he can speak some good English and everybody understand him. And don’t be afraid to talk, to speak with anybody. And well, if he speaks bad, he gonna learn how to think what he doing bad. He gonna learn these things. He has to open his mind, to don’t be afraid to speak if [they] do not understand you.

I adapted the second performance exercise that we engaged from Boal’s “Image of the Word” technique, in which participants create images in response to words that represent their respective oppressions (Rainbow 87). In this case, I asked participants to think of the English language and fashion an image in response to their thoughts. Two participants offered images during the exercise. Giorgio, who was attending for the first time, sat erect in a chair facing a table. Placing both hands palms down on the table, he began a methodical sequence of dropping his head against the table and pulling it back up until he was again upright, only to repeat the head banging motion again. When I asked Giorgio to make the image still, he dropped his head until his forehead rested against the table. Aleida characterized Giorgio’s image as one of subservience to the English language: “. . . this picture is like, ‘Hey, English. I need you, I need you.’” Giorgio then explained, “For me, the English is difficult. Like, not for writing. It’s like the pronunciation. It’s like the word. For me, the difficult the pronunciation of the word. Yeah, like when you study, like you understand one word. It’s like, for me, it’s an expression of the difficult English.”

Aleida offered her own image by standing and assuming a running pose, her right foot far out in front of the left, her right hand reaching forward clinched in a fist, and the other clinched behind her torso. She explained,

Okay, now let me tell you that at the same time, I feel like I need to run. I need to go faster. Because I’m studying English as fast as I can, it’s true, but it doesn’t work very well. I’m tired, of course, but I need keep going, and I think each time, faster and faster. I have two years here, and maybe I will be
here for two years more, and I think two years is good time, it’s not enough time for me.

I think I have a bad memory, but if I study some, a new word today, or a new expression, I try to remember tomorrow, and it’s too difficult for me. I have to use a lot of something to fix that expression, no? Okay, a picture for me would be like, “I’m so, so tired. I’m really tired. . . . I think I’m losing time.”

Maryo concurred with Aleida’s description of the importance of time while studying English. Maryo had already commented earlier in the workshop that he had imposed an 18-month study deadline to pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and gain admittance into an American university. According to this deadline, he had only six more months to study English. Maryo described his difficulty with reaching his self-imposed deadline:

Sometimes it goes slow because of work and going to school . . . . I don’t have any time until weekend. All week I work, just on Sunday I am not working. So I don’t have any time, but I go back and take . . . I take a course, and it’s enough for me. That’s it. After one year . . . That’s my plan. After one year and a half I have finish all my courses [ESL]. All things. Writing English, speaking, anything. Sometimes I fall asleep when I come to work and go back home, and I’m very tired. So I take the book work, and after ten minutes, asleep. I sleep in the book because I want to read, but I fall asleep. I’m very tired.

The final performance series during the third workshop included Maryo, Giorgio, and Raquel. Following an extended discussion of several obstacles that participants had described during earlier meetings (self-imposed deadlines for learning English, difficulties with Americans understanding their messages, locating English speakers to talk to), I introduced an adaptation of Boal’s “Breaking the Oppression” technique (Rainbow 59). Boal explains the technique as a variation on performing other TO exercises: “Often, participants will tell stories and suggest improvisations in which the protagonist is extremely weak, resigned, bereft of desires” (Rainbow 59). Boal uses this technique to stimulate participants
to re-play a scene in a way that energizes the conflict or oppression under consideration. The protagonist must relive the scene “not as it really happened, but as it could have happened or could happen in the future—the way she would like it to happen” (Rainbow 60). I decided on the technique after listening to ESL participants express a number of variations on the same oppression theme: “Some Americans will politely try to understand what I’m saying, and others will rudely resist understanding me. Ultimately, there is not much I can do. It’s up to the listener.” In an effort to reconsider the agency that non-native English speakers possess, I asked the participants to stage a real life experience that featured an English-related problem. Giorgio suggested a recent experience he had at a gas station as our topic. After stopping to buy gas, Giorgio struggled to understand how to get the pump started. He claimed that he understood the payment system instructions, yet saw no indication for what he should do if he was paying with cash. Several cars waited behind Giorgio’s car, and he finally went inside the convenience store to ask a cashier for help. After she explained that he would have to pay before she turned the pump on, he gave her cash and returned to fill up his car.

We improvised the scene as Giorgio had described it with Giorgio playing himself, Raquel sitting in a chair behind him to represent the waiting customers, and Maryo standing some distance away as the gas station cashier. During the second improvisation, I instructed the Americans in the scene, Raquel and Maryo, to make things more difficult for Giorgio by expressing their impatience. Raquel began by abruptly asking, “What’s the problem with you? Why don’t you hurry up?” Giorgio then apologized and retreated inside the convenience store. Once inside, Maryo snapped at Giorgio: “You have to stand in line. What you need? Where are you from?” Giorgio explained his confusion. Maryo sighed
audibly and glared at Giorgio. “Gas is very easy!” Maryo then quickly explained the proper procedure for paying by cash. Giorgio apologized to Maryo and returned to pump the gas. Raquel again harassed him: “You spend a lot of time inside. Next time you must hurry up!” Giorgio dropped his head and apologized.

Following the re-improvisation, the group discussed possible solutions to Giorgio’s hypothetical dilemma and to other problems in which Americans become impatient or rude with non-native speakers. Raquel claimed that she might refuse to accept others’ impatience: “I get very upset because I am not stupid, but I cannot speak very well. Well, maybe I tell the people that I’m from El Salvador, and I can’t speak English, and at least I learn other language, and you don’t. So, I talk with people maybe and tell them.” Maryo offered a more passive, apologetic solution.

First, you have to say, “I’m very sorry. It’s my first time over here. I don’t know because my country very different the language.” This one happens, I think it happens to me a long time ago too. A woman, I go shopping. And there’s all the signs say “Only 10 Items,” and after that, “Only 10.” I take a lot of stuff so I go to “Only 10 Items.” So the cashier stops, “What you need? What you doing? You have to go to another checkout...” From our conversation she knows that I am not from U.S. She told me, “Where?” I told her, “I’m from Africa, Sudan.” She told me, “Oh, I’m very sorry.” It’s good for me because she know that it was my first time.

Next, I asked all three participants to create images to represent a reaction that native English speakers commonly used when communicating with them. I followed Boal’s “Ritual Gesture” exercise in adapting my instructions (Rainbow 113). Boal describes rituals as “actions that we perform when our hearts are no longer in them. Rituals mechanise us” (Rainbow 113). Boal asks participants to freeze an action that represents a ritual in their respective lives. Because ESL participants seemed so aware of the reactions they received when they spoke English, I was curious about the ritual gestures they observed when
communicating with native English speakers. Raquel stood and placed her hands over her ears. Maryo stood and stretched his hands in front of his body at chest height, palms facing upward. Giorgio stood and stretched his arms above his head with his palms facing outward in a stop position. I asked the participants to maintain their images while they spoke aloud the thoughts they imagined Americans had when speaking to non-native speakers. Raquel, Giorgio, and Maryo all spoke simultaneously, talking over each other loudly. Giorgio uttered a phrase or two and stopped. Raquel spoke low and quick: “I don’t want to hear people who doesn’t speak English. I just want to talk with Americans because I understand the English, and you don’t talk good. So, I don’t want hear, I don’t want to pay attention to you.” Maryo spoke in a fast, sarcastic tone: “I don’t understand. Don’t waste my time. Excuse me. Just talk English so I can understand and you won’t have problems.”

The performance exercises used within the third workshop offered a context for the subsequent fieldwork phase held in an ESL classroom. Participants repeatedly concentrated both their discussions and image performances on their daily struggle to manage mundane interactions with native English speakers. Trips to the gas station, attending parties, and purchasing goods at a grocery store: all these ordinary events represented potential communication obstacles to ESL participants, and the participants magnified these events as a result. Before entering the field and for some time during the fieldwork process, I envisioned a series of complex, internalized oppressions that immigrants and refugees must face while learning English. Given my previous conversations with ESL students, I imagined that the most significant issues encountered by non-native English speakers concerned issues of independence, discrimination, and loss of identity. While more than a few participants in the three performance workshops validated my early expectations, the
issues that participants typically addressed were concrete and related to mundane interactions. Their issues concerned a more fundamental question: How do we communicate with other people when we don’t speak English well?

Performance Skepticism: Legitimizing Theatre of the Oppressed

During the workshop fieldwork, doing Boal became an exercise in legitimization, as I attempted to persuade participants that performance methods—particularly image theatre methods—were a viable means of considering their language-related obstacles. One exchange illustrates this challenge. During an early workshop meeting, Aleida, perhaps speaking on behalf of several other participants, directly questioned the utility of image exercises. She noted that image theatre frequently disallows either movement or speaking, and yet participants’ principal problem was not being able to speak English. I made scant reference to Boal’s underlying assumption that humans possess a psychic-physical unity. As Boal simply states, “A bodily movement ‘is’ a thought and a thought expresses itself in a corporeal form” (Games 61). I then asserted that the body abstractions used in image theatre were beneficial to participants. Aleida interjected, “But can you give me a vivid example?” and then asked me to illustrate the utility of image theatre within the context of a non-native English speaker trying to explain an illness to a doctor. “Not explain [the illness] with your body; that is easy,” she added. I paused. I took a deep breath. Then I stumbled through a seriously flawed explanation of how image theatre might lead to the development of rapid-fire analytic skills that could help the person’s conversational confidence during the doctor’s visit.

Aleida had me stumped. I’m quite certain I blushed throughout my entire bullshit response, never once pausing to address the obvious: Boal’s performance practice does not
provide a series of toolbox skills that might be pulled out when faced with any new, relatively unfamiliar problem. Rather Boal’s practice offers a means of retrospective analysis, of revisiting a problem in order to identify corrective measures to be wielded in the future. Aleida never challenged my answer, possibly taking it, on good faith, as potentially viable. “Oh, yes. Oh, yes,” she responded, nodding her head as if she understood me. Legitimizing image theatre represented a significant obstacle during the early fieldwork stages, and my handling of the task in part explains participants’ hesitant reaction to the use of image theatre as a performative pedagogical tool.

My earliest explanation of the performance project came during a visit to two advanced ESL classes. While trying to generate interest in and solicit participants for the project, I explained that the ESL performance workshop would: (a) focus on participants’ experiences and (b) use performance exercises to describe and analyze those experiences. My earliest justification for the project came during the first meeting of the trial workshop. I described the project as an extension of Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed practice to an ESL context. Performance, I suggested, would offer participants a means by which to address the language problems they encountered during their everyday lives. I proposed that using Boal’s TO would position participants as active collaborators in the assessment and correction of their respective obstacles. As I envisioned it during the trial workshop, the performative pedagogy project was not concerned primarily with teaching English, but with engaging participants as Boalian spect-actors, participants whose experiences serve as content for problem-solving performance exercises. During the first workshop, I never mentioned the objective that participants later identified as more salient: conversation practice.
Freire mandates that any educational endeavor begin from the perspective of its participants, “the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people” (Pedagogy 85). Boal insists that TO requires the spectator who “assumes the protagonic role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change—in short, trains himself for real action” (Theatre 122). I took these recommendations quite seriously during the initial workshop inasmuch as I argued that participants ought to articulate their respective language-based oppressions and take action to revise them. Of course, the oppressions that I envisioned participants would address concerned social-based language difficulties, where learning and speaking English produced concrete effects on participants’ social interactions. In addition to these problems, participants also referred to their linguistic deficiencies.

I claimed to operate from a position that privileged participant involvement and decision-making. “My goal for the workshop,” I would frequently say to participants during the first session, “is to have you take over, to have you identify your own problems and analyze them.” However, that statement did not always correlate with the exercises scheduled for any given meeting. I was adamant about Boal performer training, and I frequently dominated the discussion during the trial workshop meetings in an effort to prepare participants for subsequent analytic and problem-solving performance work. I explained the preliminary schedule for the project (performer training, identification and analysis of participants’ obstacles, and final product oriented toward rehearsing solutions to obstacles), but I did not offer an explicit justification for that schedule.
Boal justifies the organization of his TO poetics by referring to the end goal: action on the part of spectators. Boal explains his practice as a systematic means for carrying out this objective:

> We can begin by stating that the first word of the theatrical vocabulary is the human body, the main source of sound and movement. Therefore, to control the means of theatrical production, man must, first of all, control his own body, know his own body, in order to be capable of making it more expressive. Then he will be able to practice theatrical forms in which by stages he frees himself from his condition of spectator and takes on that of actor, in which he ceases to be an object and becomes a subject, is changed from witness into protagonist. (Theatre 125-26)

Boal identifies theatre as a series of languages, literacies to be practiced by both the aesthetically skilled and unskilled. All bodies are expressive, and TO exercises rely on bodies to communicate the participants’ respective oppressions. ESL participants are privileged in this regard because their use of an embodied theatrical language diminishes the need to communicate perfectly in English. During their practice of TO’s theatrical language, participants analyze obstacles to their acquisition and practice of a verbal language. Boal intends participants to experience self-reflexive moments while practicing TO; his hope is that “the human being discovers that it can observe itself... in this act of seeing, it can see itself” (emphasis in original, Rainbow 13). For ESL participants, seeing oneself played out onstage invites reflexive moments to re-consider the problems involved in acquiring and using a second language.

I followed Boal’s justification when explaining the performance project to the trial workshop participants, but I did not communicate this defense in terms participants recognized as immediately useful. Aleida reminded me of the necessity of legitimizing Boal’s practice for participants: “But I think if I try to explain with my body something, that person is not very interested.” Without a clearly expressed justification for the TO-based
workshop, participants no doubt questioned the efficacy of certain preliminary Boal training exercises: of walking around a room at different speeds, always maintaining an equal distance between oneself and others; of standing across from a partner and mimicking their facial expressions and body movements; of pretending to pick up an object from the floor while concentrating carefully on all the discrete muscle movements necessary to perform the task.

Freire observes, “[T]he dialogical character of education as the practice of freedom does not begin when the teacher-student meets with the students-teachers in a pedagogical situation, but rather when the former first asks himself what he will dialogue with the latter about” (Pedagogy 81-2). I never questioned the content of the dialogue between participants and myself during the first workshop. My focus concentrated squarely on training participants in Boal’s practice and generating possible obstacles to consider during subsequent workshops. The content of participants’ conversations mattered to me insofar as they identified their respective obstacles, but the small amounts of time I afforded to those conversations during the initial workshop reflected their lesser significance. Significance, I seemingly suggested to the trial workshop participants, was determined by the project’s faithfulness to Boal’s system for training TO actors. Boal’s practice involves four stages to transform passive spectators into actors. The first two stages, “knowing the body” and “making the body expressive,” consumed all the initial and at least half of the latter meetings during the first workshop. The third stage, “theatre as language,” engages participants in direct confrontation of their obstacles but was used during the first workshop in only three image exercises. The final stage, “theatre as discourse,” involves participants in rehearsals for solutions to their obstacles and was not used during the first workshop. In designing the
workshop with a heavy emphasis on training exercises, most of which did not require or allow talking, I unwittingly emphasized a division between TO and participants’ personal goals for obtaining linguistic competence.

In response to a decline in attendance and participants’ reports that the first workshop did not adequately address their interest in improving conversation skills, I moved to a more explicit justification for the second and third workshops. More drastically, I articulated the performance workshop as acutely focused on improving participants’ conversation skills. I revised the characteristics that I used to describe the workshop. Instead of highlighting the performance activity that would take place within the workshop, I emphasized opportunity for conversation. I revised a promotional poster to encourage participants to “PRACTICE SPEAKING ENGLISH IN A CONVERSATION GROUP.” I took seriously the comments from participants in the first workshop who suggested that every meeting must include opportunities for discussion and conversation. Aleida relayed a seemingly obvious statement regarding ESL participants’ desires: “People love to talk about our own experiences. It makes people feel important.” I returned to Boal’s written description of his practice, and I read Adrian Jackson’s introduction to The Rainbow of Desire in which he encourages Boal’s practice to “be treated with a similar combination of respect and disrespect—like a good cook, users of the book should be prepared to vary the recipe to suit the ingredients and the tastes of the eaters, because the work is always about what is going on in the moment, not what is going on on the page. It is not a catechism” (xxiv). I found myself legitimizing the performative pedagogy project by “selling English” to suit participants’ particular needs for conversation practice. Yomaira suggested that I recognize the intensity of participants’
desire for conversational competence: “We used to be starving for English. I think you can play with this. You need to offer this.”

My adaptation to a conversation-based rationale for the performance workshops also included a shift in how I introduced and described the performance exercises that we engaged. The most significant change to the second and third workshops concerned the inclusion of group discussions prior to any performance activity. Following an open discussion in which participants identified various language-related problems, goals, and personal experiences, I implemented image theatre exercises. In light of my explicit shift toward a conversation emphasis, I also noticed that my explanation of Boal exercises included several disclaimers. For example, while introducing the “Illustrating a Subject with your Body” exercise, I used the terms “weird” and “strange” (Games 164). Admittedly, I was concerned that participants might fail to recognize the utility of image theatre, particularly after I insisted that they strictly follow Boal’s rules regarding movement and talking during all image work. I had already encountered resistance to image theatre during the first workshop, and I attempted to acknowledge the oddity of some of my performance instructions during the subsequent sessions. During the initial workshop, I worked through a brief defense of Boal’s image theatre, focusing particularly on the utility of using one’s body rather than one’s words to communicate one’s desires. But I did not directly reference Boal’s emphasis on the expressivity of the body as a justification that enables ESL participants, in particular, to analyze their communication obstacles despite any English language deficiency.

I suppose my use of disclaimers while describing image theatre was both an attempt to put participants at ease and a subconscious recognition on my part that image theatre might, in fact, seem very odd in light of participants’ clearly stated conversation goals.
Participants in the second and third workshops, however, did not respond to my revised description by following the rules of image theatre. Instead, they approached image theatre exercises as participants in the first workshop had, by immediately resorting to movement and talking to construct any given image. During the first workshop, I reacted by interrupting participants and insisting that they not speak but instead use Boal’s gestural tools of mirroring and modeling to sculpt their images. I entered the subsequent workshops with the persistent worry of losing participants, and I reacted more cautiously when participants mobilized their image work. At first, I gently reminded participants to work silently or to produce frozen images during a particular exercise. I also relied on participants from the previous workshop to model the procedures for various image exercises. Yet participants interpreted my instructions to construct an image as requests for improvised role plays in which they acted out their respective experiences for the workshop, what Boal calls simultaneous dramaturgy (Theatre 132). As this trend continued I noticed that in most cases participants were modeling actual experiences and that others reacted to the role plays with their own stories. Participants shunned Boal’s technique of constructing corporeal abstractions of a tangible event in favor of concrete reenactments.

Boal recognizes the considerable difficulty of initiating performance methods within a group of participants congregated for a specific learning task such as literacy. While explaining how Theatre of the Oppressed was practiced within a literacy campaign in Peru, Boal notes that for the social classes of “peasants, workers, and villagers,” theatre can easily be associated with “leisure or frivolity.” Moreover, Boal indicates the substantial alienation that exists between the literacy educator and the students—regardless of potential social class similarities—based on the former’s educational objective, which becomes “an alienating
factor between the agent and the local people.” Boal argues that Theatre of the Oppressed must resist further alienation of its participants by utilizing their bodies rather than “taught or imposed” performance techniques (Theatre 126-27). Therefore, TO opens with “knowing the body” and “making the body expressive” exercises, all intended to construct a performance vocabulary based on participants’ lived experiences as manifested in their physical bodies.

For ESL participants in the performance workshops and class, systematic Boal training in realizing the expressive potential of their bodies, however capable they were in performing the exercises, obscured their acute interest in improving English linguistic competence. As I noted earlier, Boal’s general view of theatre as a language and his specific view of TO as a gestural language intend to activate participants by reducing the formal theatrical training required by other practices. Participants need only be capable of performing simple body actions and be willing to observe their personal experiences played out, analyzed, and re-considered onstage to take part in TO. For ESL participants, those capabilities were well within reach and yet not at all in agreement with their preference for talk-driven sessions. I observed that participants’ higher degree of comfort with performance exercises that allowed movement and talk was connected to their respective English proficiencies.

Several participants admitted, for example, that they frequently worried whether Americans understood what they said. Gloria, a Colombian participant, explained, “I hate when people don’t understand what I’m saying.” This concern was manifested in the image theatre workshops when, after constructing an image, participants would explain their motivation or meaning behind their performances, regardless of whether I requested an
explanation. Participants frequently referred to movements they had made within the image to explain themselves. Given the pre-existing problems that participants had with speaking English, the imposition of image theatre rules (especially not being able to talk) created further communication obstacles. Though I explicitly established a performative framework for the ESL workshops, the workshops occurred within an ESL school, a site that represented a safe locale for non-native speakers to practice English. Image theatre can be viewed in this context as an additional silencing of participants who purposefully enrolled in the ESL program to learn to use English and yet were denied that opportunity during image constructions. I frequently encouraged participants to converse about the experience of constructing a particular oppression image and to respond to the images that others constructed. The conversation that emerged from my prompting, however, was typically sparse. I asked questions about the images. Participants succinctly responded. As it played out in the workshops, image theatre became another case of the native English speaker dominating conversation while non-native speakers passively digested instructions or responded to direct questions.

Yet as I have already documented, participants did not accept being silenced for long. In response to the increased difficulty of conveying their meaning during image exercises, participants simply broke the rules: they moved and talked when necessary. Aleida, who attended all three of the performance workshops, explained this tendency as a desire to practice conversation:

We can have that kind of exercise that has conversation. Like Maryo and Raquel’s [forum theatre] exercise. We can have more of that kind of exercise because you received opinion of... they got not your opinion... She received his opinion, and the same. And they had a... an interchange, a kind of interchange.
Rather than begin from the universal basis of gestural language, open to all participants regardless of language competence, ESL participants preferred the more tangible, representational work of forum theatre. Participants preferred concrete reenactments of their lived experiences to symbolic images that characterized their internalized reactions to those same experiences. Participants preferred to communicate via the English language rather than Boal’s gestural language.

In response to their preferences and in recognition that their low level of conversational competence caused many social-related problems for participants, I shifted to a process-driven workshop structure. The revised workshops provided an independent context within which participants could present, analyze, debate, and pose solutions to discrete communication-based problems. By concentrating on the process of TO rather than its final product, participants were able to construct performances of single issues in isolation. During the second and third workshops, each meeting potentially stood alone, as we considered a new obstacle and launched a new conversation-based performance exercise each night. Participants subsequently embraced performance exercises that allowed them to engage in conversation. The immediate relevance of tangible, talk-driven exercises such as forum theatre made more sense to participants than image theatre, particularly when they faced the pressures of mundane, social interaction on a daily basis.

Performance to What End? English Fluency versus Social Empowerment

Participants’ concern with conversation practice revealed another challenge for the workshop portion of the fieldwork. My insertion of performative pedagogy into an ESL context presupposed that language is infused with social and political implications. Participants, however, were primarily concerned with language as a structural system and
therefore anticipated that performative pedagogy would enable them to manage that system. No matter how I adapted the fieldwork, participants consistently expressed an expectation that performance workshops would directly lead to increased language competence. Several participants requested advice on the “correct” way to speak English, including repeated requests for pronunciation, grammatical structure, and vocabulary instruction. During the trial workshop, for example, participants asked me to justify the performance exercises as tools that would enable them to speak fluently with improved pronunciation. As they seemed to define it, language competence was an “it” to be acquired, a skill very separate from the mundane, social obstacles that participants faced daily, even if those obstacles emerged from language difficulties. Aleida’s request for increased grammar training illustrates this position.

But I feel that I need more grammar. I think in five years, I need grammar. I think that way, and maybe I am wrong. But of course, more than grammar, we need to talk. Some words I use that I have no idea how to write these words, you know? And that’s bad because you just heard the word, and you catch that word and you use that word. But not because you, “Okay, this is how it’s spelled.”

Aleida and Yomaira’s proposal that the workshop be divided between two activities, performance-based exercises and conversation practice, involved making a bargain with potential participants: “I’ll help you out with your spoken English if you help me out with my theatre games.” At this moment, early in the second workshop, I fully recognized that a dichotomy between my goals and the participants’ goals for the performance project had already formed. While I viewed language through a lens of social agency (as a means of both empowerment and oppression), participants continually labeled language as a linguistic skill to be acquired through repeated practice. Ironically, both perspectives recognized language acquisition as a significant and necessary action. The focus for participants,
however, was initially limited to linguistic achievement. Participants viewed their language-related obstacles as confined to their linguistic competence rather than shaped by larger social and political implications.

I entered the performance workshops with the underlying assumption that ESL learners would welcome discussion of the socio-cultural struggles they encounter when going through the process of learning and speaking English. My prior experience as an instructor in the ESL program led me to consider non-native English speakers’ mundane social interactions as sites that might be addressed from the perspective of consciousness-raising. During my previous classroom conversations, ESL students called attention to their almost daily struggles to communicate with employers, landlords, and salespeople. Several labeled their experiences discriminatory in light of Americans’ assumptions that they could not communicate as adults. Jurate, an au pair from Austria, related a problematic example that occurred when she interacted with her employers:

And I ask, “Where is this?” they don’t explain. They just say, “Oh, you know you don’t need this,” like for small baby. “You don’t need this. It’s too far. It’s too dangerous. It’s too . . .” like that. And when I know, I can say, “No, I know this is not true.” That is why I need language. It’s my freedom. Then you can read the newspaper, . . . you can go out, many things. Get driver’s license, read map, many things. . . .

Given the narratives that I listened to during previous conversations with immigrant and refugee ESL students, I anticipated that the workshop participants would welcome a critical performative pedagogy, with its goals of consciousness raising and social empowerment. I assumed that experiences like Jurate’s were neither unique nor infrequent, and I aimed to encourage participants to share their own like experiences during the performance workshops.
The participants within the workshops, however, constantly referred to a different set of obstacles, problems that focused on the mechanics of learning and speaking English. Rosalina, a participant during the first performance workshop, suggested that her primary problem was linguistic not social in nature: “But now I think the thing we have to do, I mean we, because we are in a little high level, we have to practice and practice and practice and only practice [speaking English]. Yeah, don’t study any more grammar or pronunciation.” My entire project, of course, aimed to explore the critical consciousness-raising efficacy of performative pedagogy in an ESL context. To that end, I encouraged participants to consider the social consequences of the linguistic-based problems they frequently described. For example, during the second workshop, a participant identified pronunciation as a significant problem that most non-native English speakers encounter. Gloria explained that when she says the word “beach,” American interactants assume she is saying “bitch.” Several other participants then offered embarrassing examples resulting from pronunciation confusion (“sheet” and “shit”; “peanuts” and “penis”). Rather than guide participants through pronunciation practice that focused on particular vowel or consonant sounds, I encouraged them to share more stories, and I asked specific questions about the reactions they received during their pronunciation mishaps. My goal was to frame the embarrassing situations as socially-based communication obstacles that might be analyzed through performance.

Some participants, however, insisted that a pronunciation miscue, regardless of the embarrassment it caused, was a simple linguistic deficiency, one that could be easily mended by identifying, modeling, and practicing standard English pronunciation. While I did not disagree that learning and practicing standard English rules would substantially reduce communication obstacles, I was more interested in the larger social implications of such
obstacles, specifically the connections to a non-native English speaker’s social empowerment. Therefore, I responded to discussions like the one described above by introducing image theatre exercises in hopes of connecting the minor pronunciation error to an extended discussion of the consequences that participants encountered as a result of their language deficiencies.

During one such attempt, I asked participants to identify a single problem that immigrants and refugees typically face when arriving in the United States without English fluency. Yomaira and Aleida both identified the most significant—and likely most obvious—problem for non-native English speakers: the English language itself. Following my standard workshop pattern, I tried to extend the language-based problem to other socially-located problems that we could then analyze and address through performance.

Yomaira responded:

I think if you do not speak English, English is the first problem. Okay, you have a lot of other problems, like work, and going to school, everything. Like speaking, you know, I think, like how are you going to live here, you know? It’s the first problem.

Aleida then extended Yomaira’s explanation:

Of course, if you don’t speak English, you . . . okay, from this problem you have a lot of problems. But the principal reason is you don’t speak English. And if you don’t speak English you cannot study, you cannot work, you cannot go out and buy anything. . . . Sometimes you can do it, of course, but really, really with a lot of problems. But, this problem, if you don’t speak English, then after that, you have other problems. Okay, one of all the others is bigger, but the principal is language.

The participants’ continued emphasis on considering their problems through a linguistic lens—a perspective that suggested communication obstacles would be solved after learning fundamental language skills—made good sense in light of my equally rigid insistence on performance techniques. When I initiated the project, I described the workshops as entirely
concerned with participants’ experiences. Yet I did not immediately reference participants’ experiences during the first workshop, waiting until after participants had completed a rudimentary performance training regimen. While I explained the training as a necessary step leading to analysis of and solutions to participants’ communication problems, I did not invite participants to share those problems during our first meeting.

Later, after I dramatically shifted from basic performance training and image theatre exercises to a straight forum theatre approach, I recognized that the emerging dichotomy between my so-called performance goals and participants’ language goals was largely to blame for the confusion. During the early phases of the workshop, I did not effectively combat the flawed assumption that socially-based communication competence goals were inherently different and separate from linguistic-based goals. The language concerns of participants were always already immersed in social, political, and cultural concerns. As Holborow argues, “Language is both a social product and a component in the social process of how humans interact and act on the society in which they live” (11). Regardless of the largely structural linguistics approach promoted within their ESL program classes, students use the English language within social arenas and, therefore, are always susceptible to the social consequences of their language use. Holborow again clarifies: “English, for good or for ill, is what history has handed down to large numbers of people but people, in different social circumstances, have also transformed it” (11).

Within the United States, non-native English speakers frequently struggle to locate employment and schooling or to carry out any number of daily, communication-based tasks (Auerbach and Burgess 166). For these reasons alone, the English language carries with it a series of socially-based obstacles for immigrants and refugees. ESL participants in this
project admitted that the English language represents their “principal problem,” but they effectively separated their linguistic concerns from the economic and social problems that emerge from not knowing English. As Uriel concluded during a workshop discussion on language-based discrimination, “Discrimination is not the problem. Language is the problem.” Yet in the same discussion, participants readily described the difficulty they have with communicating in a wide range of social contexts, including grocery stores, restaurants, and telephone conversations. ESL participants recognized, therefore, two sets of problems: one structural linguistic in nature and the other social. This persistent division dominated the early workshop discussions and contributed to a view of the grounded, situation-specific performance activities that appeared in the workshop as frivolous or somehow disinterested in language.

On a psychological level, language can be viewed as an act already oriented towards another person, a feature that marks language as distinctly social. Vygotsky argues that language does not determine our thoughts because both language and thought are intimately connected to lived experience within a discrete historical moment. Vygotsky re-writes the Biblical passage, “In the beginning was the Word” to read “In the beginning was the deed. The word was not the beginning—action was there first; it is the end of development, the crowning of the deed” (153). Only after experiencing actions in concrete social contexts does one reflect on that reality through language. Moreover, Vygotsky connects language to thought so that “words play a central part not only in the development of thought but in the historical growth of consciousness as a whole” (153). Word meanings are unified in both the words themselves and thoughts: “The meaning of a word represents such a close amalgam of
thought and language that it is hard to tell whether it is a phenomenon of speech or a
phenomenon of thought” (Vygotsky 120).

The implication of Vygotsky’s ideas for language learners is substantial. As
Holborow explains, Vygotsky refutes the “wired-in version of language which presents
cognition and language as ready-formed in the structure of the brain” by suggesting that both
language and thought are developmental and influenced by an external, social context (42).
To that end, any speaker’s acquisition of a native or non-native language depends on social
interaction that shapes both external and inner speech. For ESL learners, learning and
practicing English cannot be fully achieved outside social interaction; the calculated,
formulaic study of structuralist linguistics does not offer a real social impetus for language so
much as it describes the structures one uses during an interaction. Even if students internally
translate all experiences and perceptions through their native languages prior to speaking in
English, their native language inner speech does not exist a priori or outside of their
experience and perception of a particular social event. The ESL learner cannot escape the
“dialogic and historical nature of human language” (Holborow 48). For this reason, the
messiness of social interaction, and all the potential problems that arise from issues of status,
class, gender, and race among others, cannot be ignored or viewed as disinterested to
language acquisition. The linguistic concerns expressed by ESL participants in this project
were never just “language” concerns in a structural sense. Even if their primary concern was
the pronunciation of a specific vowel sound, for example, the articulation of that sound
ultimately emerges from a historical context that potentially generates other socially-derived
problems (e.g. “penis” for “peanuts” and “shit” for “sheet”).
Bakhtin’s authorship models can be used to frame my Boal-based performative pedagogy as sensitive to the very issues that Vygotsky describes as inherent to thought and language. ESL pedagogy, and this includes the performative pedagogy project I undertook, frequently concerns issues of social authorship, the process of perceiving and delimiting individuals within social interaction. Applied to literary genres, of course, authorship addresses questions of identity and voice: Who speaks for whom (the literary author? the characters?)? Who interprets the thoughts and feelings of whom? Can one speak for oneself within a novel? Can a character disagree with other characters or with the literary author? Bakhtin offers a number of models to consider both aesthetic and social authorship which, in turn, provide interesting connections to the language concerns addressed by the ESL fieldwork participants involved in my project.

Especially within his early writings, Toward a Philosophy of the Act and “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” Bakhtin undertook the project of outlining an ethically responsible authorship as it occurs in the prosaics or everyday-ness of any action. Within the social context, Bakhtin encouraged an ethical view of selfhood, advising individuals to answer for their actions. Within the aesthetic realm, Bakhtin later addressed the “ways in which we come to create images of others, and images of ourselves for others” (emphasis in original, Morson and Emerson 180). Bakhtin’s Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics offers still another vision of authorship, polyphony, which entangles the aesthetic author and characters within an equal, embodied dialogue. Though he still considers the prosaics of daily life in this latter text, Bakhtin envisions author and hero in constant, unpredictable conversation with each other: “Both dialogue and the potentials for dialogue are endless. No word can be taken back, but the final word has not yet been spoken and never will be spoken” (Morson
Polyphony can also be extended to everyday social contexts and applied to interactions between individuals.

In everyday life, authorship refers to the potential to interpret others, dialogue with others, and reinforce their identities through those acts. In the ESL context, questions of benevolence are crucial to authorship: Will family members, employers, or ESL teachers participate in dialogue with the non-native English speaker? Will fluent English speakers author ESL learners kindly? Will ESL learners be able to participate in acts of authorship? Vygotsky suggests that language emerges already contingent, heavily dependent on the context that invokes it. Bakhtin, too, emphasizes the concrete by recognizing the tangible effects of live bodies interacting with live bodies. To act produces consequences, and, therefore, an act’s significance is measured through “the degree and kind of personal responsibility one assumes for it” (Morson and Emerson 69). The Boal exercises adapted for the ESL workshops, especially the image theatre exercises, focused on particularizing communicative acts by constructing body images that represent the interior and exterior effects of those acts.

For example, during the first workshop I asked participants to sculpt a group image that characterized a physical context in which they felt uncomfortable speaking English. Xenia’s response, described earlier in this chapter, featured a scene in which she was a guest in the home of a family. Xenia stood somewhat helpless, held captive by a single male who stared coldly and gestured rigidly in her direction. All the other family members ignored her, consumed by their own tasks (eating, doing homework, and watching television). English language competence probably would not have rescued Xenia in this situation because she never received the opportunity to talk. The encounter did register with Xenia, however, as
she demonstrated through her scathing critique of the family’s inhospitable behavior following the performance exercise. The sort of language analysis offered by Boal’s practice, then, does not coincide with a structural approach to language, where phonetic units and grammar rules become drills to be practiced again and again. Rather, Boal-based performance exercises call attention to the residual aftermath of language use in society. In this sense, the performance workshops highlighted a feature inherent to language: the effects of social interaction.

Throughout the workshop meetings, I witnessed a few participants frantically finishing their ESL class homework during the final moments of a workshop meeting. At other times, participants directly asked me questions in regards to a grammar or writing assignment. Participants also frequently checked their pronunciation or vocabulary while interacting within the workshop by asking me, “Is that okay? Is this right? Is this good?” These events reflect the participants’ general view of English as a rigid system and their perspective on learning English as a systematic process. Admittedly, the English language and its acquisition operate within a structural framework, but it is a framework that interacts with or is encased by a social context. As Bakhtin indicates, every social context represents specificity, uniqueness, and potential for difference. Boal’s practice follows this same maxim by particularizing every oppression participants introduce within representative performance scenes, which then serve as vehicles for detailed analysis of and corrective action to the stated problem. Bakhtin warns that to avoid or to ignore the particulars of a situation is to become a “pretender.” Bakhtin instead urges social actors to possess “non-alibis for being,” a concept which suggests that all acts be answerable and “performed on the basis of an acknowledgment of my obligative (ought-to-be) uniqueness” (Toward 42). All
situations invoke ethical obligations, and “[t]here can be no formula for integrity, no
substitute for each person’s own project of selfhood” (Morson and Emerson 31).

Theatre of the Oppressed operates from participants’ stated experiences, a
requirement that I observed during the workshops. Though it initially proved unsettling to
workshop participants, the performance work did not operate within an already defined
structure or in pursuit of a predetermined series of outcomes. Aside from my early decision
to guide participants through Boal’s practice as he describes it in Theatre of the Oppressed
(performer training, analytic tools, rehearsal for action), the workshop sessions developed in
accordance to the stories that participants shared. After the first workshop, I scrapped my
push to prepare a final performance product to concentrate on the process of using
performance to address daily communication occurrences in participants’ lives. In this sense,
the performance workshops operated within a non-alibi for being. No matter how
theoretically sound my performance practice was, however, participants’ desire for improved
linguistic competence and for exercises they perceived to achieve that goal competed with
my critical performative strategy and its pursuit of social critique and transformation. We
agreed that the underlying objective of the workshops was to empower participants as
regards their daily use of the English language. Our notion of how to achieve this objective,
however, differed. Participants preferred conversation practice to my inductive performance
methods that presupposed that language-related obstacles were, in fact, both socially-
embedded and deposited within participants’ bodies.

Language-based “Cops in the Head”

Much of the resistance that participants mounted to image theatre during the
workshops can be connected to their persistent claim that the English language represented a
primarily concrete, externalized obstacle. That is, participants suggested that once they
learned to speak fluently, use correct pronunciation, and listen more effectively, other
communication-related problems would disappear. They also admitted that their language
deficiencies resulted in numerous socially-based communication difficulties. Throughout the
workshops, participants expressed various communication fears, voicing internalized
concerns that either inhibited or prohibited their use of English in various social contexts.
However it was conceived by participants, English represented a significant oppression that
limited both their social interaction and their realization of personal, educational, and career
goals. In most cases, participants argued that the obstacles would disappear after they
improved their linguistic competence. During the workshop fieldwork, however, I
discovered that participants’ frequently internalized their communication miscues.

When I described Boal’s practice and objectives at the outset of the workshops, ESL
participants resisted the descriptor “oppression.” According to participants, their problems
were primarily language-related and therefore did not deserve such an austere title. We
agreed on describing their problems as obstacles instead. The simple shift in language
reflects the perspective from which participants viewed their problems. Oppressions imply
an act committed by an oppressor toward an oppressed. Obstacles, however, signify
roadblocks, temporary problems not explicitly linked to an aggressor or a victim. Because
participants initially voiced concern with their linguistic competence (vocabulary, grammar,
pronunciation, and listening comprehension skills), they considered any language-related
difficulty that they experienced within society as natural, as an expected growing pain that all
immigrants and refugees encounter. Rosalina, a participant during the first workshop,
illustrates this perspective by calling attention to the obvious progress one makes after learning a language:

[W]hen I arrived here, of course I knew less than now, but I was always afraid of say something. If we were to buy something and I had to say, “How much is this?” I was afraid. And I say, I tell my husband, “Sergio, you ask, you ask.” And everything was, “Sergio, you, you, you.” The phone. Oh my God, when the phone rang, I run from the house. “No, I don’t want to answer the phone!” Now I can do it because I feel more confident, and I think when the time pass, I will be more confident.

Rosalina’s solution for common communication obstacles—even those located internally—implies that the problems will eventually disappear after a significant period of time. The TO fieldwork, of course, intended to identify action to be taken by non-native speakers in the present, prior to any naturally occurring, language acculturation period.

Yet even while participants reiterated that their primary concern was language competence, they articulated a series of concerns that revealed their respective language skills as already implicated by social and psychological obstacles. Interestingly, these obstacles—difficulty with Americans unwilling to communicate, severe shyness within social situations, constant worry that others do not accept or understand their use of English—cannot be attributed entirely to a group of tangible oppressors. While participants identified a number of cases that hinted at acts of language-based discrimination, many experiences reflected internalized fears.

Most of the image work that I implemented during the performance workshops relied on Boal’s Rainbow exercises, the techniques that Boal developed in response to the seemingly invisible oppressions that participants internalize. Boal explains, “I started from the following hypothesis: the cops are in our heads, but their headquarters and barracks must be on the outside. The task was to discover how these ‘cops’ got into our heads, and to
invent ways of dislodging them” (Rainbow 8). I viewed the Rainbow image exercises as analytical tools that might encourage participants to reconsider the internal roots of many of their language-related problems. I most frequently turned to the prospective Rainbow exercises, those that attempt to bridge the gap between the individual’s internalized oppressions and those experienced by an entire group. I did not use Boal’s introspective Rainbow techniques, which concentrate on individual’s respective oppressions, because these are typically long exercises with numerous steps and require a larger number of participants. In light of participants’ ongoing skepticism regarding the use of image theatre, I was hesitant to inject exercises that required a complex series of instructions. Near the end of the final workshop, I introduced the “Breaking the Oppression” technique (Rainbow 182) and forum theatre, both of which Boal categorizes as extraversion techniques or techniques that move to rehearsal of real-life corrective action.

Throughout three performance workshops, ESL participants expressed even the most concrete of language problems—pronunciation errors, listening comprehension difficulty, confusion during phone conversations—as personalized issues, obstacles that they constantly worried about, even while communicating in English. In spite of participants’ ongoing reluctance to engage image theatre, the image-based Rainbow exercises frequently resulted in open discussion of participants’ feelings regarding their language obstacles. That discussion, however, did not always emerge in response to a given performance image. Many times participants discussed their respective obstacles in resistance or as an alternative to the scheduled image work. Participants would interrupt or delay the start of an image exercise to talk about a problem with English. Participants consistently identified their respective internalized oppressions regardless of the use of a Rainbow technique to stimulate such
analysis. The English language, internalized as a series of fears, worries, and psychological roadblocks, became a “cop in the head” for virtually all ESL participants. Even those who demonstrated a high level of language competence admitted ongoing insecurities regarding the acceptance of their spoken English in the presence of native English speakers. Although participants requested increased conversation practice and structural English lessons during the workshop, their personal stories suggested that practice alone would not eliminate their ongoing internalized obstacles.

Maryo, for example, claimed that all his “problems occurred at the bank.” In his case, he did not receive help in completing a transaction form even though he used the proper English in asking for help. The bank teller instead told him, “That’s easy. Just fill it out.” Even with an English fluency that allowed him to communicate his question, Maryo did not overcome this particular obstacle—that of a service representative who would not accommodate his request. As Maryo stated it, his lack of experience at banks in general prevented him from understanding the transaction form, not his lack of English. This scenario illustrates how non-native English speakers might easily become as frustrated by their reception in an English speaking country as they are with their struggling English skills.

Mimi offered another telling example. Having only lived in the United States for seven days when she first attended the second workshop, Mimi claimed that she was scared every time the phone rang. If she was home alone, she refused to answer the phone for fear that she would have to speak. In conversation with other workshop participants, Mimi could express her situation adequately, though in badly broken English. She reported that she only went shopping with her aunt or cousin, both of whom spoke English, because she feared that she might be asked a question in English. While Mimi’s relatively short amount of time
living in the United States helps explain her fear, her concerns echo those of other participants who have lived here much longer.

Despite her relatively advanced English fluency, Aleida confessed that she lacked the conversational spontaneity that she typically used when living in her native Venezuela. In the United States, Aleida claimed, she would monitor the people she talked to in English, evaluating them to determine whether they would be receptive to her Spanish accent. “I choose people to talk to. I prefer not to talk to everybody.” Although she had negotiated a solution for handling telephone sales calls (she typically told the salesperson to call at a specific time when her husband was home), Aleida observed a marked difference in her communication personality since she moved to the United States. And Maryo, who claimed that he didn’t experience too many problems because of his English fluency, admitted that when speaking on the telephone he easily became frustrated if an English speaker used long words. Long words, said Maryo, gave him a headache: “I close down completely. I give up and get off the telephone.”

The obvious concern shared by all participants, which Aleida characterized so simply and directly (to learn English), disguised a problematic relationship between the participants and their goal. English, as a language to be learned, practiced, and utilized for various personal objectives, became a “cop in the head.” While some participants experienced similar language difficulties, all seemed to internalize at least one aspect of English as an obstacle. English operated as a cop in the head for participants through various manifestations. For some, the cop in the head was the fear of speaking English on the telephone or anticipation that others would recognize a foreign accent. Aleida relayed the
story of a Spanish-speaking friend who worked as a salesperson and lived in the United States for twenty years.

And even he has really, he has problems with people. “Hey, where you from? Why you have that ridiculous accent?” or “What happened with you?” Many people laugh about him. He told me it was a terrible job. Even he cannot contain when somebody criticize you. And I tell him, “Hey, but you have twenty years here.” And he speaks fluently, even sometimes he forget the Spanish. But of course the people by phone, they don’t know this guy, and they don’t care. “Hey, but why? Repeat it again! What are you talking?” or “Oh, you speak obvious.” I can’t believe it. When he told me this I was surprise how they can, when he speak, “Where you from? You have a funny accent.”

Aleida’s description suggests that telephone communication problems may never be overcome, thus further solidifying a language-based cop in the head.

ESL participants also referred to another category of internalized obstacles, either concretely experienced or generally feared, that related to encounters with Americans: cases where native speakers expressed confusion, impatience, or little interest in communicating with non-native English speakers. Though several participants were reluctant to label their experiences as cases of discrimination, they did identify specific characteristics of American interactants that caused difficulties. Yomaira, for example, labeled some Americans as distant and impatient. She identified both a neighbor and a landlord as disinterested in speaking to her.

Sometimes I need to go to the office where my landlord is and tell her what is wrong in my apartment. I feel really bad, she ignore or is unpatience with me because my English is not well enough to explain which is my problem.

I know I cannot complain about discrimination in this country. I have never felt that somebody try to treat me bad. No, I cannot say that. For me, it’s hard just for one reason. I found the American people, okay, a little bit distant people, you know. Like, they are always just say, “Hello.” For example, my neighbor say just, “Hello,” “Good morning,” “Good afternoon,” and “How have you been?” And I can say, “Oh, yes very well,” and I think they don’t want to have more contact with me. I don’t know if it’s just with me because
I’m not from here, or it’s just in general with American people. I don’t know because I really have been here for two years, but I have never been involved in the culture.

I found this very bad, you know, because I have been here, and I would like to involved. But it is very hard because they don’t want to talk sometimes, and sometimes yes. But if you find, I’m sorry for that, okay? [apology directed to me as an American], if you find American, one American person who is really open and want to talk to you, it is because this person have contact with another culture or have been living in another country or have a different experience. It’s not the traditional American. It’s not easy to find. It’s hard, you know, because you say, “Okay, I want to talk English. I want to speak English. I want to learn about the culture. I want to be involved because I am living here, and it’s good for my experience, good for my knowledge.” I mean it’s good for me if you see how important is living in another country. But you say, “Okay, I have no options.” I find friends from my country or friends from other countries, and I just try to make friendships with them because they are open.

Yomaira’s account illustrates a struggle to make sense of native English speakers’ communication styles, particularly speakers who did not appear open, friendly, or patient.

Her story also reflects a certain degree of internalization, as she questions whether the problem resides within her as an immigrant or is a personality trait of Americans.

In a written journal entry, Aleida shared a workplace incident during which an American dental assistant feigned misunderstanding when Aleida asked for a scalpel. After checking with a dentist to insure that she had used the correct word, Aleida described the assistant as “not interested” in understanding her. Later, during a discussion in the workshop, Aleida refused to characterize this as a moment of discrimination. Rosalina also hesitated to label her negative encounters with Americans as discrimination, though she expressed concern with Americans’ reactions during conversations with her.

Another situation is, I feel a little of, not too much . . . I mean it is not discrimination. It is . . . I don’t how to say it. But maybe more for me because Mexico City is on the border, and a lot of Mexicans come to United States. But it is very different people. Yeah, because some of them come here and start to do bad things, or you can see that a lot of Mexican people come
without any education. They are like, um, they are persons, yeah, farmers and things like that. So when you say, “I am from Mexico City,” they think that you are illegal here, and I don’t know what. . . . I have feel a little . . . it’s not discrimination. Oh, I don’t know how to call it. And I have found a lot of Americans that don’t care.

Rosalina’s persistent reluctance to identify various stereotypes of Mexicans as acts of discrimination cannot disguise her general fear of being mislabeled, which becomes a psychological obstacle as she learns and communicates English.

During the second workshop, Gloria, a participant from Colombia, described her disgust with Americans who could not understand her English: “I hate when people don’t understand what I’m saying. And I think my pronunciation is good. . . . And I hate when people say, ‘I’m sorry? I don’t know what you are talking about.’ I hate.” Gloria’s comments echo, in far more assertive fashion, the problem expressed during Raquel’s forum theatre scene in which she was hesitant to speak during a New Year’s party for fear that she would be misunderstood. This theme was often repeated during the workshop discussions, and participants’ reaction to this problem wavered between angry frustration and apologetic worry. Marian, a participant from Ghana who attended only one session, described an encounter with an American co-worker who complained that he could not understand her accent. She reprimanded him, explaining that she spoke another language—her native African language—fluently, and that he should consider that she was now learning her second language before he criticized her.

Raquel confessed that she had only had three conversations with American speakers during her two months in the United States that did not involve asking her bilingual cousin for help. “[W]hen I have to talk, I don’t know if I am saying the word correctly. I don’t . . . like to have conversations. It’s difficult. Because I don’t know if the other people
understand me. Because I can say one thing, and you understand other thing.” Later, Raquel claimed that she very rarely initiated conversations with native English speakers because she was uncertain what she should say. Giorgio responded to Raquel’s internalized fear by emphasizing the importance of confidence for non-native speakers:

I think when any people want to learn any language, have no fear. Like speak; you have to speak any words. Like, no important what people think of you. That is what I think. You cannot have fear. . . . Like, always, like I standing with a lot of people who speak English, I always I say in my mind, “You know English. You know to speak English.” And I feel very comfortable, so security, secure, like I can to answer the question that people ask me.

For Raquel, however, her reluctance to speak also stemmed from her doubt that Americans were interested in speaking with non-native English speakers:

[S]o many Americans doesn’t want to talk to people who doesn’t speak English. For example, my cousin’s friend, she just tell me, “Hi” and “Bye.” And I know that she doesn’t talk with me. And maybe she doesn’t like to understand me, or I don’t know. Because she never talks with me, and I stand there like, I don’t know, like a fool.

Gloria’s experience matches Raquel’s, as she claimed that Americans are less warm than in her native Colombia, and that those who do understand do not have time to speak. “I think they [Americans] do understand. They don’t have time. You have the impression that they don’t want to talk to you.”

Most participants thus constructed a vision of the native-English speaking American as cold and indifferent. For many participants, the American interactant became a separate “cop in the head,” an internalized fear that suggested no matter how extensively one learned the English language, the American might still reject one’s conversational performance. This persistent interpretation of Americans suggested that participants might exaggerate their self-doubt during interactions with native speakers, perhaps biasing their perception of
interactants as inevitably negative. While several participants shared experiences that clearly reflected instances of language-, ethnicity-, or nationality-based discrimination, others labeled almost all Americans as disinterested in and impatient with non-native speakers. Participants never discussed the considerable anxiety that their native-speaking interactants might experience when talking with them. The American interactant, for example, might worry that the non-native speaker cannot understand a message or become frustrated when communication is not efficient. The absence of this possibility from participants’ workshop discussions suggests the finality with which the ESL participants viewed their encounters with native speakers. By ignoring the internalized obstacles of their American counterparts, participants referred to communication as a linear transmission from sender to receiver, an act that for them requires English fluency and a receptive, interested interactant.

Participants identified other self-concept-related struggles in regards to both their abilities to speak English and their emerging identities upon entering the United States. Yomaira described her initial experience in the United States through a helpless child analogy that I heard other participants use throughout the fieldwork. She claimed, “At the beginning I felt like a little child. I was afraid of everything around me, and when somebody wanted to talk to me I felt stress and desperation.” Rosalina concurred and described her reliance on her fluent husband when she moved to the United States.

Yomaira: Well, before we came here all the time we were thinking about my husband job, where he was going to work, everything was just about him, because . . . he came here for the company. And then I was here, I didn’t have car. I couldn’t go out, you know. I couldn’t take my English class, and I spend almost four months in this situation. And my husband just came at night from the job, and it was hard for him to try to bring me to come to the class. And I say, “Wow, it was a horrible experience for me.” And I never thought it would be like this. . . .
We have here a group of friends. And almost all of us, the women, the wife, came just for their husband. And our husband speaks very well English, and we speak so-so English, and we have been here for the same time. And for us, we don’t have a big goal like our husband have. You know what I mean? Because in our country, we were working. We were busy. We were active persons. And here, we became a different person, you know? You stay at home, clean the house, and food, and this kind of thing that, okay, we did before, but it wasn’t, our life is not just this before.

Rosalina: I think she’s right. It’s a kind of a little frustrating because in your country you could do whatever you want; you have your friends, you have your family. Even if you have, well I was working too, but even if you don’t work you have activities, something. And suddenly you arrive here, and you know nobody.

Yomaira: For the first four or five months, I could not speak English. I mean, I have to ask my husband everything, everything you need, or if I have to complain, I say, “Hey, Enrique, go to this person and tell what I want.” Or everything. I mean, I was in his hands, at the beginning. Now, I can do more.

The participants also observed that they had become increasingly passive within interactions in the United States, even if their communication behaviors in their native countries and languages were typically assertive. Rosalina characterized this shift as a situational constraint rather than a shift in personality, noting that her insecurity with speaking English contributed to a quiet demeanor in many situations here.

Rosalina: I have a friend, and once we were in this situation, and she started fighting, well, arguing with another friend. They are Americans. And I felt very uncomfortable. And then we were talking, and she asked me, “You are a—how do you say that?—tough person?” . . . And I say, “Well in Spanish I am, but in English, no.” And yeah, it’s true because . . . well, I don’t argue a lot, but I argue if I don’t agree. I’m not passive. . . . For example, in a restaurant, if a waitress has bad manners, I say, “Hey, stop doing that.” But not here, because you feel like insecure, or . . .

Yomaira: Yeah, I think that we feel insecure. This is our point of view.

Rosalina: It’s not your conscious.
Yomaira: I feel that, because my husband is very nice, he always cheers me up, you know? He says, “Just talk and be you like you were in Venezuela. And that’s it. Don’t think about it. Don’t think that you are not going to understand. Don’t think anything. Just go.” And when I do this kind of, it’s like a exercise . . . and I go out and say, “Good morning! Yes, please. I would like to buy this magazine. How much is?” And the person answers me and treat me different, you know? But when I can’t just like, “How can I ask? How can I ask? I will forget it. Everything is going to be awful, awful.” And I think this is a big problem to us, security.

Rosalina: Yeah, the confidence, because maybe you don’t have the right words or right training. You remember what happened to me the license, the office for driving license? The woman was very mean with me, and she tried the possible to don’t give me the driving license. In Mexico, I would say, “Hey, stop, and I want to talk with your manager!” or whatever. But I felt, “Okay, yeah, I come tomorrow again.” That was very in the beginning. So, I think probably now I would act differently.

Participants responded with worry and, at best, passivity to situations that they might handle with assertiveness if speaking their native languages. The above examples reflect the internalized mental blockades that participants construct for themselves prior to communicating in English.

My use of Rainbow techniques was not the sole impetus for participants’ eventual discussion of their respective language cops in the head. Participants were always willing to discuss their language-related experiences and their feelings about those experiences. The prospective Rainbow techniques that I used during the workshops, particularly the “Image of the Word,” the “Image of Transition,” the “Ritual Gesture,” and the “Images of the Image” exercises, served instead to unify participants’ experiences as a shared group oppression rather than individual ones. As I described earlier in this chapter, my adaptations of the above exercises frequently involved group images where participants extended one member’s shared experience into a general problem recognized and experienced by all. While
workshop participants preferred to talk about their problems, the use of Rainbow exercises generated a shared performance vocabulary that consistently propelled the small group into forum theatre and discussions of how to solve selected language problems in their daily lives. Image theatre, and specifically Boal’s Rainbow techniques, thus generated the sort of analysis- and action-related talk that Boal intends for his TO practice. Of course in the case of the ESL workshops, that talk occurred in spite of ongoing resistance to and confusion about the utility of doing TO.

Throughout three performance workshops, I insisted that image theatre serves as an analytical tool relevant to the identification and elimination of participants’ language obstacles. In response to a condensed time frame for every workshop meeting and limited physical space, I adapted the fieldwork to reflect the significance of the performance process rather than a larger performance product. I moved away from transposing Boal’s four-stage poetics of the oppressed onto the entire fieldwork schedule, instead devising workshop meetings that stood alone as independent considerations of a given language obstacle proposed by participants. By the end of three performance workshops, participants addressed a different obstacle every week, going through image theatre exercises in an effort to analyze the selected obstacle. Although they internalized their respective language oppressions, participants did not respond enthusiastically to image work, instead viewing image theatre as denying them the opportunity to speak and move. Forum theatre made more sense to participants as an exercise that allowed significant conversation practice and that combated particular language obstacles. The consistently low number of participants who attended each workshop meeting made it difficult to incorporate forum theatre fully into the
workshops. I introduced a few forum exercises during the workshop phases of the fieldwork, but persisted with image theatre until I moved into an ESL classroom.

Doing image theatre within an ESL workshop resulted in a series of revisions, all of which reflected concerns imperative to a critical performative pedagogy. I address the efficacy of the ESL workshops as instances of performative pedagogy within the conclusion chapter. For now, I point to critical lessons regarding Boal as a performative pedagogy that I learned from the ESL workshop experience and that directly impacted the classroom portion of my fieldwork. First, performative pedagogy is concerned with process, a lesson that I discovered amidst the trial performance workshop. Participants’ persistent need for conversation practice and their recurring belief that language-based oppressions are combated, even eliminated through improved linguistic competence made it difficult for me to launch a comprehensive ESL-based TO practice. Not only did the workshop’s low attendance prevent such an effort, but the need for non-native English speakers to address situation-specific communication obstacles made the continuous linking of discrete TO elements, such as performer body training and certain image exercises, a hopeless and impractical task. When ESL participants are motivated to learn English by their repetitive encounter with mundane communication obstacles, those obstacles must form the basis of any critical pedagogical practice, performance-driven or otherwise. The linguistic oppressions that participants faced are at the same time internalized and concretely experienced on a daily basis.

Mady Schutzman wisely re-considers North American appropriations of TO by juxtaposing them with Boal’s own social-historical context. Boal’s theatre language, notes Schutzman, was developed in a politically hostile Brazil during the 1960s and 1970s. “The
enemy was evident; the oppressive economic and political conditions derived from a known source. . .” (“Activism” 77). In contrast, the North American “enemy” is often masked, particularly because the continent can be viewed as home to colonial oppressors as well as a site for internal division between privileged and disempowered classes. For ESL applications of TO, the oppression is language and the various implications that language has for participants’ material and psychological lives. The distinction between oppressor and oppressed might be easily recognizable in South America, but those categories are not easily translated to the linguistic cops in the head that face non-native English speakers. As Schutzman reminds us, “Boal in North America can’t force the horse to drink” (“Activism” 82).

Second, as I have just stated, participants internalize the oppressions being combated in an ESL application of TO. Non-native English speakers process their difficulty with using the English language, in all its various manifestations, as cops in the head. This observation is significant to the TO practitioner because it immediately suggests a collection of performance exercises to incorporate for the ESL context: Boal’s Rainbow techniques. However, participants are more interested in exercises that allow them to talk, particularly exercises that allow them direct dialogue regarding the solution to their respective problems. Workshop participants’ interest in forum theatre, therefore, must be balanced with some analysis, performance-based or discussion-oriented, that recognizes the internalization of the common language obstacle. If analysis of participants’ respective obstacles gets absorbed into the conversation practice desired by ESL participants, performative pedagogy’s interest in critical and embodied dialogue risks being replaced. In chapter 5, I test these workshop findings within a descriptive and interpretive account of the ESL classroom phase of the
fieldwork. Within that chapter, I explore situation-specific forum theatre sessions as a means for doing performative ESL pedagogy.

Notes

1 For a narrative description of all the fieldwork participants, see Appendix B.

2 I discussed the problem of participation with the two participants remaining from the trial workshop, Aleida and Yomaira, and separately with the ESL school director. Aleida and Yomaira encouraged me to include more conversation within the workshop. They proposed a compromise between the participants and myself that might increase attendance. I would guarantee an opportunity to practice conversation for a portion of the workshop, and the participants would commit to engaging the Boal exercises on which my research was based. Though I agreed to rework the workshop, I wondered why participants could not converse during the Boal work, why the image theatre exercises, for example, could not be seen as stimulation for conversation. We also discussed the necessity of directly recruiting more participants and communicating the importance of participating in the project. Aleida and Yomaira reasoned that if participants understood my specific objectives for the research and the specific benefits they might receive from it, they would be more likely to join and remain in the workshops. When I discussed the decline in participation with the director, she offered to help locate more participants. She then visited more of the ESL classes and encouraged students to participate in the workshop. By the third week of the second workshop in early November 2000, eighteen students attended the workshop. And though that number decreased as the workshop progressed, a core group of eight participants remained through the final meeting in December 2000.

3 Prior to the initial performance workshop, I disseminated informational flyers that announced the project to ESL students. The initial flyer included a large, bold headline that pronounced, “Practice Speaking English!” The remainder of the flyer, however, described the performance methods that participants would use to practice English during the workshop. After a large decline in participation during the second workshop, I revised the informational flyer to indicate an increased conversation focus. In fact, the revised flyer mentions performance only once. Interestingly, the silhouette clip art figures that I used at the bottom of the flyer to symbolize the participants’ physical performance activity for the first workshop seemed, in the revised flyer, to represent excitable volunteers rushing to sign up for the project. The revised flyer is included as Appendix D.
CHAPTER 5

FORUM THEATRE AND LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY:
DOING BOAL IN AN ESL CLASSROOM

I hope that you will talk with us and you do that we have conversations and we talk, we speak, we read English and you can dynamics things. I hope that you help me in my English. Now I have to put the words together. I would like speak very good.

(Raquel, ESL class participant)

I want you to practice with us more about conversations, pronunciations, and grammar. I hope you to give us more about English. (I mean every kind of skills in English).

(Maryo, ESL class participant)

For me is very important know the grammatic. I am sure learning that someday speak good English. Right now I hope know shapes or methods for learn oral comprehension.

(Luis, ESL class participant)

I like have more learn English for spelling, poems, and grammar. After can have good reading and writing. That is my dream.

(Ted, ESL class participant)

Upon shifting my performance fieldwork into an ESL classroom and becoming the instructor for an intermediate-advanced section of students, I asked students to write their initial expectations for the course. I was interested in students’ goals and assumptions regarding the scope of the class, my role as an instructor, and the utility of the course in their respective lives. As the above excerpts indicate, most students described a need for structural linguistic competence. Not surprisingly, all students made some reference to discrete linguistic skills that they anticipated I would help them to acquire. In line with the program’s traditional emphasis on conversation, grammar, and writing, participants identified these language competencies as most significant. Conversation practice was the most frequently mentioned of these competencies.
My primary concern upon joining the class involved the students’ perception of my efforts to launch a performative ESL pedagogy. In addition to my obligations to the ESL program’s traditional structure, which recommended that teachers divide their class meetings into equal instruction blocks in a wide range of language competencies, I also felt bound by the students’ own language motivations and needs. My performative pedagogy research was grounded in its participants’ experiences, and I did not want to ignore those experiences no matter how incongruent they were with my critical pedagogy objectives. About half the students had attended the Boal performance workshops that I had previously conducted within the ESL program and were familiar with my performance approach. Of course the workshops were held outside the traditional classroom context. Participants entered the workshops with fewer expectations regarding how the meetings might operate, particularly because they had not previously attended such sessions in the ESL program. The intermediate-advanced ESL class, however, operated within the program’s long tradition of English training and therefore was colored by the program’s norms, rules, and methods. As they reminded me on my first night as their instructor, students anticipated that the class would focus on the structural English skills that their previous ESL classes had taught.

My ten-week stint in the intermediate-advanced course thus reflected my simultaneous attention to performative ESL pedagogy and the traditional language objectives already established by the program and internalized by its students. Following four months in a workshop context, where I established a Theatre of the Oppressed performance framework without interference from explicit program guidelines, my entry into the ESL class marked a new challenge. The classroom fieldwork represented my direct attempt to fuse both the linguistic and social empowerment objectives. Performative ESL pedagogy
shifted from my singular workshop focus of doing Boal as a means of social critique and transformation to a bifurcated interest in both teaching English as a structural and communicative system and facilitating analysis of and alternatives to English-related oppressions.

This chapter represents a narrative and interpretive account of doing performative ESL pedagogy using Boal’s forum theatre. Whereas the image theatre performance workshops operated outside an explicit pedagogical framework, the forum theatre-based ESL class was squarely situated within an ESL school. The classroom site represents the best context for carrying out a performative ESL pedagogy for a range of pragmatic reasons, including its inherent pedagogical structure, its access to larger numbers of participants, and its expanded time frame. My classroom fieldwork account considers the necessary negotiation of Boal’s TO practice with the established norms of a class organized according to structural language lessons. The compromise that I reached in relation to these disparate objectives suggests that applying a theoretical model of performative pedagogy to an ESL classroom cannot displace the already present linguistic content. Doing a performative ESL pedagogy implies a consistent balancing of learning English and assessing the social and psychological impact that English has on students’ lives.

I begin by narrating my entry into the classroom, describing students’ expectations for how I should conduct the course, my divided pedagogy (one half performative, one half structural), and students’ specific forum theatre experiences. Next, I argue that the classroom represents the most pragmatic site for carrying out a performative ESL pedagogy, while recognizing that this site also presents a series of obstacles to using performance. I also argue that Boal’s TO, particularly when grounded in forum theatre, represents a viable means
for doing performative ESL pedagogy inasmuch as TO can be adopted to handle both language and social empowerment objectives. Finally, I consider the implications that the performative pedagogue’s multi-accented identity as language instructor and performance practitioner has for the ESL classroom.

Classroom Fieldwork: Balancing Language and Performance Objectives

In January 2001, in an attempt to combat declining participation during three performance workshops, I negotiated with Lisa, an instructor in the ESL school, to conduct Boal exercises during a portion of her intermediate-advanced course. Lisa was a fellow graduate student in Performance Studies and had already used a few performance exercises in teaching her ESL class. When she agreed to allow me to enter her classroom and coordinate a series of Boal exercises with her students, I did not anticipate that I would cancel the workshop and take over the course as the instructor. I conducted the performance workshop from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. each night prior to ESL classes and then spent an hour collaborating with Lisa in her classroom. We waited until late January, after she had established her course, to begin the performance work. Lisa and I then designed image theatre-based exercises to introduce students to the notion of constructing body images and reacting to their respective language difficulties through visual images.

On my first visit to the classroom, for example, we used collages that students had previously constructed to represent their identities. The students observed their classmates’ collages—visual collections of magazine, newspaper, and hand-drawn pictures arranged on a sheet of craft paper. I had created a collage of my own to represent one portion of my identity. My collage was an assembly of already used pages torn from my daily planner. They contained numerous daily lists of activities pasted one on top of the other so as to cover
the entire sheet of craft paper. I explained that I was interested in their physical responses to
the collages they had seen. Using my own collage as an example, I created an image
representation of the identity characteristic suggested by the crowded calendar pages.
Standing at the front of the room, I removed my watch and placed it on a lectern. Next, I
rested on my knees in a kneeling position behind the lectern, facing the audience. I dropped
my head, looked at the ground, and placed my hands on the podium. Lisa asked the students
to respond to the image by interpreting the physical and emotional characteristics of my
image. Finally, I explained the motivation of my image, connecting it to the pressures I felt
in balancing my work and research demands.

Following my demonstration, Lisa asked students to construct their own physical
images using their bodies to represent some portion of either their collage or their identities.
Gloria, who had attended a few meetings during the second performance workshop,
volunteered. With a black briefcase in her left hand, Gloria stood in a profile position at the
front of the classroom. She leaned forward on her right foot with her right hand outstretched
in a handshake gesture. Her face was solemn in a tight-lipped expression. The student
audience described Gloria’s image as business-like, tense, and hurried. Gloria reported the
following thoughts: “I have to go very fast. I have to make my goals very fast because my
family is waiting for me. I don’t have more time. And I have to learn and speak and read
good English by next December. I need all the family by next December.” Later, Gloria told
me that she was studying English so that she could resume her engineering career in the
United States for the same company that employed her in Colombia. After she passed the
TOEFL, she could begin work here and earn enough money to send for her children and
husband who remained in Colombia.
I attended the next night too, and Lisa and I directed a version of Boal’s “Image of Transition” exercise, using an obstacle image that a student had presented the previous night (Games 173; Rainbow 115). We intended to use the first few nights to measure students’ interest in doing performance exercises during the conversation portion of the course. However, before we could plan any further performance exercises, the school’s director asked Lisa to take over the introductory class because the instructor had unexpectedly left. Lisa agreed and recommended that I teach the intermediate-advanced course in her place. With two weeks left in the seven-week session, I canceled the performance workshop and took over as the course instructor in mid-February 2001. This move marked the most significant transition within my fieldwork. My entry into an ESL class expanded the pool of available participants and increased the amount of time I had each night to work with participants. More importantly, my move into an ESL class situated my performative pedagogy project within a site explicitly committed to linguistic competence. This meant that I immediately began negotiating obligations to the class’s structural language agenda with performative pedagogy’s critical agenda.

I taught the intermediate-advanced ESL course from February to May 2001 as the final phase of my fieldwork. My term as an instructor spanned the final two weeks of a seven-week session and an entire eight-week session. Between fifteen and twenty students regularly attended the course. When I inherited the course from Lisa, the students had just completed a midterm examination, and my first responsibility was to review the test with them. After just five meetings, I was required to give the students a final exam that would help the ESL school director and me decide who would be promoted to the advanced course. During all five of those meetings, I found myself split between preparing the students for the
exam and pursuing the performance exercises I had used during earlier workshops. I understood the school’s requirement of teaching English within the framework of multiple competencies: grammar, listening comprehension, conversation skills, pronunciation, reading, and writing. I also recognized that for the students, who would be practicing the school’s required English competencies in concrete, meaningful contexts, the Boal-based performance exercises held pedagogical value. My central concern, then, for the final fieldwork phase involved negotiating an ESL pedagogy that valued performance. To that end, I experimented with a critical performative pedagogy that injected Boal methods, especially forum theatre, into the curriculum already established by the ESL school.

The ESL school requires its instructors to teach the comprehensive set of English language skills listed above and monitors instruction through the collection of weekly lesson plans, midterm and final exam tests, homework assignments, and student writing journals. For those reasons alone, I never considered entering the ESL classroom and disregarding the curriculum already in place. Moreover, I recognized both the pragmatic and psychological value of regular, rigorous English practice. For some students, rote grammar drills, listening comprehension quizzes, and vocabulary lists all enhanced their chances of passing objective English tests, especially the TOEFL. Several students reported the need to pass such tests to gain admittance into undergraduate degree programs or to be considered for employment in their professional fields in the United States. Still others seemed to value traditional, structural language training because of a personal desire for perfection in English. I consistently heard students describe their hope to speak “perfect English” so that Americans could not distinguish them as non-native speakers.
I was also very familiar with another narrative frequently told by ESL students in the school, a narrative that I first heard during my stint as an ESL instructor a year earlier. Students commonly arrived several minutes early to class or stayed in the classroom during a break to converse with each other or myself. During these occasions I listened to students complain about seemingly mundane problems they encountered while communicating with native English speakers. I listened to stories about landlords who would not respond to students’ requests. I listened to stories about grocery clerks who relentlessly stared at immigrant customers. I listened to stories about employers who belittled immigrant employees by asking them simplified questions or assuming they were ignorant of basic workplace information. These stories, coupled with my interest in performative pedagogy, led me to consider the intermediate-advanced ESL classroom that I inherited as an ideal site for testing the efficacy of a performative pedagogy to achieve empowerment and consciousness-raising. For this reason I approached the mandatory skills established by the ESL school in a way that privileged students’ acute personal histories. Given my ongoing ESL performance fieldwork, I also encouraged students to address their experiences through performance.

I approached my ESL teaching assignment as a divided responsibility to the school’s requirements and to my own critical performative research interests. I believed both to be concerned with enabling immigrants and refugees to live empowered, independent lives. When I suggested to the ESL director that I use the first part of each class session, traditionally designated for speaking, pronunciation, and listening practice, to implement Boal performance exercises, I did not see my performance proposal as interfering with the standard language program. I instead viewed the exercises as opportunities for students to
practice these skills while analyzing through performance the communication obstacles they regularly encounter in their daily lives. I struggled, however, to reconcile the structural language elements of the course (grammar drills and reading exercises) scheduled for the latter portion of each meeting with the participatory, problem-solving performance work used in the first portion of each class. When the school’s director agreed that the performance exercises—particularly those that featured dramatic interaction such as forum theatre—would reinforce students’ listening, speaking, and pronunciation skills, I scheduled an hour and a half block each night to do Boal-based exercises. I switched pedagogical styles almost entirely during the second half of each meeting, however, and lectured on various grammar rules while leading students through structural exercises. During the grammar instruction, I drilled students on various structures by having them orally answer questions from textbook worksheets. The latter portion of each class meeting also featured writing instruction and reading practice, which I frequently focused on the issues that students addressed in earlier class discussions or performance exercises.

I initially worried about the student perception that I was using the course as a research tool with little regard for the school’s prescribed pattern of conversation practice. This worry stemmed from earlier participant characterizations of the workshops as divided between my performance goals and participants’ conversation goals. For this reason, I committed myself to several pedagogical choices that I hoped would both solidify all performance work as substantially concerned with improving oral communication and legitimize my interest in grammar, reading, and writing instruction. First, I made certain to open all performance exercises with small group discussions—some of them rather lengthy—in which I encouraged participants to disclose their various experiences with
speaking English. Second, I carefully monitored students’ reaction to the various
performance exercises I attempted. When students seemed unclear with my directions, I
repeated myself numerous times. When students seemed reluctant to enter a performance
game or exercise, I encouraged them to participate, and I occasionally altered an exercise if it
seemed too awkward for students or if students entered the exercise but broke some of the no
movement/no talking rules I had established. Third, I followed a rigid schedule as regards
my instruction of grammar structures during the last hour of every meeting. I promised
students that I would treat grammar as a serious priority for every class meeting, particularly
because so many students viewed grammar rules as essential to their study of English.

The class eventually took on a dual personality: a relaxed forum for discussion,
performance, and analysis of students’ communication problems during the first half and a
rapid-fire, grammar drill sequence during the second half. At 8:00 p.m. every evening, there
was a fifteen-minute school-wide break that allowed for a convenient transition between the
two pedagogical styles and content. While the course operated within two frameworks—one
participatory and performative, the other structural and lecture-based—the two approaches
frequently overlapped. I imposed an 8:00 p.m. deadline for concluding the nightly
performance exercises to coincide with the students’ break, but I also carried the topics
addressed during those exercises into subsequent writing and reading assignments. Several
of the school’s instructor manuals for vocabulary, writing, and reading comprehension made
reference to concrete concerns expressed by students during forum theatre sessions. In these
cases, I assigned readings and comprehension activities from the manuals to correspond with
a topic introduced by students during our initial discussion. For example, one text addressed
immigrant housing concerns and included writing prompts, vocabulary quizzes, and reading
passages related to those issues. I assigned these in correlation with a discussion and forum scene that focused on students’ present housing problems. I also used the instructor’s manuals to stimulate student discussion regarding possible communication obstacles they faced. In one classroom instance, an illustration from a reading text that I had assigned depicted an instance of discrimination, and students unanimously responded by recalling their difficulties with the United States immigration process.

The only portion of the course curriculum that I did not attempt to connect to a performative framework was the grammar instruction. Instead, I taught grammar as an isolated component at the end of each class meeting. Following the nightly break, I stopped all discussion regarding a given theme or topic, whether that topic was student-derived or suggested within a textbook-based exercise, to focus on discrete grammar rules. In part, I adopted this strategy to satisfy students’ request for direct, applicable practice of grammatical structures that they might see on a standardized English test. I also recognized that in spite of my philosophy regarding the nature and function of the ESL course, many students viewed the entire program as a traditional schooling context. For that reason, the midterm and final exams became significant measures of students’ English proficiency. Students recognized that their performance on the tests largely influenced their promotion to a higher course level. In response to student concerns about the tests, I usually increased the class time allotted to grammar as tests approached. During the class immediately preceding a test, I suspended all performance work to conduct an explicit review for the test. The tests themselves included material discussed during the second half of each meeting: reading comprehension questions, grammar questions, vocabulary questions, and an essay. Then, after each test, I reviewed the
correct answers with students before resuming our discussion and performative analyses of concrete language obstacles.

As I already explained, I first assumed the role of ESL instructor during the middle of a session, after the students had already spent four weeks with another instructor. As was the case with my introduction of all three performance workshops, I concerned myself with constructing an environment in which students would feel comfortable participating and performing. I have already documented my struggle to orient workshop participants to the sort of active, corporeal involvement that Boal’s practice requires, yet the workshops occurred outside the classroom in a context that participants had not previously encountered. In that context, I felt that I could establish a performance framework relatively uninhibited by participants’ expectations. My performance work in the ESL classroom, particularly after taking over Lisa’s course midsession, occurred in an already established context. For that reason, I attempted to construct a critical environment in which students recognized that their voices and bodies constituted the relevant meanings for the course. Michael Rohd’s justification for warm-up activities for any performance-based group illustrates several concerns I encountered during my initial meetings with ESL students. Rohd proposes a series of warm-up performance activities in an effort to construct an energized, comforting “safe space.” Rohd’s safe space refers to an environment in which participants recognize that their bodies signify and that they belong to a collective wherein participation is valued (4).

On my first night as the instructor of the intermediate-advanced course, I moved quickly to establish a safe performance space. I also had to explain to students why their initial instructor, Lisa, was not in class. Fortunately, I had already worked with several of the
students in performance workshops, and I recognized most from my visits to the class. I opened with an introduction of myself and of my pedagogical approach to ESL. I told students that I hoped to privilege their voices, and I explained my role in service-oriented terms: “I am here to help you identify and improve those areas of English that you want to focus on.” I indicated that the students probably had varying goals for the course, including practicing for the TOEFL, acquiring a higher-paying job, and learning English before attending a university in their native countries. I then asked the students to write their expectations of me for the remainder of the session. I told them that I wanted to adapt the course to their needs and expectations and that I would try to use their responses as a starting point for future classes.

While most students indicated that they expected me to help them practice various English language skills, such as pronunciation, grammar, writing, and reading, a few also expected that I communicate with them in a way that they easily understood and that they deemed friendly. One wrote, “I want [him] to be a considerate person and friendly with us, and I’ll respect him.” Another indicated a need for an instructor who speaks slowly: “I want to you speak slow and help me, if I say it wrong repeat for me please.” Another student wrote, “I hope you speak clearly and slowly because sometime I don’t understand. . . . I hope I can hear you when you speak somethings.” I used these written expectations as both a guide for the course content and as an introduction to the participation I hoped the students would adopt for the remainder of the session. In the following meetings, I instructed students to discuss their concrete experiences regarding language-related issues in small groups, and I eventually introduced forum theatre.
At the outset of the next eight-week class session, my last in the ESL program, over twenty students attended, though the number eventually dropped to approximately fifteen. Many of the students were new to the class or the ESL program, and I began with an introduction that emphasized the participatory nature of the class. I characterized the classroom as both a “safe space” and a “workshop space.” I further recognized the various goals and obstacles that individual students possessed, and I indicated that the course would reflect those diverse perspectives as much as possible. I also described my research objectives and introduced the fieldwork process in which I was engaged. In an effort to promote participation and the construction of a cooperative collective, I assigned an icebreaker exercise. I asked students to locate information about a partner student by asking questions of others who already knew that student. The students then introduced their partner in an informal presentation, during which the partner elaborated on or corrected any biographical details. During our next meeting, I immediately began Boal-based performance work.

I began all classroom performance work with small-group discussions in an effort to recognize students’ consistent request for conversation practice. From there, however, the performance process followed one of two paths. I initially began by asking students to work in groups of four or five, to discuss a concrete language-related obstacle suggested by previous workshop participants or one that they had experienced directly, and to represent their experience with the obstacle through a group image. In these early classroom cases, I used Boal’s image theatre to stimulate discussion and analysis of students’ problems. As I have documented regarding earlier workshops, however, students regularly transformed frozen and silent images into moving, talking characters. Therefore, I frequently used the
image exercises as a springboard into forum theatre. After groups presented an image and students discussed the implications of the image, we often staged a forum scene to identify and rehearse possible solutions to the oppression image.

During other class meetings, I amended this pattern and proceeded directly to forum theatre after small-group discussions. After students discussed an obstacle they faced in speaking English and identified specific experiences with that obstacle, I asked volunteers to stage a forum scene in which the remaining students subsequently participated. Both patterns—group discussion, followed by image theatre, followed by forum theatre and group discussion followed by forum theatre—relied on the forum scene as a practical and concrete means for generating possibilities for communicative action. Students actively contributed to class discussions during forum sessions. As I will describe through the following cases, the forum sessions became the culminating moments for the performative pedagogy project as they represented opportunities for critique, possibility, and embodied rehearsal for corrective communicative action.

During the final week of my first session as an ESL instructor, I asked students to identify the most difficult obstacles they encountered when speaking English. The discussion concluded an ongoing consideration of topics generated by participants in the earlier workshops. While some students responded to the assigned topics that I had gathered from their peers, I did not sense that all the students related to the issues. Therefore, I hoped the discussion of “most difficult obstacles” would generate a class list of concerns that could be used as the pool from which we would select topics for subsequent performance work. I asked students to rank order the obstacles from most to least difficult to resolve in their respective lives. Students discussed their choices in small groups, and each small group
generated its own “top ten” obstacle list. While discussing the ordering of the obstacles, two students indicated that there was one significant problem missing which all non-native English speakers encounter. Gloria and Emilce, a student from Argentina, reported that non-native English speakers are always eager to tell native English speakers that they understand a question or a set of instructions when, in fact, they may not. Using the present exercise as evidence, Gloria and Emilce noted that every group in the class had difficulty understanding my instructions. Yet none of the groups asked me to clarify those instructions, and several even nodded their heads “yes” when I asked if everyone understood the exercise. A few minutes later when the groups did not appear to be making progress, I re-explained the exercise to each group separately. Gloria observed that this tendency is common for ESL students, both at work and school.

Using this obstacle as the focus for an image exercise, I asked Gloria and Emilce to construct an image in which a non-native English speaking employee did not understand her employer, yet nonverbally signaled that she did. The students constructed an image with Emilce representing an American employer and Gloria playing an immigrant employee. Emilce stood stage right, facing Gloria. She crossed her arms, drew her shoulders back, and rested her weight on her heels. Positioned stage left about fifteen feet away from Emilce, Gloria leaned slightly forward and moved her head up and down in a nodding gesture. Next, I asked both participants to express the thoughts of their respective characters. Emilce began: “I spoke to her slowly. And so I think she has understood me, and I hope she does the right thing.” Gloria followed: “This is the big problem with coming to the United States. When I first came, I always say to the boss, ‘I understand.’ I always say one word: ‘Yes.’ After ten minutes . . . ‘I’m sorry. I cannot understand.’” Following the scene, several
students agreed that they too experienced this problem, though at least one said it was a behavior resulting from a shy demeanor.

The following night I returned to the obstacles compiled by the students. I asked students to discuss specific instances in which they had experienced problems taken from the list. I then encouraged students to offer their stories as possible scenes for a forum theatre session. Two forums eventually followed. The first scene involved a student’s encounter at a grocery store in which she misunderstood a clerk’s explanation of how much a bulk package of meat cost. Maria, a student from Colombia, staged a forum scene that ended with her being surprised and somewhat embarrassed when the cashier told her the meat would cost five times the amount she had anticipated. Maria played herself, Saengaroon, a student from Thailand, played Maria’s mother who was shopping with her, and Yuli, a student from Vietnam, played a grocery cashier. During the forum session, I replaced Saengaroon as Maria’s mother and repeatedly asked Maria questions about the price of the meat, refusing to believe that a five-pound package of meat could cost only $3.45. Maria insisted that it cost only $3.45. When Maria asked Yuli to confirm the price of the meat, Lavrent, a student from Kazakstan, replaced Yuli as the cashier. Lavrent quickly explained that the entire package cost more than $15 and that the $3.45 price referred only to the price per pound. Maria then decided that the meat was too expensive and decided not to buy it.

Following the forum scene, the students who remained in the audience discussed the plausibility of Lavrent’s helpful explanation. Most agreed that Lavrent’s solution was not realistic because it made the situation too easy for Maria. Yuli explained,

I think it wouldn’t happen. Because she asked me, “Is this meat $3.45?” So I would have think she means $3.45 a pound. So I said, “Yes.” . . . They have to answer so many questions a day, and they are busy at work. So, I they don’t think about much. In the first place, if she said, “Why is the meat so
cheap? Only $3.45?” I would have think she probably made a mistake. . . . Because look, the only question she ask is, “Is this $3.45?” Yeah, if she added to this, “Why is so cheap, $3.45?” I would have said “$3.45 a pound. This is the total of the meat.” . . . But in this conversation the way you ask . . . that’s the solution.

By discussing the likelihood of various solutions to Maria’s grocery store confusion, the students recognized that even employees who do not volunteer helpful information can be coerced to help non-native speakers. The solution that Yuli argued for, and the one that most of the students accepted as useful, required the non-native speaker to extend the line of questioning and to assume a lower level of understanding on the part of the cashier than originally thought necessary. In this brief forum scene, students positioned themselves as the agents and their own limited language proficiency as the agency for amending a language-related obstacle. Moreover, the solution that was proposed—the asking of an additional question—was well within the capacity of all the ESL students present in the classroom.

Another forum session conducted within the ESL classroom identified mundane events such as requesting medical information from a doctor or nurse that were potentially troublesome for students. The session also generated meaningful debate regarding possible solutions to the problems. The first performance exercise I implemented during the final eight-week session was an adaptation of Boal’s “Ritual Gesture” (Games 182; Rainbow 113). As Boal explains in Games for Actors and Non-Actors, the “Ritual Gesture” exercise begins with a model in which a participant constructs a ritual gesture image that belongs to a “ritualised social structure” (185). Boal views all societies as confined by rituals and uses the “Ritual Gesture” technique to uncover rituals that confine or oppress: “The point of uncovering each society’s rituals is that they are the visual expressions of the oppressions to be found at the heart of a society. Always, without an exception, an oppression will produce
visible signs, always it will translate itself into forms and movements, always it will leave traces” (emphasis in original, Games 182). In my adaptation of the ritual gesture, I asked students to consider American rituals—repeated patterns of behavior that define the American lifestyle—they had observed. I was curious about students’ personal reactions to and interaction within those rituals, whether they understood the meanings of those rituals, and whether they could successfully negotiate and perform them in their routine lives.

In groups of four, students selected an American ritual and constructed a silent ritual gesture image that involved movement of some kind. I indicated that the images could be representative of a concrete action or symbolic of a particular attitude. Before the groups showed their images, I wrote a question on the dry erase board at the front of the classroom: “How important is it that ESL students understand this ritual?” I asked students to consider this question in relation to each ritual image they observed. One group represented a doctor’s office scene and eventually staged their ritual gesture image. Adela, who had attended the first performance workshop, Elaine, a student from Taiwan who had lived in the U.S. for over twenty years, and Frensly, a high school student who had attended a previous workshop, demonstrated the doctor’s office scene. Elaine and Adela stood downstage right, while Frensly stood downstage left. Frensly approached Adela, immediately contorted her face in a pained expression, and doubled over while clutching her stomach. She repeatedly coughed and made a gagging expression. Adela responded by motioning to Frensly’s forehead, placed what appeared to be a thermometer in Frensly’s mouth, and began looking at her watch. After a short while, Adela removed the thermometer and directed Frensly to Elaine, who gestured with her hands before handing Frensly a prescription and sending her away stage right.
Following the performance, the class quickly identified the scene as a doctor’s office, with Frensly playing a patient, Adela playing a nurse, and Elaine playing a doctor. During subsequent discussion, students focused on two areas that posed problems for them in seeking help from American doctors. First, several students, including Gloria and Adela, complained about the lack of time doctors spend with patients, particularly children. Both compared the time that doctors in their native countries (Colombia and Mexico, respectively) spent during the diagnosis and advice period of a visit with the time spent by American doctors. Second, Luis, a student from Colombia, observed the difficulty in obtaining a prescription in the U.S. He claimed that many drugs can be purchased over the counter in Colombia that are only available by prescription here. Finally, Saengaroon offered her solution to problems encountered while visiting a doctor. She said that she relies on her American husband to type out her questions and comments, which she then takes to her doctor. Several students concurred that a possible solution would involve seeking the help of someone who is more fluent in English than they were.

During the following class period we continued to discuss the problems encountered in a doctor’s office, identifying that context as the sight of possible communication obstacles. I introduced a prepared role play script that modeled a typical conversation between a concerned mother and a pediatric clinic nurse. Similar to the performance practice of trigger scripting, where a script is carefully selected and performed for a target audience in an attempt to stimulate a response from that audience, the role-play script served as a springboard for participants’ discussion of their own experiences with doctors (Rassulo and Hecht 41). Trigger scripting aims to present selected ideas through the medium of performance and, more specifically, to “facilitate communication, spark interest, and
influence attitudes in various areas” (Rassulo and Hecht 53). I only used a prepared role play
as a trigger script once while teaching the ESL class, primarily because students had no
problem moving from discussion of a particular oppression to forum theatre reenactment of
the oppression. As used by performance practitioners during the 1980s, trigger scripting
attempted to stimulate discussion of a selected issue by staging portions of a script as an
entry point for participants’ responses (Valentine and Valentine 306). My role play exercise
enlisted students to perform the initial trigger script and then proceeded one step further
inasmuch as I used forum theatre to motivate students to perform their respective experiences
and ideas regarding an issue.

During the medical interaction role play, Juan Carlos, a student from Colombia who
was studying in a U.S. culinary school, played a receptionist, Adela played a nurse, and
Raquya, a recent immigrant from Yemen, played a mother. I asked the students if the role
play script—which featured a pediatric nurse who was immediately available and who
patiently spoke at length with a concerned mother over the telephone—was realistic. Both
Ana, a Venezuelan student, and Adela claimed that they had never experienced this sort of
explanation when calling their children’s doctors. Ana described an experience that involved
a phone call to her son’s pediatrician. Unable to speak to a doctor, Ana tried to obtain advice
from a nurse regarding treatment for her son’s sustained high temperature. The nurse only
offered to take a message for the pediatrician, who eventually called Ana later in the day.
For Ana, this was unsatisfactory because she wanted the nurse to instruct her, however
limited the advice might be, on what she should do with her son.

I then moved beyond the discussion of the initial trigger role play and suggested that
we consider Ana’s narrative in a forum session. Ana agreed to play herself while Frensly

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played the role of an on-duty nurse who answered the phone. Both students sat in chairs next to each other and looked straight ahead at the audience. During the initial improvisation, Frensly agreed to take a message for the pediatrician but would not give Ana any medical advice. I encouraged the student audience to intervene during the subsequent forum scene, asking them to replace Ana if they thought they might be able to help her obtain the information she desired. No one interrupted the scene, and Frensly adopted a more sarcastic, terse tone during her conversation with Ana. Following the forum scene, Ana discussed how the situation would have been handled in her native Venezuela, and Adela and Izabella, a student from Poland, both described more positive experiences with doctors in the United States.

I encouraged Frensly and Ana to play the scene one more time, and I asked students to stop the action if they could propose a solution. The scene began again, and after several minutes it appeared that no one was going to replace Ana. I stopped the scene, replaced Ana, and immediately began expressing my fear to the nurse. I told her that I was extremely worried about my son. I explained that I knew she was well-trained as a nurse, and I asked her directly if she might suggest some actions I might take based on her own experience. Ana then returned to replace Frensly as the nurse. Ana answered my questions reluctantly at first, but when I told her I was inexperienced with tending to a child with high fever, she told me several steps I might follow. The scene ended after I reiterated her suggestions and requested that the doctor call me as soon as possible. The entire class then engaged in a discussion regarding the feasibility of the solutions I had proposed.

We talked about on-call doctors and nurses and discussed the difficulty of going to an emergency room. Phoufay, a neurosurgeon from Laos who conducted research at a local
hospital, offered the number for a twenty-four-hour nurse phone line from his hospital. Adela described the importance of being nice to nurses and any person in a service-related occupation. In her experience, being nice and persistent had produced a positive behavioral change in both nurses and fast-food employees. She described these strategies as compliance-gaining tactics. Though no students volunteered to play out their suggestions in a forum scene, numerous participants discussed their own strategies for managing situations in which employees expressed reluctance in answering questions. Moreover, following this forum session, subsequent forums generated significantly higher participation and a greater number of proposed solutions.

In the class’s next forum exercise, I began with a general request for small group discussions in which students considered the communication problems that they had encountered when they first came to the United States. Students initially claimed that they had overcome their earliest communication obstacles, and then began to disclose more immediate experiences that they had not successfully managed. We staged several of these experiences in a forum format. In one of the scenes, Adela described a visit to a grocery store in which she was unable to explain the message she wanted to be printed on a Valentine’s Day cake she was ordering for her three daughters. The bakery employee could not understand her pronunciation of “Congratulations Daughters.” After repeating this phrase about ten times, Adela’s husband, who was standing next to her, told the employee what she wanted. Adela claimed that two problems existed. First, the employee could not understand her pronunciation. Second, her husband knew what she wanted and still refused to help. According to Adela’s husband, she needed to practice by herself.
In the initial improvisation, Adela played herself, Nick, a student from Taiwan, played the bakery employee, and Sara, who had participated in previous performance workshops, played Adela’s husband. After the improvisation, the students staged a forum session. In the first forum, Sara stopped the scene and asked to swap roles with Adela. She stated her request to the employee only two times before asking, “Do you understand me?” When Nick told her that he did not, she turned to her husband (now played by Adela) and asked for paper. Adela said there was no paper, and Sara asked other customers (who she improvised as student audience members) until she found paper and a pen. She then wrote her message on the paper. A discussion followed concerning the use of writing a message to substitute for poor pronunciation. Sara claimed that she never forgot to bring paper and a pencil when she goes shopping. Ana indicated that she relied on other customers in a store: “Sometime the person next to you will kind of understand you.” Sara then wondered about those instances when she was alone, with no family or other customers to help her communicate. In those cases, Sara claimed, non-native speakers should resort to writing or any other means necessary to make themselves understood: “We never can be stopped. We need to find other forms, other forms to do, for people understand us.”

Immediately after the forum on Adela’s grocery store misunderstanding, Lorena, a Colombian student who rarely joined the session’s forum scenes, described a visit to a party store. She wanted to purchase magic toys, and when she talked to a cashier, she phrased her request, “toys magic.” The cashier did not understand her. Lorena repeated her request in the same order several times, altering only her pronunciation of “magic.” Finally, after the employee repeatedly told Lorena that she couldn’t understand, Lorena left the store without the toys. Luis agreed to play Lorena, and Francis, one of Sara’s high school-aged children
from Mexico, played the party store employee. After the initial improvisation, Nick replaced Luis and quickly spelled the word “magic.” Still, Francis, playing the cashier, claimed that he could not understand the word. Frensly replaced Nick in the role of Lorena and brought her small translation computer to the front of the room. When Francis said he could not understand “toys magic,” Frensly spelled out the word on the translator, which then spoke the word aloud. Other students immediately protested that this was not always possible, and Frensly resorted to writing the word down on paper. Again, the audience protested that Lorena did not have paper with her; Frensly countered that all stores have paper on the counter with some form of writing instrument. After writing the phrase, Francis told her he understood and directed her to the magic toys.

During the subsequent discussion, students offered several solutions. Ana said that she cuts out a picture of the item she wants to purchase before going to a store, particularly if she is interested in a specific brand item. Gloria said that it is important to prepare for a shopping visit just as one would prepare for a vacation to another country. She suggested that students practice the word, write it down, or ask an English speaker to help them choose the correct words. Others claimed that the translator might be a good idea if a student owned one. Maria was concerned with those who could not spell or write well. She said the problem was pronunciation. Sara then suggested that students could record themselves saying the words they have difficulty pronouncing. Finally, Francis suggested that students describe the particular object, not a general category. For example, “magic toys” refer to a larger category of objects, and Lorena might have experienced more success if she had offered an example of a magic toy.
Both these forum sessions fulfilled my dual function for a performative ESL pedagogy: they allowed students to practice the language skills of speaking and listening while encouraging them to construct solutions to their own communication-based problems. During the particular cases cited here—Adela’s difficulty at a grocery store and Lorena’s problem at a party store—students increasingly referred to their own experiences as evidence for why a particular solution would or would not work. I noticed that students more readily entered the forum sessions and that discussion following the sessions dramatically increased. These two cases also point to a particular problematic context that students frequently encountered: confusion during sales interactions. Students further characterized their ongoing communication problems as related to their limited English vocabulary, poor pronunciation of particular sounds, and comprehension of native English speakers who spoke very fast.

Another communication obstacle identified by students concerned the reaction they perceived from Americans during social interactions. In a sequence that began with open discussion and then progressed to both image and forum performances, students addressed the common dilemma of coping with negative or uncomfortable reactions when communicating with Americans. To initiate discussion and, more specifically, to encourage students to disclose their personal experiences, I distributed a cartoon illustration. The cartoon featured a man walking along a street next to other people. An imagined scene appeared above the man’s head in which he viewed himself as a gorilla that horrified the people walking next to him. A caption at the top of the cartoon read “Culture Shock.” We began by discussing the meaning of the picture, particularly the thoughts and feelings of the man. Several students commented that the man was afraid that others viewed him as
different. Almost all students recognized the man as someone who was new to a country and who worried about others’ reactions to him. When I asked the students if they had experienced anything similar upon coming to the United States, several agreed that they had.

Following this introductory discussion, I assembled five groups of students (about four students to each group) and asked the students to consider Americans’ reactions of them during social interactions. I also asked the students to consider their opinions of Americans during interactions. I further instructed students to respond to the two questions by creating a still, photographic image, much like the cartoon we had just discussed. One group decided to use all its members in constructing an image, and though I had asked for a frozen image, the group assembled a silent image that incorporated small representative movements.

Saengaroon stood profile at centerstage, facing the stage right area where Izabella, Jesus, a student from El Salvador, and Naim, a student from Afghanistan, were located. Jesus and Naim stood far stage right talking to each other, never once looking at Saengaroon. Izabella slowly circled Saengaroon, persistently staring at her. Saengaroon occasionally looked up at Izabella and then quickly turned her head downward, holding her hands together in front of her waist.

Following the image performance, I asked the audience to describe what was happening in the scene. Most focused on the thoughts and feelings of Saengaroon, noting that she was scared, worried, nervous, or shy. Saengaroon then explained that the scene represented a formal dinner party that she had attended with her husband. Numerous other couples also attended the party but she did not know them. Because she had only lived in the United States for a short time, she was unable to speak much English, and she felt very shy and embarrassed at the party. During dinner, while her husband spoke to a man he knew
from work, Saengarooon sat silently. A woman sitting across from her constantly stared at her. The woman would not stop looking at her, and Saengarooon was reluctant to eat because the woman persisted in staring. Saengarooon kept thinking about how hungry she was, and she finally began to eat her dinner. She never spoke to the woman throughout the dinner party, and the woman said nothing to her.

Using Saengarooon’s experience as a script, the students staged a forum scene the following night in which Saengarooon attempted to overcome the problem she had encountered. During the initial improvisation, Saengarooon played herself, Maria played the role of the woman who stared, Andrew, a student from China, played Saengarooon’s husband, and Jesus played the husband’s friend. All four students sat in a circle as if they were at dinner table. Jesus and Andrew immediately began talking to each other about work. Maria stared at Saengarooon, who immediately looked away or down. Maria then looked away briefly, yet eventually turned back and even leaned forward to stare at Saengarooon more.

During the forum session, I asked students to intervene if they could suggest possible solutions. No one intervened until the end of the improvisation, when Maria volunteered to switch places with Saengarooon. Maria then immediately began talking to the woman who stared. “How are you?” she asked. “Do you like this party?” “Would you like something to drink?” “What is your name?” The woman, now played by Saengarooon, answered the questions but did not extend the conversation. The silent tension that the audience observed during the first improvisation reduced somewhat but the woman who stared still looked intently at Saengarooon’s character.

Saengarooon later explained that the woman, who is now a close friend, is very shy and does not speak much in any situation. In discussing the possible alternatives for
Saengaroon in this situation, both Maria and Jesus emphasized the need to try to speak, even if she did not know many English words or phrases. It is very important to attempt to communicate, they said, so that the American in the encounter will respond with more communication. Gloria claimed that Saengaroon’s American husband had an obligation to help her, particularly because he knew that she would be uncomfortable since she did not speak much English. If he would not help, Gloria suggested that Saengaroon leave the dinner table and walk around so that she would not be in the uncomfortable situation. Sara indicated that if anyone stared at her persistently, she would return the behavior by staring back at the person.

As demonstrated in this classroom fieldwork narrative, I used Boal’s forum theatre as a performative pedagogy tool. The embodied, dialogic, and risk-filled site of pedagogy I discussed in chapter 3 eventually appeared in my ESL classroom through repeated problem-solving drama exercises. During the initial workshop fieldwork phases I was concerned with constructing a theatrical forum product that might suggest a master solution narrative for non-native English speakers. In the final fieldwork phase, however, I worried less about the format of the performance methods and the outcome of the performance exercises that students engaged. Within the ESL classroom, I adopted an approach that reflected the processual nature of performative pedagogy, an approach that recognized that participants’ language-based obstacles are neither pre-determined nor consistent.

Translating Forum Theatre for the ESL Classroom

My ESL classroom fieldwork represented the culminating experience in an eight-month series of performative pedagogy experiments. Within this concluding fieldwork phase, I discovered the traditional classroom to be the best locale for doing performative ESL
pedagogy. This conclusion, of course, directly reverses my initial expectations and assumptions regarding the ESL classroom. I initially proposed isolated workshops as the most practical and efficient means of implementing performative pedagogy because I desired a context that was removed from the institutional constraints of an ESL school. Having taught in the ESL program previously, I recognized the instructor’s classroom obligations to an established curriculum and teaching practices. I anticipated that a workshop removed from the ESL classroom would allow me to construct a performance site unaffected by participants’ or the program director’s traditional language instruction expectations. I soon learned, however, that my self-proclaimed independent workshop was always shadowed by its location within the ESL program and participants’ projection of structural language objectives onto all performance activity. When I resisted these influences and steadfastly pursued critical performance goals, participants stopped attending. After conducting three, eight-week ESL performance workshops, all of which struggled to maintain a consistent number of participants, I turned to the ESL classroom as a potential site for facilitating participation in my performative pedagogy experiment.

I discovered that despite its location within a structured, comprehensive ESL school, the ESL classroom represented the most feasible site for conducting performative pedagogy. First, the class operated within an obvious pedagogical framework with explicit instructional objectives. The class was situated within a progression of ESL courses, each rated according to the language-competence of its students. I entered the intermediate-advanced class, the second highest language level offered at the school. Several students in the course had already attended lower levels at the school and had moved up to the level I taught. Students recognized that their language competence, as documented on their respective class
examinations, determined their placement and promotion within the school. Moreover, students were familiar with the wide range of language competencies that the school included within its curriculum. Although instructors at various levels emphasized some language skills over others, all instructors received textbooks for the program’s preferred competencies: conversation, pronunciation, listening comprehension, reading, writing, and grammar. Instructors also attempted to coordinate their teaching of specific language structures across the program so that students promoted to the intermediate-advanced course, for example, would encounter new grammar structures appropriate to their respective language competence. For these reasons, students already anticipated and were familiar with the discrete objectives for the course prior to my entry into the classroom.

My performance workshops had no explicit connection to specific language objectives, and I even stated on a number of occasions that I was more interested in staging participants’ experiences with learning and using English than I was in actually teaching English. Yet participants consistently projected their need for language instruction onto the workshop. Participants viewed the workshops, situated immediately before their ESL classes, as another opportunity to practice English, while I ignored language pedagogy in my attempt to emphasize the consciousness-raising potential of performance. Rather than embrace performance as an obvious tool of social critique and agency, participants repeatedly demanded justification for my reliance on Boal exercises. My anticipation that a workshop context would allow an uninterrupted consideration of Boal’s practice as a performative pedagogical tool never materialized because that context was already influenced by expectations of language instruction.
I initially viewed the classroom’s already present pedagogical tradition as an obstacle. Because the ESL program relied on traditional language instruction grounded in a primarily structural linguistic pedagogy, I anticipated that the students would reject the critical performative strategy that I pursued. The classroom’s language pedagogy framework, however, actually enabled my efforts to initiate performative pedagogy methods. As an ESL instructor, I projected the same language competence objectives onto the classroom as students did. I recognized my obligation to the task of teaching English first, then located a performative means for carrying out that task. As I have documented, the result was a bifurcated pedagogy that reflects both critical performative and structural linguistic agendas. This compromise, however, helped ease students’ transition into the forum theatre sessions that I implemented during most of the class meetings. Situated within an instructional framework, performance methods seemed less threatening and more applicable to students. I experienced the usual reluctance when I introduced performance exercises, but students eventually participated in forum scenes as spect-actors by directly performing within the scenes or commenting on possible solutions from their seats. Forum theatre functioned as an instructional tool that both satisfied students’ expectation of conversation practice and positioned such practice as a meaningful rehearsal for subsequent action in their real lives.

Second, the ESL class resolved the practical scheduling and attendance problems that I encountered throughout the workshop fieldwork. Students attended class three nights a week for eight-week sessions, and though attendance was not perfect, a significantly larger and more consistent group attended the intermediate-advanced class than did the workshops. The ESL school had already established its reputation as an affordable and convenient means of learning English. Offering courses at night for a minimal fee of only twenty-five dollars,
the ESL school attracted nearly a hundred students every session. The majority of the students enrolled in the beginning courses, but all the course levels had as many as fifteen students enrolled in any given session. Ten to fifteen students regularly attended my course. Some students reported that they were motivated to attend by the opportunity for promotion to higher English courses. Promotion was typically reserved for students who attended almost every class meeting in any given session and who scored high on their respective exams.

The class’s increased time also helped my performative pedagogy, as every meeting lasted nearly three hours. I found that students had sufficient time to conclude forum exercises in a single class meeting rather than stretching a forum scene over several nights as we did during the workshops. I also occasionally postponed writing or reading exercises to give a longer, more complete treatment of a student’s language-related obstacle within small-group discussion or forum scenes. With the longer class meetings, we were able to consider a single forum scene every night, and we also occasionally fit an image exercise into the nightly performance schedule. The ESL class allowed me to consider performative pedagogy within a significantly larger participant pool than did the workshops. Motivated by their persistent interest in learning English, students regularly attended the intermediate-advanced class. The class’s scheduling, from 6:30 to 9:00 p.m., also enhanced attendance as students had more time after work to get to the class than they did during the 5:30 p.m. performance workshop.

My enthusiasm for the ESL classroom as an ideal site for doing Boal-infused pedagogy was tempered by my ongoing recognition that I could not pursue a pure performative pedagogy within the intermediate-advanced course. Though comparatively
more practical than an independent performance workshop, the ESL class was constrained by institutional regulations and by students’ relative resistance to a performance methodology. I earlier argued that the class’ situation within an ESL school created a useful pedagogical framework for launching performance exercises that students would view as relevant to their respective language study. The ESL school also created obstacles for a performative pedagogy. The school maintained a burdensome procedural protocol for both its teachers and students. Prior to every class meeting, students signed their respective time sheets and picked up their identification badges in an administrative building separate from the building that housed most ESL classes. Program administrators frequently told students not to attend classes if they could not be on time or could not prepare their homework for every meeting. The program director consistently encouraged instructors to assign homework and an extensive journal writing assignment for the four days of the week that classes were not scheduled. Other procedural requirements that teachers and students were reminded of included the limited amount of time scheduled for the evening break, a ban on food and drink inside the classrooms, and a stern warning against moving furniture around within the classrooms.

The ESL program’s heavy-handed administrative protocol and its insistence that students approach learning English as a traditional schooling effort made doing performative pedagogy a little awkward. Moreover, my sudden shift to structural and traditional language instruction during the second portion of each class meeting after an hour and a half of forum theatre seemed abrupt. I even suspected that some students resisted entering our frequent classroom forum scenes because of their perception that we were not learning English during the performance work. I interrupted my performative pursuit of embodied, critical dialogue
by 8:00 p.m. every class meeting because I felt significant pressure to teach grammar structures that students would learn, demonstrate, and use to gain promotion to the school’s advanced course. Students, in turn, participated in the forum scenes only when the topic involved significant opportunity for conversation practice. The utility of my performative pedagogy, it seemed, depended on its connection to the expansive, traditional language objectives established by the ESL school.

Regardless of the obstacles I encountered while doing performative pedagogy in the ESL classroom, the version of that pedagogy that worked best depended on forum theatre, particularly because this TO practice responded to both students’ and the ESL program’s concerns for explicit conversation practice. Forum theatre gave students a means to address brief, mundane communication obstacles, while insuring that performance allowed for substantial practice in pronunciation, conversation, and vocabulary. As I defended the use of forum theatre to the ESL school’s director, it was a method that privileged communication practice in a relevant, problem-solving context. The situation-specific forum scenes that dominated the performance portion of each class meeting pushed the class toward several critical objectives of performative pedagogy. In comparison to other performance strategies that language scholars have suggested for the ESL classroom, my forum theatre-inspired approach provided a tangible demonstration of performative pedagogy’s capacity for critique and transformation. Specifically, my adaptation of TO within the ESL classroom demonstrated a commitment to the contingency of students’ lives and an opportunity for students to dialogue openly about a language-based oppression’s source and effects. The latter objective intended to prepare students for the construction of tangible, communicative actions in response to their oppressions.
First, my ESL translation of forum theatre as a performative pedagogy privileged the discrete, contingent events that occurred within students’ lives as they reported them. Forum theatre positioned my pedagogy as dependent on students to disclose their daily experiences with the English language. Although I initially used a master list of language-based obstacles that workshop participants had constructed to initiate classroom forum theatre scenes, the topics that generated the most discussion arose spontaneously. Forum theatre worked best when students introduced experiences still fresh in their minds or recurring obstacles that they still struggled to overcome. These obstacles frequently referred to relatively brief social interactions, such as asking for directions, shopping at a grocery store, answering the telephone, or holding a brief conversation at a party. Students readily participated in forum scenes that resonated with their daily lives. Aleida explains, “If you can work with real experiences that each one had, at least once, it’s perfect. For me, it’s very good because you are working with real experiences. ‘Okay, this morning I had a trouble with my landlord . . .’ Okay, let’s work, let’s work about what happened with this problem.”

Bakhtin offers the “loophole” as a means by which authors might exercise non-alibis for being, an alternative that he contrasts to the idea of “rhythm.” For Bakhtin, aesthetic rhythm refers to “projected expectation or patterning” (Morson and Emerson 192). Rhythm can also be used to describe the limitations inherent to finalizing acts of authorship within the ESL classroom. When teachers author students in such a way that becomes predictable—mandating the patterns by which they will learn, declaring the content that they will absorb, and predicting the outcomes of such learning—teachers practice a rhythm-like pedagogy. Bakhtin’s alternative to rhythm is the loophole, which he connects to the freedom found in I-for-myself, or the internal vision of oneself. When students are able to participate freely in
the “event of being,” when a particular context such as the ESL classroom possesses “perilously and absolutely unpredicted” choices, students are able to take advantage of the loophole, which allows them to elude restrictive pedagogical rhythm (“Author and Hero” 118). Bakhtin argues, “Free will and self-activity are incompatible with rhythm” (“Author and Hero” 119).

The ESL class reflected Bakhtin’s loophole concept inasmuch as the forum exercises that students enacted were guided by their concrete, lived actions. Boal suggests that TO participants are able to recognize—at some level of specificity—the internalized oppressions suggested by another. Boal’s hypothesis of analogical induction calls attention to the “sympathy” expressed among spect-actors. Boal insists that the Theatre of the Oppressed “is the theatre of the first person plural” and that “the oppression of one is the oppression of all” (Rainbow 45). All participants should connect to the protagonist spect-actor in a scene, either through identification (“I am exactly like that”), recognition (“I am not like that at all, but I know exactly the sort of person it’s talking about”), or resonance (“I am not like that, but I would like to be”) (Rainbow 68-69). I grounded my initial selection of the communication obstacles suggested by workshop participants in the hope that the students would recognize the obstacles as relevant and salient to their lives. I called particular attention to obstacles suggested by participants who were also enrolled in the ESL class.¹ In this manner, I tried to position the performance content of each class meeting as contingent on students’ experiences.

Soon after I entered the class, however, I began revising the obstacle list in light of the experiences that students described. The revised list determined the forum topic for each class meeting, and I frequently referred to the list for writing assignments, vocabulary
lessons, and listening comprehension suggestions. For example, after a group of ESL students identified doctor visits as problematic for non-native English speakers, I proposed a forum scene based on Ana’s experience during a phone call to a nurse. This particular forum produced a series of relevant language lessons for the class, including vocabulary words that the students used during the forum performance and explicit conversation practice using a doctor’s office role play script. While I did not surrender my instructional role, the content of the classroom, in terms of the topics being discussed, always remained within students’ hands. I maintained control of the classroom schedule by suggesting particular performance exercises to explore the students’ experiences as well as by adopting explicit language lessons from the material that students’ performances generated. The students’ control of the class’s content, however, reflected a means of discovering a Bakhtinian loophole in which the students created and carried out language-related actions in a contingent fashion. Our classroom avoided rhythm because students determined the specific direction of our performative pedagogy each night (Bakhtin, “Author and Hero” 118).

During the image theatre-based performance workshops, participants described a general trend toward internalizing many of their respective linguistic- and communication-based obstacles. The methodological shift to forum theatre and the move to an ESL classroom generated discussion of situation-specific obstacles rather than cops in the head. The intermediate-advanced students still indicated that mundane communication encounters caused them worry and anxiety, but the shift to forum theatre provoked conversations regarding the specific communicative actions that would help them negotiate these encounters. The focus on language-based cops in the head that characterized the early phases of the fieldwork was replaced in the classroom fieldwork phases by pragmatic discussion.
geared toward eliminating those internalized oppressions. Given the focus of Boal’s forum practice—to locate and rehearse tangible solutions for real life—students eagerly moved from analyzing their respective problems to eradicating them. While this transition is an obvious extension of my move from image to forum methods, it also represents a fundamental characteristic of the language-based obstacles identified within this project: they existed as both internal and external exigencies. It was never enough to consider non-native English speakers’ experiences within forum theatre alone because participants had already internalized their experiences in terms of psychological insecurities, frustrations, and fears. For example, Maryo’s self-determined solution for his confusion while opening a bank account cannot disguise the impatience and frustration he described as effects of the problem. Nor did Adela’s difficulty in making herself understood to a bakery employee—a relatively contained communication problem—obscure the internalized effects the event had on her overall communicative confidence.

During the classroom forum theatre scenes, students identified a number of concrete communication problems and solutions to address the problems. Several categories emerged from the forum scenes, including communication difficulty during social interactions, confusion related to retail shopping encounters, problems interacting with medical personnel, and confusion concerning telephone calls. Workshop participants had addressed all these categories, incidentally, within the framework of image theatre exercises, but the intermediate-advanced students returned to them during the classroom forum theatre scenes. Within these scenes, students frequently mentioned their personalized psychological responses to the above problems, but they were primarily concerned with arguing about
possible solutions. A few examples that correspond to the above categories illustrate the participants’ interest in locating workable solutions to their problems.

Numerous students explained their general difficulty with communicating, including confusion, frustration, and insecurity, during their first days in the United States. Saengaroon’s intimidation during a dinner party serves as one model case of this problem. In response, forum participants suggested a number of solutions that they claimed had already worked for them, and in the process, transformed the forum scenes into counseling sessions where inexperienced ESL students received specific advice from those who earlier had encountered the same communication problems. Students recommended that inexperienced non-native English speakers use exaggerated body gestures and facial expressions to communicate their confusion or desires. Others advised newcomers to study carefully the behavior of Americans in particular situations as a model for their own behavior in similar situations. Other participants advocated direct intervention during an interaction by asking the native English speaker to slow down or to preface the conversation with a language competence disclaimer to prepare the interactant.

Telephone-related communication obstacles also frequently served as the topics for forum scenes, and students offered a wide range of possible solutions to these problems. Several students advocated the use of a native or bilingual speaker to communicate the non-native speaker’s desires. More frequently, though, students located solutions that might be carried out by the non-native speaker directly. For sales calls, students recommended that the non-native speaker request another representative or manager in hopes that they would respond more patiently or would better understand the non-native speaker’s response. Students also suggested that they could directly request that salespeople slow down their
vocal rate or that they might memorize any of the following phrases: “I’m not interested right now, but I will call you back later if I am interested.” “I’m sorry. I don’t speak English.” “Could you call back later when my husband/wife/friend/etc. can speak to you?” In all cases, regardless of the communication problem represented in the forum scene, students preferred those solutions that directly empowered them. Students rehearsed communicative action that placed them in direct control of the problem situation and that required them to communicate directly with confidence to a native English speaker. This preference indicated a dramatic shift from the early image theatre work, when participants primarily focused on how they felt during particular communication situations rather than how they might eradicate the problems associated with those situations.

Forum theatre’s utility as an instrument of performative ESL pedagogy comes, in part, from its persistent focus on students’ lived experiences, a perspective that other ESL performance practices have glaringly omitted. The most common use of performance within the ESL classroom, English language role plays, attempt to engage students in conversational practice. ESL proponents of performance favor a communicative competence approach to language instruction and therefore argue that drama enables students to practice “real interaction” within the classroom (Yalden 19). In most descriptions of ESL performance exercises, however, students do not select interactions that emerge from their respective lives. ESL practitioners such as Paulston, for example, implement role play scripts that engage students in practicing commonly used functional language behaviors. Students practice making consumer complaints, offering interpersonal advice, and expressing their anger in relation to some event. Students in my ESL class did not reject the need for acquiring functional communicative competence. They did, however, demonstrate clearly
that their needs for English were contingent on their respective identities, language proficiencies, and day-to-day interactions. However relevant a particular role play might be for ESL students, the instructor’s selection of that script prior to listening to students’ narrative accounts of their concrete experience with a given language obstacle or functional behavior denies those students’ voices. In such cases, students ironically retain a limited social role as instructors speak on their behalf, choosing which obstacles deserve discussion and how that discussion will occur.

ESL practitioners frequently praise the experiential learning component of performance, but fail to recognize that embodied learning is not safe from ideological influence. Auerbach and Burgess’s critique of survival ESL curricula indicates that role plays have been used to reinforce oppressive social structures or limit the social situations in which non-native English speakers would realistically use English (158). Forum theatre does not suppose an established social reality within which its ESL participants may practice English. A significant advantage of using forum theatre as a performative ESL pedagogy concerns its recognition that students’ social realities are always contingent on a range of social, cultural, and political influences. Rather than prescribe a context and communicative problem for ESL students, forum theatre allows them to perform as spect-actors, as critical observers of their respective social realities and as agents committed to transforming those realities.

Second, forum theatre generated a dialogic culture within which students openly shared their respective experiences, debated the effects of shared language oppressions, and collaborated on communicative responses that they practiced within the classroom. Boal’s forum theatre provides an excellent means for empowering ESL students to help one other
because it encourages students to consider and even sample another person’s perspective of a
given oppression. For example, our classroom forum theatre scenes necessarily positioned
language as a socially implicated signifying system inasmuch as students were called to offer
their personalized analyses and solutions to given language-based oppressions. The
communication obstacles that students disclosed were never individual, private problems in
the context of forum theatre. Once staged as a forum, the obstacles became the collective,
shared property of all the ESL students.

Bakhtin’s exploration of the relationship between self and others in his essay “Author
and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” helps explain forum theatre’s efficacy for dialogue. Bakhtin
states that acts of social authorship depend on the author’s potential to maintain an
outsideness in relation to the other. In real life, we cannot experience a concrete picture of
ourselves directly. Bakhtin maintains that we instead rely on the authorial description that
others witness when encountering us. He characterizes three forms of the self: I-for-myself,
“how my self looks and feels to my own consciousness;” I-for-others, “how my self appears
to those outside it;” and the-other-for-me, “how outsiders appear to my self” (Morson and
Emerson 180).

Boal’s forum theatre efficiently concretizes Bakhtin’s selfhood categories. Ana’s
forum, which explored her difficulty in receiving medical advice when calling her child’s
pediatric office, offers evidence of forum theatre’s capacity for initiating the author-other
dialogue. From Ana’s perspective, her telling of the story and her replaying it during a forum
improvisation constitute the “I-for-myself” category of selfhood, as she addressed her own
internalized feelings and desires as a worried mother who needed English communicative
competence to obtain information in caring for a sick child. The forum suggestions, in this
case provided by several students and myself, signify the “I-for-others” category of selfhood as Ana witnessed others’ representations of both her initial frustration and her possible courses of action. Finally, the “other-for-me” category of selfhood applies for several of the remaining ESL participants, particularly because they easily recognized Ana’s dilemma as one they too had experienced. In that sense, Ana projected not only a personal vision of the communication obstacle, but a collective one as well. In this case, and in several other forum sessions where participants projected their own personal experiences onto the model proposed by only one, the protagonist benevolently authored the participants. The model forum scene provokes but does not finalize participants’ personal narratives and analyses of a given communication obstacle.

Our classroom forum sessions were never lengthy, usually because after one or two forum rehearsals, student spect-actors interrupted to describe their own experiences with the dramatized problem. At first, I reacted by requiring any spect-actor who wanted to express an opinion regarding the problem to enter the scene and communicate within the drama of the oppression. Students reacted to my insistence on dialogue via theatrical action by reducing their participation. I later realized that by initiating discussion, and more importantly, by stimulating students to share their personal narratives, the forum sessions became opportunities for extended conversation practice. Generating conversation in a classroom of fifteen non-native English speakers was never easy, and generating relevant conversation that focused on concrete communication problems was even more difficult. For many students, reacting to forum theatre by sharing narratives became as empowering as entering a forum scene to rehearse corrective action. Most students had stories to tell, and in many cases, those stories contained problems. During the students’ forum theatre scenes,
then, the classroom became a problem-solving site, as students enacted solutions within a forum or just argued for a particular course of action based on their own lived success or failure.

As a performative ESL pedagogy, forum theatre aligned with Bakhtin’s recommendation that people resist finalizing others during social interaction. To that end, participants ultimately suggested their own obstacles to consider within forum scenes and, just as important, adapted Theatre of Oppressed to their language needs. Located within his theory of polyphony, Bakhtin’s notion of addressive surplus calls on authorship that expresses a “willingness to listen,” in which the author honestly approaches the other in dialogue, considering the other as an independent, separate consciousness (Problems 299). Morson and Emerson describe addressive surplus as asking “the right sort of questions”: “Recognizing the other’s capacity for change, one provokes or invites him to reveal and outgrow himself” (243). Addressive surplus is preferable to Bakhtin’s earlier notion of essential surplus because it does not deliver the extra information, previously unavailable, to the other. Essential surplus refers to extra information which exists outside the other but which can be seen by an author; it refers to the “others-for-me” category of selfhood that Bakhtin advocated in his earlier writings. Within Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony, however, the author neither assumes access to nor employs the knowledge of others. As equal participants in dialogue, both author and the other discover any extra information about each within an unfinalized interaction.

Addressive surplus can be seen in the ESL classroom inasmuch as I created a forum performance frame within which dialogue was the primary rule. In most Theatre of the Oppressed work, in fact, the traditional authorial role is displaced. Aesthetic activity within
TO heterogenizes the authorial voice, shifting the power of the traditional theatre director or the actor to a wide range of participants, all of whom possess a valid voice within the selected exercise. Boal insists that TO involve analogical induction by its participants, a mandate that encourages equal participation among spect-actors. The actual dialogue that emerges from Theatre of the Oppressed work is evidence of polyphony in practice. All potential finalizing acts of authorship (by the joker or the protagonist in a given exercise) are unsettled by the uncertainty of other participants’ actions. As the joker/TO facilitator within the ESL classroom, I certainly noticed aspects of the protagonist perhaps unknown to that person, but so did the other participants, and the dialogue of the cast within a given forum propelled the scene forward. Addressive surplus occurred inasmuch as the forum scenes encouraged dialogue with the other, rather than a finalizing description available to those who exist outside the other.

Adela’s forum scene in which she described confusion at a grocery store while ordering a cake illustrates the unfinalizability that became a key feature of the classroom forum work. Following Adela’s initial improvisation of her experience, Sara replaced Adela and immediately wrote Adela’s instructions on paper to enable the bakery employee to understand the request. This intervention provoked much debate and discussion. In fact, the participants eventually interrupted the forum scene to argue among themselves, and I realized after a few minutes that it would be fruitless to require participants to perform or demonstrate their suggestions as Boal strongly urges for forum theatre scenes. Participants spoke quickly to each other and spoke over each other, arguing forcefully at times about the best communication behavior to use if one misunderstands a grocery clerk. At that moment, I became more of a bystander than an instructor or even a Boal joker/facilitator. I asked a few
questions to encourage participants to clarify or defend their suggestions, but the ideas emerged so quickly and forcefully that I mostly sat back and tried to insure that everyone who had an opinion was heard. In this case, my authoring was tied to listening and Bakhtin’s authorship idea of addressive surplus. Rather than enforce Boal’s rule for performing all forum suggestions, I tried to respect the sort of spect-actorship that signified empowerment and critical consciousness within the ESL classroom: careful, analytic talk about one’s personal experiences. Even as participants effectively halted the forum exercise, I observed participants sincerely debating the most efficient means of handling consumer misunderstandings. I observed both fast-paced conversation practice and consideration of the mundane, socially-situated communication obstacles. I observed participant dialogue spun directly out of a performance scene that all participants immediately recognized on the Boalian level of identification. Finally, though neither participants nor myself explicitly called attention to it, I observed a fusion of my so-called performance goals and their so-called structural English goals.

Other performance strategies for the ESL classroom direct students to interact with each other, but rarely in the improvised, sincere way that forum theatre allows. Wessells’ construction of an ESL curriculum around students’ collaborative, original theatrical production best approximates forum theatre’s focus on engaging issues that students identify as important. Wessells indicates that her students select the topic for the theatrical production, then engage in a practice akin to Boal’s simultaneous dramaturgy by improvising various scenes relevant to the topic before collectively scripting the scenes for a subsequent rehearsed performance (230). As a performative ESL pedagogy, forum theatre also allows for spontaneous improvisation of a given topic, also selected by ESL students. Yet forum
theatre also allows every improvisation to be interrupted, to be changed by an intervening audience of spect-actors. That is, forum theatre extends the notion of student invention and collaboration through its insistence that students critique and amend the various communication obstacles dramatized in any given scene. Forum theatre anticipates that drama serves a problem-solving function, and when it is applied to the ESL classroom, forum theatre plays a dual function of critique/transformation and English language practice.

Most performance methods adopted into ESL classrooms, of course, do not privilege contingent dialogue or student-derived proposals for corrective action. Students are allowed improvisation only in determining how a selected conversation topic should be pursued. ESL role plays typically assign social roles, social contexts, and relevant language expressions to students (Paulston “Developing”). While some ESL practitioners argue that role playing enables students to rehearse real life action, a goal also upheld within forum theatre, the ESL practitioners themselves influence the supposedly meaningful interaction that gets dramatized within a role play. Students have stringent conversational boundaries within role plays, limits that are established in an effort to control the type of language practice that students engage.

As an instrument of ESL pedagogy, forum theatre recognizes that language practice is most meaningful when it occurs within student-selected contexts, particularly when those contexts reflect immediate, tangible problems for participants. Moreover, forum theatre recognizes that non-native English speakers share an oppressive language culture. ESL students’ membership within a common language condition allows them to recognize and react to other students’ respective language obstacles. Forum theatre thus avoids the trap that ESL practitioners who primarily engage performance through role plays encounter. When
used alone, role plays frequently reflect the view that a structural language curriculum should dictate the function and utility of a performance exercise. Role plays, therefore, get assigned within ESL classrooms to illustrate or rehearse a previously selected curriculum item. Forum theatre, of course, operates within the historical moment of each classroom meeting and predicts neither the function nor utility of any given scene outside its capacity for critical dialogue and rehearsal for transformation.

Identity Implications: ESL Instructor and/or Boal Joker

Applying performative pedagogy to an ESL classroom imposes a series of expectations on both students and their instructor. Both obviously operate within the educational context of second language learning, and, therefore, both share an interest in the acquisition of English. The infusion of performance within the ESL classroom positions students and teachers in the respective roles of performers and directors, or at least some variation of these theatrical roles. My specific location of Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed within an intermediate-advanced ESL class cast the students as spect-actors and myself as a Boalian joker. During my stint as an ESL instructor, I negotiated the instructional role alongside the joker role. Doing performative pedagogy within any academic context fuses the performative and pedagogic roles that an instructor must play and situates those roles as both critical and interested in transformation of social obstacles.

Once I selected Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed as my performative pedagogical method, I was obliged to facilitate performance within the ESL context as a TO joker. The joker in Boal’s practice is a director-like character who is ultimately responsible for activating and motivating participants. In Boal’s image and forum theatres, the joker fulfills the functions necessary for the transformation of spectators to spect-actors. The joker acts as...
the director or facilitator, introducing the exercises to the ESL participants, instructing them when necessary, and, most importantly, adapting the exercises to match the implicit and explicit desires of the participants themselves. Mady Schutzman and Jan Cohen-Cruz trace the joker label to the wild card in a deck of playing cards: “just as the wild card is not tied down to a specific suit or value, neither is the TO joker tied down to an allegiance to performer, spectator, or any one interpretation of events” (237). Lib Spry identifies the joker as primarily concerned with adapting TO for particular audiences: “Flexibility is the key. The joker’s job is that of midwife to the process. This is very different from the way we have been taught to lead and to experience being led” (179). Spry’s example from a performance workshop with a literacy group holds particular significance for the present study’s ESL context. Spry observed that her participants rejected the “theatre games that made them feel like kids” in favor of discussion regarding practical, political action. Spry shifted from TO games to using the group’s discussion as a script for a theatre piece, in which the literacy participants rehearsed for an actual meeting with city politicians (179). The final task of the joker within forum and image theatre lies with the participants themselves: spect-actors’ desires and inhibitions must be recognized and explored.

During my classroom facilitation of image and forum theatre, I encountered student assumptions that I would act as a traditional English instructor, assumptions that I realized through students’ requests for direct conversation and grammar practice. Such requests problematized my joker task of adapting to the collective will of participants. By following the instructional requests of some ESL participants, I risked fundamentally altering the nature of both my performative pedagogy research and several basic tenets of Boal’s practice. For example, if I had completely followed the suggestion of Aleida and Yomaira and split the
workshop into a conversation practice session and a Boal performance session, I would have undoubtedly failed to observe one of the primary outcomes I intended to measure: the efficacy of Boal’s practice to address mundane, communication-based problems for non-native English speakers. If I yielded entirely to workshop participants’ desire for more talk and less body-based performance work, I would have neglected Boal’s belief that both concrete and psychological obstacles can be addressed via corporeal action. Like Spry, I finally adapted my performance agenda in light of participants’ overwhelming concern for conversation practice by using more forum than image theatre during the classroom portion of the fieldwork. Throughout my ongoing fieldwork adjustment of TO-inspired performative pedagogy, however, I became uncomfortably familiar with Eleanor Crowder’s fear of the Boalian joker as an “authority figure” who has “an incredibly powerful role in what gets elicited from the audience toward possible interventions” (Schutzman, “Canadian” 223-24).

In Toward a Philosophy of the Act, “Author and Hero,” and Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, Bakhtin encourages an activist approach to everyday life. The answerable act, what Bakhtin believes to be a fully ethical act, requires the actor to act in consideration of the self’s own uniqueness, the uniqueness of the other, and the sociohistorical moment in which both self and other exist. Bakhtin places considerable emphasis on this ethical, answerable act for the existence of any person: “to be in life, to be actually, is to act, is to be unindifferent toward the once-occurent whole” (emphasis in original, Toward a Philosophy 42). Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed generally considers both self and other, as well as the socio-historical context. In theory, Theatre of the Oppressed is grounded in the present, in the uniqueness of the “event of being,” as experienced by the participants of any given performance exercise. In practice, however, Theatre of the Oppressed references two
distinct events and thus requires that two unique “events of being” be addressed. The first event is the performance activity itself. Forum theatre, for example, serves as a live action of its own; it creates moments where answerability must be addressed for self and other, for joker and spect-actors. The second event is that for which the performance activity, the forum, rehearses. That is, TO contains a reality of its own in the form of the events performed for any given forum scene, but also alludes to the tangible, non-mediated reality that produces the very oppressions being addressed within the scene.

As an author within the ESL classroom, I faced the sizable task of balancing my own bifurcated authority as Boalian joker and ESL instructor with the desires and exigencies of the ESL students themselves. Added to this task were contextual considerations stemming from both the placement of my performative pedagogy project within an ESL program that emphasized traditional pedagogical methods and students’ disclosure of tangible social events where communicating in English was difficult. Who or what would I privilege in designing particular TO activities? What sort of obstacles or oppressions would I either solicit or encourage for discussion within Theatre of the Oppressed work? Would I obscure participants’ worries regarding their linguistic competence? Would I emphasize my own interest in addressing the concrete, socially-located communication problems that participants consistently shared?

In light of Bakhtin’s theories of ethical authorship, the TO joker must recognize that mere faithfulness to an other’s unique being and the maintenance of one’s own answerability for an act do nothing to insure that the act recognizes the other in a way that the other emphatically prefers. Most Boal exercises begin with an oppression shared by a participant who becomes the protagonist during subsequent improvisations. Throughout his explanation
of TO, Boal insists that the joker should always ask questions of the protagonist rather than make suggestions while a scene is being played. Boal implores the joker to respect the protagonist’s perspective, will, and vulnerability. Following Bakhtin’s ethical authorship models, the TO joker must identify the will of the protagonist in any given performance scene. If they are played according to Boal’s prescriptions, all Theatre of the Oppressed exercises recognize the historical, concrete presence of the other. In that sense, the TO joker benevolently authors all participants. Yet it is crucial to distinguish between mere recognition of the other’s real, oppressive situation and the particular desires of the other within that situation. Engaging others in the concrete world is very different from interfering with others in their concrete lives. Spry suggests that the joker should recognize the specific wills of participants: “I feel strongly that those of us who work as animators using Theatre of the Oppressed need to be very aware of not only the issues we are exploring but of the dynamics between ourselves and those we are working with. We should not kid ourselves about who we are, nor the power we potentially have as animators” (177). This challenge clearly implicated my ESL practice of forum theatre. Extended to its ideal end, Spry’s suggestion requires Boalian jokers to invoke Bakhtin’s concept of exercising a non-alibi for being by asking both themselves and participants a direct question: what is my purpose in participating in these performance exercises? In both theory and practice, both parties’ answers should echo each other.

In considering this question for the present project, I recognized dissonance between my response and those of ESL students. My purpose in establishing and directing a Boal-based performance workshop and subsequent ESL class concerned both an academic experiment involving performative pedagogy and a sincere interest in facilitating problem-
solving with non-native English speakers. Participants’ purposes for joining the project varied. They clearly recognized that I was using the performance workshop as a vehicle for my doctoral dissertation. This recognition, in some way, likely contributed to participants’ identification of the workshop as “my research.” According to Aleida and Yomaira, the fact that I was engaged in collecting research data relevant to participants’ respective lives influenced some to contribute their experiences to the project. Another motivation concerned conversation practice. As numerous participants reminded me, non-native English speakers frequently worry about speaking English proficiently, even perfectly. Aleida prioritized conversation skill as her primary goal in studying English: “The first is to really, really speak an almost English. I mean a good English. Maybe not like you, but really close. I want to really speak English in the future.”

Participants’ desire to become highly proficient English speakers did not align with my initial stated goals, and I certainly struggled to match their linguistic-based goals with my own communication-based concerns. When participants described their desire to speak better English, however, they always referred to concrete, communication obstacles or internalized communicative fears as reasons for their pursuit. Adela explained,

I want to learn English because my three daughters speak English. My husband speak English. And today in the morning, one of my daughters say, “Why don’t you learn to speak English?” So I need to speak English because I can stay at the same level to all my family. My whole family, my husband and my daughters.

Adela’s desire to learn English and speak it fluently was not an isolated goal, an objective removed from particular social and psychological motivations. She described her strained communication with her daughters and, later, her difficulty in finding a job, as reasons for studying English. Raquel offered another example of how participants’ desires to boost their
linguistic competence were connected to issues of social empowerment. While explaining her reason for attending the workshop, Raquel stated, “For learn English. For speak good English. For know how I can have a conversation. For these. Not like a class, but when I speak with you, I learn something, and with the exercises, I think about my problems that I have when I try to speak with other persons.” The underlying motives for participants’ pursuit of English conversational skills always emerged from concrete social experiences in which they struggled to communicate or faced some internal or external obstacle in accomplishing a communicative task. My challenge throughout the performance fieldwork, inside both the workshop and the ESL classroom, was recognizing the significance of participants’ desire to practice conversation skills while addressing the underlying motivations for that desire.

While negotiating my objectives and those of ESL participants, I occasionally violated basic restrictions that Boal places on Theatre of the Oppressed jokers. In an explicit instruction for forum theatre jokers, Boal states, “Jokers must avoid all actions which could manipulate or influence the audience. . . . Jokers personally decide nothing” (Games 232). At least three times during the fieldwork process I entered a forum scene, exiting my joker position to replace a protagonist or antagonist and suggest new means of rehearsing the corrective action for a problem. During another forum, I began the initial improvisation as the antagonist and following the scene, urged participants to replace either the protagonist or myself. In all these cases, I interfered in an attempt to instigate responses from other spectators. I hoped to demonstrate possible suggestions for communicative action and thereby encourage other participants to enter forum scenes. Most of this interference occurred during
my transition of the performance fieldwork from image to forum theatre. In all these cases, I recognized the various problems with my direct intervention.

Foremostly, I risked contaminating the empowerment on which Boal bases his forum theatre practice. Forum sessions offer spectators the opportunity to observe and act. Although I entered scenes with the altruistic intention of furthering participants’ empowerment, I reduced the significance of ESL spect-actors entering a scene because my participation presented the biased model of a native English speaker. Moreover, my own identity—that of an English-speaking American—represented the exact oppressor profile for some participants. Numerous participants immediately apologized before or after sharing any communication experience within which they had described Americans in a negative way. Aleida wondered if participants were fearful of disclosing problem experiences that involved communicating with Americans because they did not want to offend me. “You know, maybe we are afraid of telling you exactly about the real problem. Maybe. . . . What I’m trying to tell you that maybe people are afraid to tell you because you are an American. Maybe, maybe. Yes. It could be.” When I entered a scene, I could not readily assume the sort of ideology and/or experiential reaction that non-native English speakers possessed. For the ESL spect-actors, the scene represented reality. For me, it represented another person’s problem. Once inside the scene, I could neither maintain the sort of distanced facilitation necessary for a forum joker nor express an ESL participant’s subjective interpretation of a communicative obstacle. I instead opened myself to a problematic identity that Rhonda Payne labels a “fixer:”

As a popular theatre worker—one who has done community-based, collective creations, and political, issue-oriented theatre for a long time—one fundamental principle was understanding that my role as a theatre person was to use my theatre skills to elucidate, to frame, to present the situation. I was
not a “fixer.” I was not the one to solve the problem. If I’m working with a union going on strike, I can use my skills as a theatre artist and performer to tell the story. But the telling of the story does not in itself solve the problem or fix whatever the problem is in the community. (Schutzman, “Canadian” 217)

While I eventually stopped entering forum scenes, particularly once the fieldwork moved into an ESL classroom and spect-actor participation increased, I recognized the difficulty in practicing the sort of ethical authorship inherent to Boal’s joker figure, and indeed, his entire TO practice. My altruistic motivations became patriarchal. My concern for stimulating participation became interference. My interest in facilitating rehearsals to participants’ problem experiences became coercion.

Once I entered the ESL classroom as an instructor, I assumed responsibility for teaching grammar, pronunciation, reading, writing, conversation, and listening comprehension. While several participants had already referred to me as an ESL teacher within the workshop, I only willingly assumed that identity during the final fieldwork phases. Once inside the classroom, I openly negotiated both roles. I was, at once a Boalian joker and an ESL educator. More specifically, I attempted to negotiate the instructor position within the framework of both critical pedagogy and performative pedagogy in an effort to test the efficacy of a critical performative pedagogy for the ESL context. I only operated as a critical performative pedagogue during the first half of each ESL class, during which students typically studied conversation, pronunciation, and listening comprehension. As I described earlier, I balanced my obligations to the ESL program’s requirements for comprehensive language instruction with my own performative research interests by dividing the class into two distinct pedagogies. During the first hour and a half of each meeting, I typically engaged students in discussion regarding their various real-world experiences with speaking English.
I then guided them through various Boal exercises that framed their respective experiences as problems to be solved. During the final hour of class, I shifted to a traditional “banking” style of education by lecturing on grammar rules and drilling students on various reading comprehension, writing, and grammar exercises.

My division of the class and pedagogy also responded to students’ stated interests and objectives. During my first classroom meeting with the intermediate-advanced ESL class, I asked students to write their expectations of me as their instructor and their educational objectives for the class. Every student included specific structural English skills on their respective goal lists. Elaine wrote, “I want to learn more grammar and present perfect tense. This is my big trouble.” Several mentioned the necessity of preparing for standardized English tests. Lavrent described a workplace related objective: “When my boss is writing something, I understand completely. But during conversation I am feeling very bad because it is hard me to separate and catch words. I don’t know what I need to do right now. I expect this problem to solve with my teacher.” Most students also mentioned their expectation that I would include conversation practice during the class. My decision to use a traditional lecture style and direct drilling of grammar structures during the second half of class was not only predicated on the ESL program’s specific requirements for each class level, but also on students’ various motivations for a structural understanding of English.

In this sense, I believed that I was not sacrificing a critical performative pedagogy so much as I was responding to students’ expectations, desires, and needs. Though I might have experimented with a performative pedagogy within the grammar, writing, and reading portion of the class, the relatively brief amount of time allotted to so many areas of study reduced the feasibility of that option. I did not think it plausible that I might performatively
engage six English competencies, however connected they might be, within a 150-minute period. The program’s requirement of midterm and final exams further deterred me from extending performative work into all areas of the class. I could think of no reasonable means of testing students on the experiential learning that occurred during the performance exercises. Instead, I frequently asked students to write about and to read articles or short stories connected to their respective experiences that we had discussed within forum theatre scenes. During listening comprehension quizzes, I read aloud articles that focused on the types of tangible problems that students identified within performance work.

As an ESL instructor, I divided my attention between satisfying students’ requests for standard structural instruction and the assumptions of critical performative pedagogy. I also observed a distinct difference in how I interacted with students during the two somewhat opposed sections of each class. During the performative Boal section, I typically asked students to discuss their experiences with a particular communication-based problem already mentioned by students during previous meetings. Next, following about fifteen minutes of small group discussion, I asked volunteers to stage one student’s experience as a forum theatre scene. I then facilitated the forum session as a Boalian joker. Throughout the performance-driven portion of each class, I asked primarily open-ended questions in an attempt to stimulate participants to talk about their experiences, ideas, feelings, and suggestions. I also made a conscious effort to fulfill the pronunciation, conversation, and listening comprehension criteria that the program established by engaging as many students as possible in interaction, by responding to student requests for vocabulary or pronunciation help, and by occasionally correcting student errors. Within the frameworks of Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed and my own conception of a critical performative pedagogy, I felt
uncomfortable interrupting a student to make a pronunciation or grammar correction. However, students within the intermediate-advanced class, as well as previous participants in the performance workshops, stressed the importance of a teacher who would consistently correct their language mistakes. Aleida, for example, revealed that she preferred “a strict teacher:” “Not strict in the way, ‘Hey! Did you bring your homework?!’ But who makes you say the correct answers.” Aleida also described the typical respect and formality that students grant teachers in her native Venezuela. Although I could not justify such corrections within a performance-based pedagogy whose focus was on social and personal empowerment, I felt more strongly that participant expectations regarding their instructors should be met, particularly when those expectations were grounded in their pursuit of passing a standardized English test.

During the second section of each class, I continued to ask students questions, though these took the form of grammar drills. Using copies of a grammar workbook, I proceeded through the class student by student, requesting that they orally answer selected grammar problems. During these oral drills, I frequently corrected students’ grammar and pronunciation. Rather than sit behind a student desk, I paced at the front of the classroom, occasionally writing new vocabulary words or grammar rules on the dry erase board. This marked a stark contrast from the performance section of class, when I would sit with students in the audience while volunteers staged forum scenes. While student participation certainly varied according to the type of exercise used (performance or standard grammar drill), I observed that in both cases students deferred to me as the authority figure. That observation was no surprise to me when it occurred during the latter portion of the ESL class, but I was startled when students consistently waited for me to encourage either the disclosure of their
communication obstacles or forum interventions. My assumption was that students would view the performance portion of each meeting as an opportunity to guide both content and direction for the class. While students more actively and independently participated during performance activities than they did during grammar exercises, they frequently waited for my instructions in both formats.

Gloria and Emilce’s description of non-native English speakers as typically reluctant to ask native English speakers questions helped explain the passivity I observed throughout the ESL classes. During an image scene, Gloria and Emilce described a pattern of behavior common for ESL students: indicating that they understand something when they actually did not. During the performance portion of the ESL class, students also seemed reluctant to volunteer their stories for a forum scene or to suggest alternatives for action within the scenes themselves until I first requested participation. After I asked for volunteers a second or third time, or even after I asked a specific group to volunteer a problem experience they had discussed, students willingly responded. After one student had offered an experience, numerous others would join a class-wide discussion or forum session.

I also recognized that my role as ESL instructor fundamentally altered how some students interacted within the classroom, even if they had previously participated in the earlier performance workshops. Students from Latin American countries, for example, described their interactions with teachers in their native countries as formal and carefully controlled by the teacher. Raquel labeled the teachers in her native El Salvador as “strict”: “In El Salvador, the relationship between teacher and student is more formal than here (USA). We have to say ‘Mister’ or call the teacher by the last name but always with
“Mr. . . .” Aleida described the distance that she maintained from her teachers in Colombia. “I don’t remember calling a teacher his name. . . . I was like, ‘Keep your distance. This is your teacher.’ It’s something related to personality. It’s a custom.” Lianna, a student from El Salvador, characterized student-teacher relationships in terms of the trust, respect, and confidence that students should place in their teachers.

For me it’s [student-teacher relationships] very important because your teacher is a guide, and you believe what they teach to you. We can ask them in everything if I don’t understand anything, and we can help them in everything too. We can be a good friends. . . . We have to respect our teacher always since they’re the authority in our class. He knows more than us, and he has more experience than us in what he is teaching.

My role as a critical performative ESL teacher, then, was countered not only by my own pedagogical decision to use two styles within the classroom, but also by students’ expectations and experiences of how student-teacher interactions ought occur. Students’ acceptance of the passive student role within the classroom reflected another cop in the head they faced while acquiring English. Learning English within a critical performative framework mandates committed, embodied engagement, but several students reported that they were accustomed to or preferred a less active role as student.

During an early image exercise in the ESL class, I asked participants to sculpt images of the typical student-teacher interaction in their native countries. Most images depicted a teacher standing at the front of the classroom in a lecture gesture and showed seated students attentively taking notes at their desks. Following the image exercise, students offered their respective interpretations of the performances and narratives of how teachers and students interact in their respective countries. Raquel claimed that she preferred her native Salvadoran style of education where teachers carefully monitored their students. Raquel explained, “They [teachers] take care of the student like when we are in kindergarten. They
controlled if we assist to the class, everything.” Ly characterized the relationship between teachers and students in his native Vietnam as a dramatic inequality of power. Ly claimed that Vietnamese students worried about answering teachers’ questions with correct answers, primarily because they feared the label of “bad” student. Ly explained, “You must be scared of him [the teacher] or you will not learn.”

Students’ expectations ran opposite to the dialogic, participatory requirements of Boal’s TO practice, and our classroom practice of TO was fundamentally altered by those expectations. My presence as instructor seemed to counteract the construction of a performance space within which participants took entire control. I also recognized, however, that students’ perceptions regarding an instructor’s persona could not be easily or quickly changed. In light of these perceptions, students and I were able to negotiate an ESL classroom in which students’ active participation and decision-making during performance work were balanced with students’ preference for maintaining the teacher authority familiar to their respective cultures.

Throughout my classroom fieldwork, I attempted to balance performance with pedagogy, performance with critical pedagogy, and critical performative pedagogy with an ESL curriculum. To that end, I divided the intermediate-advanced ESL course into distinct performative and structural language components. The performative portion of each class operated from the assumption that language is always encased within a contingent sociopolitical context. During performance exercises, students explored their respective language contexts and identified instances where English was translated as an oppression. Students also used the performative pedagogy format to devise and rehearse solutions to their language-based obstacles. The structural portion of each class recognized the immediate and
diverse needs that students had for acquiring linguistic competence: to gain enrollment into
an university; to obtain employment in their career fields; to pass various standardized tests
required by either schools or employers. The last hour of each meeting, therefore, featured
repetitive language practice in the form of grammar drills, reading comprehension quizzes,
and essay writing.

My division of the ESL course amounted to a compromise of my initial vision of a
critical performative ESL pedagogy. That vision viewed performance, both theoretically and
pragmatically, as a means of teaching English in a way that simultaneously created
opportunity for critique and transformation. The pedagogy I enacted within the ESL course
cannot be described as a pure critical performative enterprise. Within the context of the ESL
classroom, I discovered that Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed does not simultaneously pursue
structural linguistic objectives and critical, transformative objectives. My division of the
ESL course into distinct pedagogical philosophies and methods reflects that discovery, but it
also indicates that language—although originating within contingent, social interaction—
takes form within a structural system that learners view as a significant means of eliminating
the daily language obstacles they encounter. That is, in spite of their productive forum
sessions that privileged performance rehearsals, ESL students still pointed to structural
language competence as a means of combating their respective problems. During a written
evaluation of the course conducted in the last meeting, several students identified both the
forum theatre exercises and the traditional grammar drill as the most helpful components of
the course. These responses offered a provisional recognition that doing performative ESL
pedagogy does not necessarily imply obscuring structural language instruction.
Forum theatre, in particular, emerged as the most efficacious means of doing performative ESL pedagogy because students could relate the performance practice to both their traditional language goal of improving their conversation skills and their recurring social need to combat various communication obstacles. While I mixed some image theatre work into the course during the initial class meetings, small group discussions eventually replaced the image scenes as the analytic portion of my performative pedagogy. I had used image theatre within the workshop, of course, to facilitate analysis of participants’ language obstacles and, more specifically, analysis of the internal and external effects that those obstacles produced. Within the ESL class, however, discussion groups that preceded and followed each forum session served the purpose of analysis. The students resisted the frozen, silent image exercises just as the workshop participants had. Discussion groups made more sense within the ESL class because students could talk about the effects and sources of their respective language oppressions and simultaneously practice their conversation skills. Because students were so interested in improving their spoken English, I discovered that even introverted students disclosed their respective emotions regarding their language obstacles during the small group discussions. Discussion groups were also used by all the ESL courses and therefore seemed to make more pedagogical sense to the intermediate-advanced students.

My attempt to implement forum theatre as a means of doing critical performative ESL pedagogy resulted in a refashioning of what “critical” and “performative” mean for the ESL classroom. While non-native English students recognize the standard acquisition of English as an empowering act of its own, those students also reported the utility of using performance to reflect on the social context they negotiate when they use English. Doing
critical performative pedagogy within an ESL classroom did not dramatically revise the identity of that pedagogical space. I discovered that for ESL contexts, at least, teaching the academic content traditionally affiliated with the context, in this case the English language, cannot be separated from performative critiques of students’ respective oppressions. If performative pedagogy is to be embraced by ESL learners, it must pursue its objectives of critique and transformation at the moment of teaching English. Balancing these objectives simultaneously, I found, is not easily managed, and though it did not occur until the final stage of the fieldwork, my division of the intermediate-advanced ESL course into performative and structural components reflects my first attempt to negotiate this requirement.

Notes

1 For a complete list of communication obstacles that participants discussed during the entire fieldwork process and the suggestions rehearsed within the forum scenes, see Appendix C.

2 As Boal uses the term in both his forum and image theatre practices, the joker figure resembles a director. Mady Schutzman observes that Boal’s contemporary joker is responsible for “presenting the basic process and ‘rules’ of forum, facilitating interventions from the audience, and helping to clarify the essence of each solution being offered by the spect-actor in each intervention” (“Brechtian” 154). It is this joker that I refer to in the present project. However, Boal also developed an entire “Joker System,” which references a theatre practice with separate objectives and aesthetics than either forum or image theatre. The Joker System attempts “to analyze the text and to reveal this analysis to the audience; to focus the action according to a single, predetermined perspective; to show the point of view of the author or director” (Boal, Theater 175). That is, the Joker System works simultaneously in the realms of analysis and presentational aesthetics. Ruth Bowman describes the Joker System as principally focused on unsettling “the singular reality of the world as it is represented in the dramatic text (and as it is conventionally reproduced in performance) in order to explore alternate ways of representing and interpreting that world” (139-40).
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

[Until now I believe that you think that we do not have to speak good English to communicate, no? That’s what I think. I don’t know if it’s true or not. But I think if I try to explain with my body something, that person is not very interested. . . . They can understand, of course they understand because the body is extremely expressive, but I don’t think that they like. You know? I don’t [think] they like. . . . I think you have to speak. Here, you have to speak. Okay, for start, it is really good that you use your body and you use your manners. It is really important that you talk.

(Aleida, ESL workshop participant)

Students and teachers enter the classroom as already embodied, performing creatures (Warren, “Body” 257).

When I instituted the initial ESL performance workshop for this performative pedagogy project, I grappled with a question that I had already answered in the prospectus for this study. It was a question that I revisited numerous times during each phase of the fieldwork: What is the purpose of my performative ESL pedagogy experiment? Or as I stated to myself in written and mental notes, “What am I really trying to do here?” The answer to these questions, of course, provides a broad blueprint for the entire project, suggesting the scope, methods, and justification for this study. My response to these questions within the prospectus served this function: “In this dissertation project, I take up the difficulties of the immigrant ESL learner from a performance perspective by exploring the utility of Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed within the ESL classroom.” I also proposed formal, specific objectives: “First, I hope to discover the utility of using theatre exercises as critical pedagogy tools for teaching and learning ESL. . . . Second, I aim to bring the principles of consciousness-raising, as referred to in both Boal’s theatre work and in discussions of critical pedagogy, to the ESL classroom.”
My blueprint for this project, however clearly I articulated it within the prospectus, did not translate to pedagogical or performance action as neatly as I had earlier envisioned. I encountered and responded to a number of obstacles during the fieldwork. First, I did not begin the performance project within an ESL classroom, a site that my original purpose statement specifically identified, though I solicited ESL students as workshop participants. Second, the performative pedagogy that I instituted within both the workshop and the intermediate-advanced ESL course was never geared toward “teaching and learning ESL” in a way that resembled traditional language lessons, though participants reported that they acquired situation-specific, communication competence during the fieldwork. Third, participants occasionally viewed the consciousness-raising objectives that I proposed in my prospectus as contradictory to their explicit requests for plain conversation practice. Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed fit well with the language-based oppressions inherent to the ESL context, but my application of TO translated the practice as a pedagogical tool and thus demanded attention to language learning objectives both within the ESL course and within the performance workshop.

Participants’ concerns such as the one stated above indicated that adapting Boal or performative pedagogy in general to an ESL context did not erase the obligation to that context’s learning objectives, in this case language competence. Aleida’s concern that the TO exercises did not pertain to participants’ primary objective, learning English, led me to ask more questions of my study’s utility: Could the ESL context operate as a site for critical performative pedagogy? Was that context already solely committed to traditional, structural language learning? How does a performative ESL pedagogy simultaneously pursue both language competence and consciousness-raising objectives? Warren’s claim regarding the
performance identity of all students and teachers provided a perspective from which to approach this challenge. First, I recognized the performative qualities inherent to all pedagogical encounters, regardless of their learning objectives. Next, I attempted to collaborate with ESL participants on a vision of how Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed might become a method for doing both language pedagogy and critical consciousness-raising. As an “already embodied, performing creature” working with participants whose daily, embodied social performances were hindered by their language proficiency, I attempted to fuse language learning objectives with empowerment objectives.

I began this study by critiquing historical approaches to ESL pedagogy. Given the dual function of the English language as both an obstacle and an enabling tool, the manner in which English is taught and learned has serious implications for immigrants and refugees to the United States. I examined the chronology of ESL pedagogy over the last one hundred years, noting the assumptions and limitations of structural, functional, and critical approaches. While critical pedagogy has recently become the preferred means of doing ESL instruction, its sizable demand that a language pedagogy both teach English and enable a cycle of critique and transformation has not always been reconciled. Therefore, I described ESL pedagogy as an ongoing problem.

In response to this problem, I proposed a critical performative ESL pedagogy. I argued that performative pedagogy provides a specific means for balancing the theory-practice tension by privileging the body as already sociopolitically implicated and by viewing language as a performative construction. I acknowledged the use of performance within traditional ESL pedagogies, but I noted its primary use in those contexts was as a vehicle for experiential language practice. My proposal for a critical performative pedagogy in the ESL
context emerged from the Performance Studies discipline. While education scholars have frequently joined performance and pedagogy, many of those efforts have reduced performance to an actor-centered project of the classroom teacher. Other misuses occur within the Performance Studies discipline and include the isolation of performance theory from performance praxis. I proposed a critical performative pedagogy that extends Warren’s call for pedagogy infused with performative analysis, engagement, and critique (“Body” 258; “Promise” 3). My critical performative pedagogy proposal included: (a) commitment to the politically, culturally implicated body; (b) reliance on unscripted, contingent dialogue within the classroom space; and (c) relocation of students and teachers to positions of risk.

Next, I described my experimental efforts to implement a Boal-based critical performative pedagogy within a community-based ESL school for adult immigrants and refugees. My fieldwork description provided a testing ground for the efficacy of my earlier claims regarding the fusion of performance and pedagogy. I described my ESL project as an ongoing pedagogical process that adapted Boal’s image and forum theatres across four distinct phases. Each phase corresponded to the ESL school’s seven- or eight-week class sessions. During the initial fieldwork phases, I conducted one-hour Boal workshops prior to students’ nightly ESL classes that mostly implemented image theatre. During the latter fieldwork phases, I scrapped the workshops and entered an intermediate-advanced ESL class as an instructor. Within the class, I used forum theatre as an explicit performative pedagogy to address students’ language-based obstacles and to encourage language practice. The study reported my negotiation of goals and direction for the Boal-based performative pedagogy, as I initially focused on issues of social empowerment and consciousness-raising, while ESL participants focused on improving their English language skills. The study also reported my
negotiation of image and forum theatre, particularly in light of early participants’ views that image performance exercises obscured their more serious linguistic pursuits. I analyzed both the psychological and the situation-specific communication obstacles of participants as TO oppressions that became the content of our performance work. Finally, I addressed my dual roles within the project, Boal joker and ESL instructor, and their implications for participants and the project’s outcomes.

In this concluding chapter, I first evaluate the project’s efficacy as a critical performative ESL pedagogy by using the constituent parts of that pedagogy as evaluative criteria. I consider the effect that my version of performative pedagogy had on students’ actual language acquisition or English communicative competence. I interrogate the project’s capacity for critical agency and empowerment. I also assess the project in light of the assumptions and criteria laid out by scholars engaged in critical performative pedagogy. Next, I articulate the value of the ESL context as a pedagogical site, the utility of performance to negotiate critical pedagogy’s theory/practice tension, and the instructional authority of the critical pedagogue. I conclude the chapter by offering suggestions for future performance research in the areas of performative ESL instruction, Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, and general applications of performative pedagogy.

Appropriating Risk as a Performative Pedagogical Instrument

This study implicates every pedagogical situation as always confined or enabled by its attachment to issues of contingency, particularity, and adaptation. I have repeatedly referred to education as an ideological practice that shapes the classroom and social identities of its constituents, both students and teachers. Consequently, pedagogy can be viewed as an unstable and risky enterprise. Regardless of its academic content, student population, or
instructional method, pedagogy occurs at discrete historical moments, within particular socio-cultural environments, and for concrete audiences. This study examines the instruction of English as a Second Language, an area that positions linguistic content as useful for any number of specific purposes within society, including functional and empowerment purposes. Pedagogy in other subject areas can also be critiqued for how it frames the utility of its content matter for its historicized and politicized student audiences. Those audiences cannot be generalized into broad student categories in a way that disguises the ideologically influenced physical bodies that comprise every student category. All pedagogies, regardless of instructional content, respond to the contingency of these instructional, content, and audience factors even if they do so by silencing them. This study implemented Boal-based performance methods of instruction in an effort to recast the instability and risk of the ESL classroom as opportunities for critique and transformation rather than as pedagogical obstacles.

In assessing the efficacy of this project to balance the joint objectives of language instruction and social or personal change, I argue that critical performative pedagogy takes advantage of the unstable, risk-filled ESL site. Performative pedagogy assumes that its participants represent distinct histories and distinct futures and that these particularities reside in students’ bodies. Performative pedagogy assumes that the utility of a class’s content will not be predetermined, packaged, and forced on students. Performative pedagogy assumes that instructional methods will empower students to examine the ideologies imposed on their bodies, the ideology inherent to the classroom itself, and the potential for learning to be used as an instrument for change. In the case of the performative ESL pedagogy considered in this study, these traits were observed in the rearrangement of the ESL class’s structural
language goals within a utilitarian framework that emphasized language as both oppression and agency.

By examining the constituent areas of a critical performative ESL pedagogy, I illustrate how my Boal-based project successfully managed the problem of balancing the various contingencies that appear in the community-based ESL classroom. As an instrument of language instruction, the performative ESL pedagogy developed a hybrid curriculum that used structural and communicative perspectives. As I will soon argue, this approach defined the function of language according to the specific uses that students identified as most salient to their respective lives. As a critical project, the performative ESL pedagogy promoted individual, psychosocial change more than broad social transformation, and this emphasis privileged students’ individual communication oppressions as significant and worthy of extended discussion within each class or workshop meeting. Finally, as a case of performance, the ESL project demonstrated the utility of activating students’ bodies within the classroom, the difficulty of pure, contingent dialogue within the ESL site, and the lessons of empowerment that emerged from the risks inherent to performance and Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed.

While this project relies on a participatory performance method, its location within an ESL site raises the possibility that its efficacy can be measured using language assessment instruments. Traditionally, ESL pedagogy has been measured according to students’ demonstration of language competence using instruments such as standardized tests, communicative competence measures, and oral interviews with students.¹ My entry into an intermediate-advanced ESL course certainly suggests that learning of discrete language structures might have occurred during my classroom tenure. If students improved their
language competence as a result of their participation in my performative pedagogy experiment, then that progress could be measured using any number of standardized language tests, including the midterm and final exams I administered to fulfill the ESL school’s guidelines.

These traditional ESL assessment measures fail to assess the primary objectives of my performative pedagogy. Within both the performance workshops and the intermediate-advanced course, my objective, negotiated in conjunction with participants’ desire for improved linguistic competence, concerned overcoming the language-based social obstacles that participants encountered. This study’s efficacy is better measured according to the consciousness-raising framework inherent to performance practices that attempt to promote psychosocial or sociopolitical change. The key problem for measuring the efficacy of such practices concerns distinguishing when change has actually occurred. How can one know if a performance practice will affect transformation? Once the audience leaves the performance space, goes home, and sleeps on the entire experience, how can one know if anything in society will change?

Baz Kershaw suggests that a rephrasing of the efficacy question is necessary before evaluation can occur.

What if we pay more attention to the conditions of performance that are most likely to produce an efficacious result? And what if we broaden the canvas for analysis beyond the individual show or production (but still including it) in order to consider theatrical movements in relation to local and national cultural change? If we consider the potential of performance . . . to achieve efficacy in a particular historical context, perhaps we can then squash the bugbear of empirical conclusiveness and construct an approach to analysis which will be more theoretically and indeed factually convincing. (emphasis in original, 3)
Cindy Kistenberg determines the efficacy of sociopolitical performance by examining the implied criteria of the performance’s social situation (30). In her study of intervention performances that emerged in reaction to the AIDS crisis, Kistenberg argues that “effectiveness” can only be determined in relation to the AIDS crisis: “Does it mean providing people with outlets for catharsis? Does it involve changing attitudes towards homosexuals and/or AIDS?” (30). She further locates the efficacy of performance in “new significations or representations that challenge the power/knowledge structure that disempowers people and creates communities that can act” (34). Citing cultural studies scholars, Kistenberg recognizes that social change depends on the language of representation used in a given situation. If an oppression is talked about, understood, or performed in new, empowering ways, then that oppression may be unsettled.

More specifically, this study’s efficacy must be measured in relation to the Theatre of the Oppressed framework that it adapted for the ESL classroom. That framework is decidedly focused on initiating participants to reflect on internal and external oppressions and to rehearse solutions to them. Jackson acknowledges the uncertainty with which TO groups measure their success. Jackson claims that it is nearly impossible to apply quantitative analysis to a Boal workshop precisely because all the group’s outcomes are fundamentally qualitative ("Introduction," Rainbow xxiv). Schutzman argues that Boal’s practice cannot be measured on the “basis of the quantifiable political activism it stimulates” in the United States until his practice first “roots” here and is then adapted to a variety of contexts (“Brechtian” 142). As a practice that produces qualitative effects, Theatre of the Oppressed must be evaluated according to the observed and reported experiences of participants. As I describe the efficacy of my Boal-based performative ESL pedagogy according to the criteria
inherent to each of its constituent parts, I refer to analyses of the performances that ESL participants constructed and the opinions they shared regarding the project’s utility.

As a case of ESL instruction, the performative pedagogy that I enacted within the performance workshop and the intermediate-advanced course can be evaluated according to one of two approaches typically used within language curricula. Structural approaches to ESL attempt to improve students’ linguistic competence and therefore focus on teaching specific grammatical structures as they apply to writing and speaking situations. Communicative approaches to ESL emphasize the importance of communicative competence and usually engage students in extensive conversation practice that approximates the social contexts in which they will use English. Both these approaches view language acquisition as a measurable competence, assessed through standardized grammar-oriented or situational communication tests. Neither approach, however, views students’ actual social uses for language as contingent or unique. Though communicative ESL methods refer to how language is used in discrete social contexts, teachers determine the actual contexts and linguistic structures to be used within the contexts prior to classroom instruction.

During the workshop phase of the fieldwork, I explicitly disregarded linguistic competence as I reminded participants that the workshop’s purpose was to consider how language impacted their respective lives, not to learn specific grammar structures. Therefore, there was never an opportunity to assess any coincidental improvement in linguistic competence that participants may have achieved as a result of attending the workshop sessions. Within the intermediate-advanced course, I pursued a structural linguistic approach during the latter half of every meeting when I effectively switched from a performative pedagogy to a traditional, lecture-oriented pedagogy. During the final hour of each class, I
drilled students on rules for grammar and writing, with an emphasis on verb tenses. The ESL school’s expectation that students learn particular grammar structures within designated course levels motivated my switch to a structural pedagogy, though I also responded to students’ request for training for standardized English exams. The brief time devoted to linguistic competence within the intermediate-advanced course, however, did not generate noticeable improvement in students’ linguistic competence scores, at least as indicated by their test scores in areas such as vocabulary, reading comprehension, listening comprehension, essay writing, or grammar structures. In fact, just as was the case during my earlier teaching stint in the ESL class when I had used a structural instructional approach throughout the entire class, students made only slight, gradual improvements or remained relatively stable on their test scores.

With its communicative approach to ESL instruction, my performative ESL pedagogy offered workshop participants and intermediate-advanced students repeated opportunities to practice conversation skills in the contexts they identified as most salient to their respective lives. The utility of performative pedagogy as a form of ESL instruction could be seen during several image and all the forum theatre exercises. During these exercises, participants identified the situations that gave them trouble, analyzed their respective obstacles to communication within the situations, and rehearsed strategies to overcome the obstacles. Specifically, the performative pedagogy project pursued sociolinguistic and referential approaches to communicative competence. In recognition of sociolinguistic competence, our image and forum scenes focused on how one should communicate in a discrete interaction wherein a speech community establishes the rules and values for language use (Saville-Troike 40). For example, when Vivian, a participant from Lebanon, struggled to understand
the directions that bystanders gave her as she searched for her doctor’s office within a medical complex, participants collaborated to identify the questions appropriate to that specific locale that would enable clear, understandable responses. Paulston’s referential view of communicative competence aims for autonomy and “free, spontaneous interaction” on the part of the language learner (“Linguistic” 38). A central focus during forum scenes, particularly, concerned the ease and fluidity with which participants interacted during sales interactions. Participants reminded each other to relax and forget about concentrating on every word when talking to sales clerks.

Communicative approaches to ESL traditionally incorporate performance exercises, usually in the form of role plays, but they do not recognize the contingency and particularity that every ESL learner represents. All the TO exercises adopted in this performative ESL pedagogy, however, began with participant suggestions regarding the specific communication obstacle to be addressed. Practicing tangible conversation skills became an empowering exercise for the ESL participants during image and forum exercises inasmuch as they alone identified the areas of communication to be studied and practiced. We avoided the problematic survival approach to ESL, wherein students are positioned as “survivors” in unrealistic social situations or in confining social roles (Auerbach and Burgess). Throughout both the workshop and classroom phases of the project, participants shared communication-related experiences that were then re-considered as content for performance exercises and the performative pedagogy curricula.

During debriefing discussions, participants further clarified their view of performative pedagogy’s utility regarding communicative competence instruction. Participants observed that Boal-based exercises function to stimulate conversation, encourage self-expression, and
resolve communication-based problems. Though she preferred the situation-specific forum
exercises, Raquel admitted that she also enjoyed image theatre: “I like when we do the
image. I think more my problems. I have other ideas. And the other people, they give me
ideas for how, for resolution of my problems.” Giorgio indicated that the performance
exercises offered him a forum for expression: “You helped me for, like to have time for
expression of self because no people, American people, have time for listening at people
learning English. It’s like a conversation is [what] the people who learn English need very
much to speak.” Aleida called attention to the problem-solving potential of forum theatre:

    My opinion, I think it does help. I think. Okay, you really have to think about
the problem, feel relaxed to take, to have a solution or to get a solution, and
then try to practice that solution. If you don’t practice maybe you never will
know if you solve or not. . . . I like, for example, what Raquel and . . . Maryo,
when she was explaining about her experience with the American guy.
Because you really knew what, how she felt. And what you wanted to do
knowing about experience because you want to find a solution. That is
excellent. Is very good. It’s a good step, maybe.

While I did not assess communicative competence through a standardized instrument,
interviews with participants as stakeholders indicated that the TO exercises were relevant to
their respective communication situations. More importantly, participants labeled the
performance exercises as beneficial tools that helped them to succeed in those situations.

As a critical pedagogy, my performative ESL project was guided by the ideals,
however utopian they may appear, of critical theory and therefore may be evaluated in
relation to these ideals. First, the performative ESL pedagogy enacted for this project sought
to construct a “democratic public sphere” wherein participants actively critiqued and
transformed their respective social arenas (Giroux and McLaren xxii). Second, the project
aimed to privilege participants’ contingent, socially constructed identities and histories.
Third, the project attempted to resolve the tension between critical theory and grounded
language instruction. Finally, the project attempted to avoid the criticism lobbed against critical pedagogy: charges of unacknowledged invisible politics, a rationalist bias, and an unfettered position of authority for the teacher (Ellsworth).

My performative version of critical ESL pedagogy admittedly did not achieve all the aforementioned objectives. Few critical pedagogy projects fulfill the idealistic goals espoused by critical educational scholars. The sheer breadth of these critical goals dooms most critical pedagogies to fail. It is difficult, for example, to uphold critical theory’s multiple call for critique, transformation, and dialogue while also avoiding the temptations of instructorial authority and carrying out discrete social change. The objectives of critical pedagogy are not incongruous, but they certainly pose feasibility and efficiency problems for practitioners. Achieving critical pedagogy’s central goal of social critique, for example, requires as much from students as it does from teachers. Because critical pedagogues are urged to resist a dominant position of authority, achieving this goal assumes that students will: (a) express displeasure or awareness of their respective positions within an oppressive society; (b) recognize the significance of a critical position within that society; (c) hold no prior expectation that the teacher will act in a position of authority; and, most importantly, (d) desire an active voice in the proposed critical dialogue regarding their oppressive condition.

This project’s efficacy for carrying out the goals of critical pedagogy must be considered in light of the participants’ central interest: combating discrete language-based problems that one encounters, either psychologically or externally, during communication interactions. Giroux’s vision of an emancipatory citizenship education, wherein participants assume the central position as stakeholders in their respective social lives, was not fully
realized during the relatively confined performance workshops and ESL classes considered for this project. Giroux calls for an education project in which “civic courage” is the hallmark: “[S]tudents should learn not only how to weigh the existing society against its own claims, they should also be taught to think and act in ways that speak to different societal possibilities and ways of living” (emphasis in original, Theory 202). Within the ESL project, participants frequently assessed the complexity of their social interactions by calling attention to their considerable difficulty in making Americans understand them. ESL participants typically confined their critique, however, to statements of displeasure regarding American’s communication styles or discussions of their opinions of specific immigration- or work-related U.S. laws. While we staged a few forum theatre scenes in relation to these explicit social topics, participants’ interest within those scenes focused on ways to explain better one’s position within the immigration office or employment context rather than any broad attempt to instigate social change.

During one ESL class session, I distributed a cartoon to represent the issue of social discrimination. When students interpreted the cartoon as representative of immigration problems, we staged a forum scene that featured students negotiating various visa requests with an U.S. immigration officer. The debate that followed the scene enlisted a number of students who documented their respective problems with obtaining immigration documents such as work permits and visitation papers for their families. Encouraged, I gathered immigration data from a legal website and made copies for the class. Our discussion ended somewhat abruptly the following night, however, when participants called my attention to the obvious impossibility of changing the nation’s immigration laws.
Though they complained, and in some cases even labeled immigration laws as discriminatory, participants also recognized the enormity of their respective social limitations and, more importantly, their central motivation in attending the ESL class. The ESL class, along with any problem-solving theatre tactic I introduced, was not designed to affect broad social or legislative change so much as it was to improve communication and linguistic competence and to address small, relatively confined, communication problems. For the ESL project, then, social critique involved the identification of contained problems that participants encountered during English language interactions. Transformation involved the identification and rehearsal of relevant communication alternatives to be used during English language interactions.

In response to critical pedagogy’s insistence that the classroom privilege the contingent, lived experiences of students, the performative ESL pedagogy consistently reacted to the issues that participants discussed. Participants considered and re-considered their respective identities (as non-native English speakers, as immigrants, as refugees, as women, as men, as mothers, as fathers) while engaged in Theatre of the Oppressed work. This analysis occurred both explicitly during post-performance conversations and implicitly as a function of Boal’s image and forum theatre guidelines. Participants identified a lengthy list of obstacles they encountered during typical social interactions, and they proposed and rehearsed solutions to those problems during a series of image and forum theatre exercises (see Appendix C). As I documented in chapter 5, participants frequently interrupted forum scenes with lengthy debates regarding the utility of proposed solutions. Many of their problems concerned consumer interactions and telephone conversations. During forum sessions, participants frequently ignored my identity as an American and openly criticized
Americans as too impatient when communicating with non-native speakers. The participants shared helpful suggestions with each other for avoiding confusion or conflict, and they positioned some of the blame for their communicative problems on their respective American interactants.

However, the project’s attention to participants’ particular views and demands was not comprehensive. When participants identified the various social constraints inherent to their identities, they frequently turned to English language competence as the preferred strategy for overcoming their respective constraints. Even after participants shared narratives that detailed communication difficulties that fluent immigrants and refugees encountered (difficulties that frequently result from the refusal of native English speakers to communicate with them), the general belief within the workshop and ESL class was that attaining English fluency would eliminate their communication oppressions. Regardless of its accuracy, participants perceived that linguistic competence would solve their communication-related problems. Linguistic competence became a measure of empowerment for participants. My construction of a critical performative pedagogy, however, viewed communicative competence, particularly sociolinguistic competence, as a more effective strategy to combat language-based obstacles. I did not share participants’ view of linguistic competence as a social savior, and in this area, the project did not uphold its commitment to the explicit interests that participants identified as most salient to their personal language projects.

Critical ESL pedagogy’s concern with maintaining a balance between critical theory, with its emphasis on social critique and transformation, and language instruction was achieved in this project, particularly if language instruction is viewed from a communicative rather than a linguistic perspective. ESL scholars complain about the lack of grounded
critical pedagogy research for their language-specific context (Ewald 275). As I documented in chapter 2, critical ESL pedagogy espouses critical theory with little advice on how to carry out its ideals within an ESL classroom. Within my performative ESL pedagogy, I upheld Pennycook’s notion of critical ESL praxis, where theory is grounded in practice and vice versa (“Introduction” 342). Boal’s TO encourages participants to examine the social and cultural influences that reside in their physical bodies. Within the ESL project this meant that participants examined the corporeal effects of the language-related oppressions they had experienced. During image theatre work, for example, participants articulated their internalized reactions to the external, tangible communication problems they faced. During forum theatre and throughout all the post-performance discussions, participants practiced resolving their respective communication problems. The project’s use of TO implicitly referenced language as a performative construction, as a linguistic system that comes into being within recurring social performances. In response to a performative view of language, participants did not isolate their workshop or classroom efforts to the study of grammar, phonetics, or semantics. They instead engaged the very social performances that enable these traditional linguistic structures. The ESL project always emphasized the practice of language as a contingent, socially embedded performance, even during moments of critique. Participants practiced their communicative competence in the social contexts most relevant to their lives. These contexts then became sites for critique and transformation during image and forum theatre exercises. Opportunities for critique and transformation thus occurred inherently within the project as a function of TO’s critical foundation.

Finally, the performative ESL project can be evaluated according to the criticism that has been leveled against critical pedagogy, which includes charges of invisible politics, a
rationalist bias, and an unacknowledged, unchallenged position of authority for the instructor. Ellsworth describes critical pedagogy as overly hopeful in its pursuit of “radical democracy.” Critical theorists, Ellsworth claims, assume a “posture of invisibility” when they fail to analyze the efficacy of their pedagogical programs to execute the sort of broad social change they espouse (301). While engaging performative critical pedagogy, I neither assumed nor argued that doing TO within an ESL context would dramatically alter oppressive social conditions for non-native English speakers. I did conduct the fieldwork with overly optimistic expectations. My primary interest was that non-native English speakers might better adapt to communication obstacles that regularly occur within social interactions. The relatively specific transformation that the project pursued was neither unreasonable nor unfounded. Using performance as a tool for communicative rehearsal, the critical ESL project sought a more equal balance for immigrants and refugees who frequently reported frustration when engaging in mundane social performances of language. Therefore, the outcomes of this project were confined to manageable communication strategies, outcomes that avoided critical pedagogy’s tendency of pursuing an unrealistic, all-encompassing program of change.

The critical performative ESL project also escaped the danger of a rationalist bias that haunts other critical pedagogies. Ellsworth argues that critical pedagogy should acknowledge the other by acknowledging the other’s mode of discourse, rational or otherwise. She suggests that the so-called “irrational” narratives of the other be accepted on their own merit rather than be appropriated into a rationalist system of analysis and critical thinking. Because it followed Boal’s body-centered performance practice, the ESL project filtered all experience, physical or psychological, through the body. The body became the
preferred site for knowledge production, a preference that unsettles traditional rationalist views that tend to isolate the functions of the mind and body. In fact, the emphasis on participants’ bodies, evident during the early performer training exercises, discouraged participants who desired a more pragmatic, rational approach to language. Even when I adapted the performance workshop to include more talk-driven exercises, participants always played out their responses to various communication obstacles on their bodies. Rather than uphold a single way of knowing—the rationalist approach inherent to discussion circles—the performance-driven critical ESL pedagogy upheld the body as an efficacious, sensual means of knowledge. Performance, as it was interpreted for the ESL pedagogy described here, always privileged the corporeal alongside the cerebral.

However, the critical performative ESL pedagogy was not exempt from criticism that the critical pedagogy instructor always operates from a position of unmitigated authority, acting as the benevolent guide who leads students to empowerment and self-affirmation (Ellsworth 308-312). My roles as TO joker and ESL instructor were always corrupted because I never approached participants in ways that upheld either their individual visions of selfhood (as per Bakhtin’s call for ethical authorship) or their personal reasons for acquiring English. While I always respected participants’ respective goals and admitted as much to participants, I never fully escaped my own interests. As a researcher, for example, I inevitably maintained a commitment to the completion of the fieldwork, occasionally at the expense of a single participant’s desire to pursue a line of dialogue or a grammar lesson. Though I spent seven months within the ESL program, I neither satisfied nor addressed every participant’s acute linguistic, communicative, or social need. In retrospect, I believe that
authority cannot be erased within an educational program, regardless of its critical or performative bent.

I found, for example, that I did not always agree with participants’ ideologies. I began the project with the hopeful assumption that participants desired a truly democratic society as much as I, that they valued equality and dialogue, regardless of gender, race, class, nationality, or religion. More than once during workshop discussions or classroom meetings, however, I struggled to address participant comments that contradicted my social values or that personally offended me. During a small group discussion about communication obstacles, a participant expressed direct dislike for African-Americans. She claimed that African-Americans were always rude when they communicated with her. At this moment, in spite of the participant’s inherent right to her own voice and interpretation of her own communication experience, I considered interrupting, shutting her down, halting the discussion. I considered offering my own point of view. I considered pointing out the participant’s all too obvious generalization and oversimplification of human behavior. I also thought about her discrete communication encounters and what internalized oppressions led her to this conclusion. I thought about her cultural identity, already intact prior to entering the United States. I thought about race relations as a sort of social performance, one that overlaps with the communicative performances that troubled ESL students.

In this case, I made a brief statement that essentially invalidated the participant’s opinion, stating matter-of-factly that it was impossible to make an accurate assessment of an entire race based on her singular experiences. Then, still disturbed, still nervous, I changed the subject. Later, I was unhappy with the way I handled the situation. I had neither announced my own values as the reason for my displeasure, nor had I explained my abrupt
dismissal of her point of view. I certainly disregarded Ellsworth’s call for teachers to acknowledge the social, political, and cultural interests that they bring with them into the classroom (310). A critical pedagogy, I discovered, cannot and should not disguise the teacher’s nor the students’ capacity for isolated and distinct identities. All parties bring special interests into the classroom. Critical pedagogy should not erase those interests in the spirit of unification or radical democracy.

As a performative pedagogy, the ESL project followed the principal criteria that I earlier outlined as definitive of pedagogies that maintain a connection to the Performance Studies discipline: a commitment to participants’ bodies and the inherent historical contingency marked on those bodies; the inclusion of dialogue as an improvised, democratic exchange between teachers and students; and the exposure of all participants to risk. Performative pedagogy’s commitment to students’ bodies, both as sites of ideologically-infused learning and as vehicles for critique, was duplicated in the ESL project. The project’s use of Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed as a method mandated an ongoing consideration of the body. Boal’s practice, as I have repeatedly stated, operates with the body as the starting point for all actions of critique and transformation. From the beginning, I asked workshop participants to explore the expressivity of their bodies, encouraging them to consider the corporeal effects that their various language-based oppressions had left on those bodies. Though most participants preferred concrete discussion and performance of their actual communication obstacles, I repeatedly used Boal’s performer training exercises and adaptations from his image theatre to emphasize participants’ bodies as “terrain[s] of struggle, conflict, and contradictions” (McLaren, “Schooling” 161). Participants then engaged those bodies in performance, working through possible alternatives—actual
embodied solutions—for their respective communication problems. During every forum theatre scene, for example, participants used their bodies to represent problems they had experienced and, more importantly, to explore corrective behaviors that might offset those problems. By relying on Boal’s practice as its performance methodology, the ESL project successfully incorporated the body as crucial for both critique (via image theatre scenes) and transformation (via forum theatre scenes).

Performative pedagogy’s vision of an open, critical dialogue was more difficult to observe in the performative ESL project. I began the performance workshops with the assumption that dialogue would be a cornerstone of the TO exercises. My view of dialogue was an ideal one, colored by Bakhtin’s pure dialogic model of polyphony. Bakhtin’s vision for polyphonic dialogue, a dialogue that “affirms the independence, internal freedom, unfinalizability, and indeterminacy” of its participants, requires all parties, students and teachers, to pursue ethical behavior. I encountered a considerable practicality problem in executing performance methods that followed Bakhtin’s expansive vision of dialogue. Though neither the workshop nor the ESL classroom exceeded twenty participants, every participant represented unique goals for learning English, individual experiences in using the language, and disparate cultural identities. The group’s most obvious similarities were their attendance at the performance workshop or ESL class and their relatively comparable language proficiency. Even these apparent similarities broke down under careful analysis. Several participants attended the performance workshop so that they could practice speaking English. Others claimed that they were motivated to locate solutions to their respective communication problems. Other participants described their interest in helping me to complete practical research that might help other ESL students in the future. Even within the
advanced ESL class, language proficiency varied according to participants’ specific skill in any one language competency. Some participants spoke fluently, but struggled with writing and grammar structures. Others struggled with pronunciation and were reluctant to speak. All these disparities created an impossible scene for a true, polyphonic dialogue, where participants approached each other singularly, face to face, without anticipation of a stock response or motivation. Dialogue, as I described it in chapter 3, would have only been possible in the ESL project if I devoted the workshop and classroom sessions to exploring every participant’s experiences. Doing this, of course, would have exhausted all our time and likely would have disrupted the continuity that participants created while considering the communication obstacles commonly shared by all in the workshop or class.

As it was actually practiced within the performative ESL project, the dialogue was efficient, dedicated to the shared experiences of participants, but never fully attentive to the particular lives of all fifteen to twenty ESL participants. Rather than explain away the diluted use of dialogue within the project as necessitated by the participants’ desire for language competence or its ultimate location within an ESL classroom with pre-established objectives, I point to two possible explanations. First, Bakhtin’s pure dialogue, the polyphonic model of ethical exchange between an “author” and a “hero,” cannot be accomplished within a heterogeneous group. Pure dialogue within any pedagogy demands personal attention and the expectation that a teacher can, in fact, approach students as individuals who do not necessarily share the same motivations and lived experiences as their colleagues. That requirement renders polyphony unfeasible for most educational arenas that are marked, if only slightly, by the demand for efficient, measurable progress in the form of some final product.
Second, my early organization of the performative project followed a rational, chronological sequence in which participants would train as Boal performers, identify and critique their respective communication problems, and conclude with the construction of a large forum theatre performance. Although I scrapped this plan halfway through the fieldwork, my early focus on completing a final product positioned the acquisition of knowledge as a function of completing this sequence. That is, by strictly following Boal’s performance pattern as described in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, I reduced the significance of the ongoing exchanges that occurred during every workshop meeting. An emphasis on the performance process rather than the performance product engenders an emphasis on the dialogue that occurs within that process. My interest in the experiences of participants within the moment of doing *Theatre of the Oppressed* did not appear until the latter meetings of the second performance workshop. Once the workshop shifted into the ESL classroom, the school’s requirement of midterm and final exams, along with its discrete linguistic criteria for promotion to the next ESL level, reintroduced the influence of a final product. Dialogue still occurred during the first half of the class, when participants engaged in image and forum theatre, but that dialogue usually ceased following the mid-class break when I shifted to teaching grammar, writing, and reading comprehension. Truly contingent dialogue, therefore, requires a particular pedagogical context, one inhibited by neither instructor-generated nor institutional concerns with production. Polyphonic dialogue requires an absolute dedication to the minute, discrete exchanges that repeatedly occur during the messy process of learning, whether that learning occur during the act of performance or during traditional language instruction.
The project exposed both ESL participants and myself to the third criteria of a performative pedagogy, risk. As it has been applied to definitions of performative pedagogy, risk engenders possibility. Risk allows for experimentation, for redefinition of traditional classroom roles, for the exploration of meaning that occurs during the act of performance. Within the ESL performance context, risk occurred as a result of the unfamiliar terrain that we encountered since we both experimented with unfamiliar pedagogical techniques and roles. Though I had studied Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, attended a weekend Boal workshop, and adapted a few exercises for a previous ESL class, I had never developed and directed a Boal-based performance workshop prior to this project. Participants, of course, had never encountered Boal either. Participants initially viewed English as a Second Language instruction in terms of learning discrete linguistic structures. The risky, indeterminate process of doing performance exposed participants to new ways of thinking about how language learning might occur and its residence within their bodies. Specifically, the risk generated during Theatre of the Oppressed exercises helped to revise participants’ notion of traditional language schooling and cast them directly into the act of pedagogy. Even amidst their uncertainty, participants assumed an active role within the ESL workshop and intermediate-advanced course, a role that forced them to confront the concrete language obstacles that constrained their social use of English.

ESL participants immediately encountered risk after entering the project. Once they joined the workshop, their first task was to participate in performance exercises that required them to leave their more familiar and comfortable position as students and become active collaborators. Participants had no problem discussing their specific language-related experiences; this was a request that they frequently encountered in their traditional ESL
classes. They did not appear at all familiar or comfortable, however, with performing those experiences during initial workshop meetings. Doing Theatre of the Oppressed demanded that participants assume the role of spect-actors, Boal’s term for TO participants who both observe the action and take part in it. While participants seemed very accustomed to observing, listening, and occasionally commenting from their seats, they were reluctant to leave those seats to join the dramatic action during a workshop or classroom scene. For the ESL performative pedagogy, risk amounted to the very act of participation because the nature of that participation always asked participants to place both their experiences and their bodies on display. Yet as participants themselves described, Theatre of the Oppressed positioned them as authoritative agents in both analyzing their language obstacles and finding solutions to them. For this reason, the risks inherent to performance initiated a series of problem-solving discussions regarding participants’ language issues.

As a Boal workshop facilitator and later as an ESL instructor, I also encountered risk, though in my case it was something that I consciously invoked. Early within the project, I struggled to locate participants for the performance workshop. By the conclusion of the first fieldwork phase only two participants remained. During most of the workshop meetings, I worried about the danger of losing the project. I was confident that a few participants would always remain, but Boal’s TO is necessarily a collaborative effort, and forum theatre requires more than a small group of four to achieve its potential as a problem-solving method. As I implemented the performer training exercises and insisted on the silent, still performance rules of image theatre, I observed both nonverbal and occasional verbal dissent from participants. I always responded by defending the training and image work, but after the first
workshop when participants consistently dropped out of the project, I identified the
performance methods that I used as endangering my ability to continue the project.

During debriefing interviews with participants, I realized that the low attendance was
not entirely the result of the performative approach I enacted, as some participants could not
locate transportation or had difficulty balancing work, family, or school obligations while
attending the workshop. Yet several participants wondered whether those who left the
project questioned the utility of doing performance exercises that allowed no talking or
movement. Alcida noted that the first workshop required consistent attendance and
participation before she came to understand the utility of image theatre and Boal training:

\[
\text{If I came here and I just had these exercises, and I quit, I didn’t learn anything}
\text{because it was just the beginning. It was like, okay, the first letter of the}
\text{English alphabet. If you left that, you couldn’t learn. You couldn’t do}
\text{anything. . . . If they quit, they would not appreciate even the first exercise. If}
\text{I quit, I would never, if someone ask me, “How was your session with Ross?”}
\text{“Oh, nothing. Nothing. Just mirrors.” I cannot understand that from the}
\text{beginning. I have to continue to see the results.}
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As a workshop facilitator, I felt significant pressure to maintain enough participants to keep
the project afloat and to situate the program within Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed. No
matter how I adapted TO for the particular ESL context, as Boal instructs, I still felt that
using performance, as an uncomfortable or unfamiliar practice, increased my risk of losing
participants.

Within the ESL classroom, doing performance became risky because I feared that it
might obscure the already present, already understood pedagogical practices established by
the ESL school. Many of the students in the intermediate-advanced class had already
attended lower level classes within the program and already recognized the pattern for
instruction that most classes used. While I never feared that students might drop the class, I
was conscious of participants’ expectations upon entering the class, the school’s established requirements and traditions, and the implications of inserting performance into this context. Participants eventually embraced my decision to use forum theatre within the workshop and ESL course. I realized that for the ESL context, the risk of doing Theatre of the Oppressed is tempered by the agency that TO assigns its participants. In order for ESL students to accept the risk of doing performance, however, the performance methods must be congruent with explicit language instruction or must demonstrate an obvious utility to students’ respective uses for language.

In chapter 3, I described the risky base of authority that performative pedagogy engenders. By calling the traditional authority of the instructor into question, performative pedagogy opens up legitimacy to all participants within the classroom. While I do not feel that my authority was every truly called into question within my performative ESL pedagogy, participants frequently shared that authority during image and forum exercises. Though I never attempted to establish instructional authority within the performance workshop, I recognized that participants frequently viewed me as an English teacher. When the workshops turned to performances of their respective language oppressions, however, participants’ voices and bodies were activated. In the context of TO exercises, participants did not need me to validate their actions because their experiences formed the content of the workshop. Later, within the ESL class, I observed that participants more willingly adapted the Boal exercises to their own interests, mobilizing still images, for example, and role playing their respective experiences regardless of my instructions. Participants did not attempt to wrestle the instructional authority from me, but particularly within the ESL classroom, they controlled every meeting through their discussion of discrete language
obstacles, their response to my performance instructions, and their self-motivated direction for each performance exercise.

Revaluing Critical, Performative, and ESL Pedagogies

My fieldwork occurred at the intersection of ESL, critical, and performative pedagogy, and as a result, I observed a number of strengths and weaknesses inherent to these pedagogical frameworks. While reflecting on each of these pedagogies, I realized that in cases such as the present study where performance, pedagogy, and language interact, scholars and practitioners in these respective disciplines have much to gain. The benefit of combining language pedagogy with critical theory and performance practice lies in the particular lessons that a project like this one generates, lessons that have value for future critical performative ESL projects but also for scholars singularly engaged in any one of these areas. For this study, those lessons include: the importance of particularizing language instruction in the ESL classroom so that it responds to the discrete, communicative needs of students; the utility of performance to negotiate critical pedagogy’s struggle to balance its critical and instructional objectives; and the revision to the critical pedagogue’s identity as an instructor whose authority must be dissected and distributed within an ESL classroom. In this section, I elaborate on these lessons as evidence of the value of doing critical performative pedagogy in the ESL context.

First, ESL pedagogy represents a unique opportunity to engage a diverse community of learners in the simultaneous pursuit of language acquisition and empowerment. More specifically, a performative pedagogical framework enables this pursuit by situating language learning within a framework of reflection. As this study demonstrated, Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed is an efficacious means of carrying out performative ESL pedagogy because its
consciousness-raising performance methods allow tangible communication practice that originates with ESL students’ particular experiences. Boal’s image and forum theatre rely on participants to suggest content and to revise the performance procedures if necessary so that participants achieve their respective goals of problem analysis and problem solving.

All attempts to do ESL pedagogy must address the community in which the pedagogy is applied. That is, the particular social, historical, political, and cultural contexts that comprise the pedagogical situation and define the identities of students must always determine the ways in which ESL pedagogy gets enacted. Throughout this project I grappled with a precarious balancing act. How could I do ESL pedagogy within a community-based program whose central mission is to serve a wide range of immigrants and refugees to the United States? This mission, readily observed in the ESL school’s operation as an extension of a religiously affiliated social service for immigrants and refugees, committed the school to recognizing the distinct, and often disparate, linguistic histories and objectives of its students. Like any ESL school that operates as a service to a community of immigrants and refugees, the diocesan program had open admissions and encouraged students of any language competence. The result of this policy and the school’s commitment to helping its constituents adjust to life in the United States could be seen in the distribution of students across ESL classes. The beginning class assumed virtually no knowledge of the English language, while the advanced class focused on fine-tuning the speaking and writing skills of near-fluent students.

The problem that frequently occurs within an ESL program like the one I considered concerns adjusting to the diversity that appears within any given classroom. In all educational contexts, students perform at different levels of proficiency. In all educational
contexts, students represent varied and individual social or cultural perspectives. In all educational contexts, students pursue discrete personal goals, even if those goals occasionally coincide with broad goals shared by other students. The difficulty occurs when instructors attempt to adapt their pedagogy and corresponding curricula to the respective proficiencies, socio-cultural perspectives, and goals of their students. This difficulty is magnified in community-based ESL programs precisely because of those programs’ commitment to working with as wide a range of participants as possible. Though I engaged participants within both the performance workshop and the ESL class who usually had a moderate to high level of English proficiency, their profiles as ESL students varied dramatically, both in terms of their social and cultural identities and their motivations for learning English.

Most of the participants that I encountered were classified as immigrants, meaning that they willingly migrated to the United States to live. However, that broad category encompassed another significant sub-category that included participants who lived in the United States on a temporary basis, with their graduate student spouses, with a family member who already lived here, or to fulfill a workplace obligation. A number of participants admitted that they were only visiting the United States for several months and joined the ESL program because it was a very inexpensive means (only $25 for eight weeks of language classes) of learning English. Their primary motivation, as they described it, was to learn English to help them advance in their educational or occupational careers in their native countries. Other immigrant students claimed that they moved to the United States to pursue improved social, economic, or employment opportunities. A few participants were classified as political refugees. Though refugee students were not in the majority, their
respective histories revealed their pursuit of English as urgent and influential in their hopes for success within the United States.

These obvious disparities, as well as any underlying cultural markers that participants brought with them into this project, mandated a flexible approach to doing ESL pedagogy. Even within the performance workshop, where my central goal was not teaching the English language, the diversity of participants required sensitivity to their unique histories. This project suggests that community-based ESL pedagogy operate from a maxim of engaged attention to the distinct cultural envelopes from which its students emerge. Bakhtin’s call for ethical authorship, where social actors approach each other as historically located, as contingent, and as capable of action, should be applied concretely to the community-based ESL classroom. The difficulty, of course, concerns how to translate the wide-ranging mandates of Bakhtin’s ideal model for social interaction to the classroom practices of teaching English. Added to that problem is the concern of handling the diversity that many community-based ESL programs engender by welcoming all non-native English speakers, regardless of social, ethnic, or linguistic background. Fortunately, Boal’s TO offers a means of particularizing language instruction because it positions ESL learners as consumers and agents. As spect-actors, ESL students can practice language that corresponds to the discrete situations they identify as relevant.

As I have just documented, some ESL students, typically those classified as political refugees, operate from a position of risk, a socially constructed designation that locates them on the unstable boundary of success and failure. Deanna Fassett regards the educational category of “at-riskness” as an active labor performed by “students, educators and the concerned population” during ongoing interaction. That is,
educational risk may be constituted in interaction, a series of ritualized social actions that take on the appearance of normativity over time. In short, what we have come to understand as educational risk (i.e. the presence or absence of particular traits) elides a more complete understanding: we are all at risk at some time or another, with more or less severe consequences. (6-7)

Other students within the same ESL classroom may occupy a position of privilege, both economic and social. I observed that ESL participants who were visiting relatives in the United States before returning to their native countries described family histories that reflected a life of educational and economic stability. Stephanie Vandrick questions how a critical ESL educator should approach privileged students, particularly in light of critical pedagogy’s push for empowerment and social action. She summarizes this issue as an identity concern:

It is true that even these privileged students suffer some marginalization as foreigners, as people who cannot use the English language fluently, and, sometimes, as people of minority races and ethnicities. These students do sometimes experience discrimination or at least a sense of being outside the mainstream. . . . But clearly these problems are balanced, and probably outweighed by the students’ privilege. Instructors must consider which aspect of these students’ experience they should address: the oppressed outsider, the privileged insider, or both at once. (375)

In light of my fieldwork experience with both categories of students, at-risk and privileged, as well as my encounters with a number of participants whose identities and experiences complicated these polar distinctions, I recommend a critical approach for community-based ESL pedagogy. Educators should avoid erasing the characteristics that mark difference within an ESL context by promoting the common pursuit of English as a shared objective somehow removed from social, cultural, or economic influences. Instead, educators should create opportunities for students’ differences to be considered within the academic content of learning the English language. Critical pedagogy, with its commitment to dialogue and its dual pursuit of critique and transformation, enables such opportunities.
More specifically, performative methodologies, such as the Boal-based approach I experimented with in this project, allow community-based ESL educators to carry out the theoretical objectives of critical pedagogy. A central benefit of using Boal within the community-based ESL classroom involves its reliance on students to suggest the direction and content of course curricula. Students operate as producers of knowledge inasmuch as they suggest their discrete, personal experiences for performance exercises. Students simultaneously instruct and learn, as they both suggest solutions to their colleagues’ respective problems and listen to the suggestions of others.

Obviously, doing Boal within the ESL classroom would need to coincide with more traditional language instruction directed by the English proficient instructor. Yet the instructor should avoid determining the ultimate direction that students apply the specific linguistic structures taught within traditional lectures or exercises. Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed begins by asking participants to share their experiences. In sharing those experiences within a diverse classroom, one marked by a range of social, cultural, and economic categories, students engage a larger discussion about their distinct identities, the identities of their colleagues, and how those identities are enabled and constrained within the English-speaking society at large.

It is also important that community-based ESL programs recognize that language instruction is always embedded in communication instruction. The historical move within the ESL discipline from structural to communicative pedagogy methods recognized the importance of negotiating one’s linguistic competence within discrete situations. However, communicative language instruction has not yet satisfied the call for meaningful, relevant application of linguistic lessons. Raimes, for example, argues that ESL practitioners have
merely placed communicative pedagogy on top of a “positivist traditional framework,” never questioning the theoretical flaws of a structural view of language (545). I do not believe that a critical performative pedagogy that relies on Boal’s TO for method could ever perform the tasks that traditional grammar drills and rote language exercises accomplish within the ESL classroom. Boal’s theatre practice, of course, was not designed as a language pedagogy tool. However, Theatre of the Oppressed does recognize communication. TO especially recognizes dialogue about the motivations, influences, and effects of tangible or internalized social oppressions. It is therefore useful as a pedagogical tool that analyzes and proposes solutions to participants’ respective problems. For that reason, TO and other forms of performative problem solving should be implemented as ways to execute community-based ESL instruction. When used in conjunction with traditional, structuralist language pedagogy, these participant-driven performative methods engender a meaningful, communicative approach to linguistic competence.

Second, performance allows critical pedagogues to balance their dual responsibility to critique and classroom instruction. As evidenced by Boal’s TO practice, performance can engender experiential learning of selected content by engaging students’ bodies within the classroom. At the same time, performance instigates critical reflection on how one’s body is constrained by ideological forces, a reflection that fulfills the critical pedagogue’s goals of critique and transformation. Within the ESL context, critical pedagogy operates from another set of joint goals: “the simultaneous development of English communicative abilities and the ability to apply them to developing a critical awareness of the world and the ability to act on it to improve matters” (Crookes and Lehner 320). These goals parallel the objectives for any critical pedagogy project inasmuch as critical pedagogy pursues competence in a
specified academic area as well as social critique and transformation. Yet regardless of how it is conceived and practiced, critical pedagogy does not easily resolve the tension that occurs when trying to execute the simultaneous acquisition of these goals.

Auerbach and Burgess propose that Freire’s problem-posing pedagogy be extended to community-based ESL projects, arguing that students must learn critical thinking skills to cope successfully in foreign situations (166). Rivera transformed her ESL classroom into a critical context by insisting that students become active producers of knowledge. The result was a series of “popular research projects” that documented relevant issues surrounding participants’ social lives (485-86). Both these concrete applications of critical pedagogy to the ESL context clarify how critique operates within a language classroom. Neither, however, elaborates on the crucial issue of acquiring necessary linguistic structures that enable basic forms of communication. If critical pedagogy is to transcend normative, traditional instruction, it must emphasize the capacity of students to construct knowledge actively, to critique the production of knowledge, and to react to oppressive practices. If critical pedagogy is to have a place within particular academic arenas, it must privilege the academic content of interest to a given arena. When applied to educational practices, critical pedagogy thus occupies a precarious position between social activism and academic instruction.

The present project exemplifies this strenuous position for critical pedagogy, as the academic content of language instruction took on legitimate significance for ESL participants. Learning English became a vehicle for obtaining concrete educational, occupational, and social goals. As I have already argued, learning and practicing English always occurred within discrete social contexts, and the internal and external obstacles
located within social contexts frequently obscured participants’ successful communication. My task, then, in applying a critical performative pedagogy was to legitimate the communication context and all its inherent obstacles as significant to using the linguistic structures that ESL students learned. Ewald recognizes this challenge as implicit to all critical language pedagogy: “The contradiction between furthering a critical pedagogy and its related goals and fulfilling the traditional role of a language educator may create a tension for teachers, requiring them to compromise their own pedagogical and moral perspectives” (276). Ewald further observes that most language programs operate from a singular interest in “developing nativelike competency” in the target language, an interest shared by language students as well (277). I frequently asked myself if my critical performative experiment had reached its ethical boundaries when participants asked for straight grammar or pronunciation drills, sans any performative spin. When participants interrupted a performance exercise to ask a simple, direct grammar or vocabulary question, I considered and re-considered the utility of a critical performative approach to ESL pedagogy.

Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed practice ultimately allowed ESL participants in this project to practice English, especially conversation, and critique within a single forum theatre exercise. Because TO depends on active participation, it uniquely balances the tension between teaching English and promoting critical transformation. During TO exercises, participants are encouraged to discuss their unique oppressive experiences, to analyze their respective inhibitions and motivations, and to dialogue with others about possible actions to be taken. Though image theatre is clearly not a performance practice that emphasizes talk, Boal indicates throughout Rainbow of Desire that it should stimulate participant discussion concerning the particular oppressions staged within a given exercise. Forum theatre, of
course, almost always requires talk because it is a performance form that requires live problem-solving rehearsals. For the ESL context considered in this project, the rehearsals focused on communication obstacles. In staging forum scenes around such obstacles, the participants necessarily practiced their communication skills.

I was always reluctant to intervene as an ESL teacher during these scenes to indicate grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation errors, preferring instead the backstage role of Boalian joker who asks questions rather than provides answers. Given the participants’ persistent requests for correction when they made such errors, however, it does not seem unreasonable for the Boalian joker/ESL teacher to develop a system in collaboration with ESL participants for making appropriate language corrections within TO exercises.

Performative pedagogy and critical pedagogy, particularly when fused within an academic context, must not betray their obligation to that academic context. When that context is the ESL classroom, especially one occupied by immigrant and refugee students, the communication lessons inherent to ESL instruction must not be set aside at the expense of pursuing critical or performative objectives. Fortunately, Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed provides a unique means for balancing the objectives of all these interests.

Ultimately, I discovered that the balance between pursuing critical objectives and language competence, while awkward, must be maintained. I discovered that a critical performative pedagogy neither ignores nor softens direct teaching in the subject matter relevant to the academic context in which it occurs. I discovered that critical performative pedagogy must remain in a pensive both/and position. To do critical pedagogy within the ESL context, practitioners must recognize that there are moments of so-called “uncritical” teaching, where a language teacher must set aside the dialogic, liberatory methods of critique
and empowerment in order to instruct non-native English speakers in the logistics of language structures. There are appropriate times within a critical ESL pedagogy for a teacher to establish the basic linguistic rules that all students must recognize in the face of communication interactions, even if they don’t execute them to perfection.

Traditional styles of pedagogy, particularly those that directly and rotely disseminate language rules to students, have been appropriately criticized for their transformation of the ESL classroom into a mechanical language depository where students receive, but do not produce knowledge. Yet traditional methods can be used in ESL educators’ efforts to establish a common vocabulary of linguistic structures, which then might be applied to critical and transformative acts. I propose that critical ESL pedagogy maintain ties to some traditional, structural language methods—particularly those that focus on grammar constructions—because they efficiently construct a unified linguistic base for language learners. If critical pedagogy is to maintain its capacity for a dual critique and transformation, however, educators must be careful to apply such methods within an overtly critical framework. That is, any banking pedagogical methods must be prefaced by and situated within the dialogic, participatory tenets of critical pedagogy.

Third, this study revises the critical pedagogue’s authority from a traditional position of complete control over methodological and content decisions to a collaborative position that encourages students to assume power within the classroom. Authority becomes a significant point of contention within a critical or performative pedagogy because both these pedagogical perspectives operate under the assumption that students actively participate within the construction of knowledge. Critical performative pedagogy privileges dialogue and locates that dialogue in the improvised, contingent conversations that erupt within a
context of social critique and transformation. Within a critical framework, traditional instructional methods are criticized for upholding the social status quo, are identified as confining and oppressive, and are set aside in favor of a “co-intentional education” where “teachers and students, co-intent on reality, are both Subjects” (Freire, Pedagogy 56). Where does this leave the authority traditionally held by the classroom teacher?

Giroux argues that critical pedagogy repositions teachers as “transformative intellectuals.” Giroux explains,

This means that such educators are not merely concerned with forms of empowerment that promote individual achievement and traditional forms of academic success. Instead, they are also concerned in their teaching with linking empowerment—the ability to think and act critically—to the concept of social engagement and transformation: that is, teaching for social transformation means educating students to take risks and to struggle within ongoing relations of power in order to be able to envision and promote those unrealized possibilities in the wider society that point to a more humane and democratic future. (“Schooling” 138)

Giroux refers to such authority as “emancipatory,” but he problematically positions the instructor as capable of activating students in the fight against broad social injustice. Giroux specifically suggests that teachers treat “students as if they ought also to be concerned about the issues of social justice and political action” (“Schooling” 139). While Giroux’s vision of social equality and a democratic reality is both sincere and altruistic, he also obscures the agency so central to critical pedagogy. If critical educators are capable of doing what Giroux suggests, it seems very likely that they might require coercive means to carry out their expansive charge.

McLaren urges the critical educator, for example, to “make classrooms into critical spaces” (emphasis mine, Life 241). McLaren readily admits the need for an openly politicized identity for the critical educator, arguing that educational spaces are
fundamentally political. However, McLaren never questions whether students, now activated within his politicized, critical classroom, operate from the same sort of humane, democratic vision that he espouses. While I personally buy into McLaren’s idealized view of a radically democratized social sphere, I have never encountered a class—in an ESL context or otherwise—wherein all students shared my utopian goals for society. For students to assume the efficacious position of authority within the critical classroom, and particularly within the performative critical classroom, they must be free to pursue a jointly constructed dialogue that emerges in response to the contingent identities they disclose within that classroom.

Instructorial authority must be shared within the critical performative classroom, but not to the extent Freire imagines in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire recognizes the dissonance of a dialogic, liberatory education within the traditional framework of educational authority and instead proposes newly renamed “teacher-student” and “students-teachers” identities for teachers and students.

The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this process, arguments based on “authority” are no longer valid; in order to function authority must be on the side of freedom, not against it. (emphasis in original, *Pedagogy* 67)

Freire acknowledges that students frequently resist such radical transformation, but he attributes such resistance to the oppressive socialization process to which students have been historically subjected (*Pedagogy* 49).

It is possible, as I observed during the ESL project, that students have more tangible, concrete reasons for resisting dramatic attempts to re-fashion classroom authority. In the ESL context, the teacher is frequently a native English speaker and, therefore the holder of linguistic authority in regards to non-native English speaking students. In the performative
critical ESL context, the teacher still holds linguistic authority inasmuch as students seek to learn how to communicate in English. During TO exercises, ESL participants cast me into the position of linguistic expert inasmuch as they expected that I would correct their language errors. ESL students might also resist the acceptance of authority within the classroom because their native English-speaking American instructor occupies the position of the potential “oppressor.” During this project, participants consistently identified Americans as cold, disinterested, or belligerent during interactions. During performance exercises that considered participants’ communication problems with Americans, I could not avoid influencing the discussion. No matter how often I told participants to ignore my identity as the American representative, participants still apologized to me before and after they complained about other Americans’ behaviors. Participants also frequently turned to me to explain why Americans behaved the way they did. These experiences suggest that ESL students will respond to the identities of their instructors regardless of the introduction of critical methods.

During the ESL project, classroom authority shifted from myself to students only during the enactment of performance. For example, during the performance fieldwork for this project, participants staged experiences relevant to their lives, not mine. Participants played out their respective communication oppressions, which they aptly renamed “obstacles.” I did not, nor should I have, encourage students to examine and critique the broad-based social oppressions that I believed all had experienced, such as discriminatory workplace practices or immigration laws. Both those issues were discussed, incidentally, but students initiated that discussion, then summarily ended it when they recognized that such expansive social problems could not be efficiently considered or even combated within the
relatively confined forum theatre scenes they typically constructed. Within the critical performative classroom, then, educators should recognize that their authority as regards the academic content and the performance methods applied to that content must be mediated by an ongoing commitment that students take on the crucial role of active participants and constructors of knowledge. Engaging students within performance, particularly participatory performance such as Theatre of the Oppressed, creates explicit spaces of authority for students.

This revision of instructional authority within the critical classroom does not exonerate instructors who attempt to deposit their political, social, or cultural views into their students. Nor does it free instructors to espouse their singular interpretations of a course’s relevant academic content. Critical performative educators should instead maintain the delicate tension between their sole possession of classroom authority and their entire surrender of that authority to students. As performance facilitators, educators must forcefully construct a safe space wherein students can assume responsibility for their own decisions through the act of performance. This responsibility includes explaining and adapting the rules of a given performance practice so that it fits the contingent situation to which it has been applied.

I discovered that carrying out this task necessarily requires collaboration on the part of student participants, especially for Theatre of the Oppressed because Boal’s exercises do not immediately apply to every oppression context. The ESL workshop and classroom, for example, operated within a language-training format, and for that reason, I eventually compromised my literal interpretation of TO in light of participants’ direct and indirect requests for more traditional language instruction and practice. At some moments, the
critical pedagogue must accept and respond to student requests for traditional “banking” education. The ESL classroom should maintain some connection to the traditional linguistic authority of the instructor, but should do so within a dramatically revised critical performative authority framework. Such a framework adds the requirements of collaboratively establishing a classroom environment that privileges performative identification and critique of relevant social obstacles as well as performative rehearsal for the combat of those obstacles.

The appropriate authority role for any critical pedagogue depends, of course, on the academic context within which the pedagogue operates. Perhaps most importantly, the critical pedagogue should consider the maxim of situated, contingent dialogue as the model for assessing authority. By responding to the particular learners—and their constituent identities—within a given educational context, the pedagogue can respond with an appropriate construction of authority. Yael Shalem’s discussion of the feminist pedagogue’s authority applies to the critical pedagogue as well.² Shalem contends that authority necessarily occurs as an “epistemological labor” in which the instructor has three central tasks: designing the course, which includes the “selection and organization of texts;” open disclosure of the pedagogical tradition and strategies that the teacher operates from; and a decision regarding how students should resolve the central concepts relevant to the course (61). The critical educator should take full responsibility for the construction of the course, its pedagogical framework, and the assignment of educational outcomes in a broad effort to position students in a realistic position to produce and negotiate knowledge during the completion of the course.
Authority within critical pedagogy cannot be entirely erased. Rather authority must be performatively asserted in a way that demands student participation, offers a critical framework constructed with student contingencies in mind, and explains the biases and/or intended relevance of that framework. Instructional authority must not demand how student participation should take place within the critical framework. Authority within critical pedagogy must shift, must avoid permanence, must react. While avoiding complete disappearance, critical pedagogical authority should initially emerge, then fade into the offstage regions of the classroom, and finally reemerge as necessary in response to student requests. Theatre of the Oppressed seems to be a likely method of carrying out this epistemological labor inasmuch as it positions the practitioner as a facilitator whose central task is to encourage performance participation, debate, analysis, and problem-solving without suggesting how those tasks should occur.

Recommendations for Subsequent Research

My experience using TO as a performative ESL pedagogy illuminated several recommendations that might benefit subsequent research. Specifically, this project guided me to suggestions for practitioners in three areas: the practice of performative pedagogy within an ESL context, Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, and the practice of performative pedagogy in general. For instructors who launch performative pedagogy within ESL classrooms, I recommend serious attention to several situational constraints that affect the reception of performative pedagogy by both students and the larger ESL program in which classes are held. For TO practitioners, I call attention to the utility of Boal’s personal example in aggressively adapting TO methods to the discrete contexts in which they are applied. Finally, I suggest that performative pedagogy should always maintain a central
concern with critique, that Performance Studies research provides instructive examples for
doing performative pedagogy, and that practitioners recognize the inherent practical
difficulties in launching a performative pedagogy.

During my performative ESL pedagogy project, I observed specific constraints
concerning the community-based ESL program in which the fieldwork occurred and the
particular students that participated. Any performative ESL pedagogy must recognize the
institutional constraints that influence and occasionally alter attempts to install a broad-based
performance for social change practice such as Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed. In my case,
the Catholic diocese-sponsored ESL program already possessed a long, rich history within
the community. For over twenty years, the ESL school operated as a comprehensive English
training program for immigrants and refugees. The school developed a product-oriented
pattern to ESL instruction that privileged promotion from one class level to the next. As she
reported to me, the director’s hope was that the school’s curriculum would expand with its
students so that when students reached the highest course level, that class would provide
increasingly difficult material. In this way, students would never graduate from the school
on the basis of fulfilling a pre-established set of completion requirements, but continue an
ongoing study of English until they deemed their language proficiency appropriate to their
respective goals. The philosophy that had emerged within the ESL program, then, privileged
a comprehensive study of English with fluency as the intended outcome. Ewald describes
this approach as common for many language programs, wherein program administrators
establish implicit or explicit expectations that teachers will “adopt a communicative approach
through the exclusive use of the target language, so-called authentic materials, and so-called
meaningful interaction with the goal of developing nativelike competency in the S/FL [second/foreign language]” (277).

At the ESL program that I considered for this project, students attend three nights a week for nearly three-hour class meetings. Classes run in eight-week intervals with a week off between sessions. Students are assigned weekly writing journals and homework assignments, and they take midterm and final exams every session. Students receive attendance certificates and report cards at the completion of most sessions. Within this environment, where tangible linguistic progress in the form of promotion and merit certificates serves as the preferred capital, my performative pedagogy experiment did not make immediate sense. Even though I began with a structured, chronological schedule that would ultimately result in a performative product of some kind, Boal’s TO practice always privileges the immediate, corporeal knowledge that emerges from the performance process. I eventually mediated my heavy product orientation, which participants reported as less relevant to their daily communication obstacles, and turned to one-shot forum theatre sessions. To carry out a Boal-based pedagogy within an ESL school, the practitioner must be willing to negotiate the dialogic ideals of a critical performative pedagogy with the traditional perspectives of academic measurement and progress that the school has already established.

Fortunately, I experienced a beneficial relationship with the ESL program’s director. She was immediately interested in my performative research and described her own previous attempts to implement drama-based exercises and assignments within the program. Still, the program itself did not change in response to my vision of how ESL pedagogy should operate as a critical performative enterprise. The program maintained its traditional goals and
standards of linguistic achievement, and I initially operated somewhat outside the classes. My performance workshop was scheduled for the hour immediately prior to participants’ respective ESL classes. While the director exerted no pressure for my project to adhere to the ESL class format or goals, I indirectly experienced that expectation. Students, whose only experience with ESL pedagogy usually came from attending the program’s traditional courses, frequently compared the workshop exercises and tasks with those that they completed during their subsequent ESL classes.

When I later joined the program as an ESL instructor, I encountered the dilemma of negotiating the program’s expectations with the contingent, process-orientation that I developed in the performance workshops. Given the ongoing evaluation requirements for all ESL instructors in the program such as weekly homework assignments, journal assignments, and tests, I found that my critical performative identity was progressively disciplined. I compromised the absolute directives located within my vision of critical performative pedagogy to fulfill my obligation to the program as an ESL instructor. Most noticeably, I divided the course into two distinct pedagogical styles, an initial performative format in which students engaged forum theatre and a subsequent traditional, banking format in which I drilled students during rote grammar exercises.

I recommend that practitioners of critical performative pedagogy in the ESL classroom engage in some compromise of their critical and performance objectives, particularly because students and program administrators have already established various institutional traditions that will inevitably constrain those objectives. Because the educational programs are likely well established, and more realistically, because performative practitioners likely enter those programs as educational research guests,
compromise becomes both understandable and ethical. Practitioners should recognize the necessity for adaptation of their theoretical ideals and their performance practices prior to entering the ESL scene, and they should anticipate ongoing adaptation upon engaging ESL participants.

Another recommendation concerns the physical context for performative ESL projects. As I described in chapter 4, I facilitated the performance workshop within a small, cramped boardroom. The performance space I utilized for most of the workshop was more appropriate for committee meetings than it was for doing TO work. When I moved into the ESL classroom, the space increased dramatically, but the classroom was filled with long tables arranged so students faced a lectern and a dry erase board at the front of the room. Moving the tables would have been difficult, and more importantly, the facility services employees who maintained the diocesan building that the ESL program rented for its classes discouraged even the slightest alteration of classroom furniture. My use of Boal required enough physical space so that participants could construct group images and rehearse forum solutions. During the workshop, I moved the conference tables aside, but our space was still cramped. When I adapted the workshop to an emphasis on forum theatre, space became less an issue, particularly because participants focused their forum scenes on conversation-based obstacles that did not require large amounts of space to perform.

Based on my experiences, however, I recommend that ESL practitioners who use Boal carefully consider the amount of space they will need and the space available in any given community site. While physical space constraints did not dramatically alter the results of this project, it did make doing Boal’s performer training and image theatre difficult. In my case, participants resisted those elements of TO anyway, but I believe that the cramped,
formal space in which I attempted to facilitate both training exercises and image theatre contributed to participants’ discomfort. Practitioners must recognize that the physical locale of a project contributes to the construction of a symbolic performance place, wherein participants should feel comfortable carrying out the movements and actions required by a given performance practice.

My final recommendation concerning performative ESL projects concerns participants’ respective language proficiencies. ESL practitioners should pay close attention to the base level of language proficiency that all participants share because this factor effects how the performance work is enacted as well as its eventual outcome. In my case, I initially solicited participation from the ESL program’s two advanced classes. During the first workshop, all participants possessed a relatively high English proficiency. In fact, I could easily communicate with all participants during conversations. Participants could easily understand my performance explanations and directions, and they asked questions if they did not understand. I expanded my search for participants in subsequent workshops, however, because attendance dramatically dropped. During the second workshop, several participants attended from the lowest ESL class, and a number came from intermediate and advanced classes. There was no shared level of English proficiency within the workshop, as some participants could speak only a few English phrases, and others were near fluent.

My initial assumption in adopting Boal’s image theatre was that it would enable participants with low language competence to consider their respective oppressions through a visual, bodily form. That assumption proved false during the workshops, however, because participants with low language competence not only could not speak well, they could not readily understand my instructions. I occasionally modeled performance instructions with my
own body, but these explanations became lengthy, and more fluent participants would translate my instructions into the less fluent participants’ native languages. Forum theatre, of course, usually involves action and talk. This was especially the case during the ESL forum scenes because participants identified communication obstacles as their largest concern. In several workshop forums, participants who might have recognized, actively contributed, and benefited from a proposed solution were confused because they could neither speak or understand the forum dialogues.

For these reasons, I suggest that Boal be applied to ESL communities that possess a shared level of linguistic competence. I noticed some variation in terms of participants’ fluency when the project moved into the advanced class, but participants typically had very little trouble understanding each other or making themselves understood. Though image theatre seems possible for participants with little language proficiency, I recommend that practitioners carefully consider how the theoretical framework and instructions for particular image exercises will be communicated to participants. The most reasonable adaptation for these cases would involve the use of a live demonstration by the facilitator and the translation help of participants who already understand the image instructions.

My ESL performative pedagogy also offered specific insights for performance practitioners who work with Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, particularly the reminder that wherever TO is applied, the practitioner’s primary task concerns adaptation. That is, practitioners must ask themselves how they will adapt Boal’s practice in recognition of the contingent, concrete characteristics that define any given context. Practitioners must answer the following questions prior to and during their respective Boal projects: Why have I chosen this practice? What version of Theatre of the Oppressed will I use? What benefits and
limitations does this practice make possible? How will I adapt this practice to fit the particular needs of this site?

I arrived at these questions following my own struggle to make Theatre of the Oppressed applicable within two frameworks: ESL pedagogy and critical performative pedagogy. I hypothesized that Boal’s theatre practice, with its concrete focus on social critique and transformation, would successfully mediate between the aims of these pedagogical traditions. Yet when I constructed my strategy for implementing Theatre of the Oppressed, I overlooked Boal’s insistence that practitioners revise and re-construct the practice in accordance with the demands of a given site and its participants. I attempted to insert a TO program in its theoretical and concrete entirety by following Boal’s four-stage process of “knowing the body,” “making the body expressive,” “theatre as language,” and “theatre as discourse” during a lengthy performance workshop. As I earlier documented in chapter 4, my lofty expectations were deflated during the initial workshop, and I soon recognized the need for drastic and consistent adaptation.

Perhaps Boal’s repeated mantra regarding the place of the spectator within the Theatre of the Oppressed as a liberated spect-actor should serve as a guiding principle for TO practitioners. If, as Boal insists, “Theater is action!” and Theatre of the Oppressed frees spectators to think and act for themselves (Theatre 155), then TO practitioners must insure that participants can act in a way that is meaningful to their respective situations. Spect-actors must not be forced to act within a performance frame that has little relevance to their contingent lives or that becomes too difficult for them to manage.

During this project, for example, I learned that my inclusion of performer training, which required participants to explore carefully the expressivity of their bodies, distracted
participants from an urgent and significant goal: increasing their English communication competence within specific problem situations. Playing performance games and doing basic body awareness exercises, while helpful in the construction of a larger performance vocabulary, were not as relevant to participants’ goals as our eventual forum theatre focus was. In describing the rules of forum theatre, Boal directs the joker to “spell out the rules of the game, but in complete acceptance from the outset that the audience may alter them, if it is deemed necessary for the study of the proposed subject” (Games 232). This prescription should be extracted from forum theatre and applied to all adaptations of Boal’s practice. In addition to his published accounts and instructions, practitioners must turn to Boal’s ongoing theatre work as an engaged example for doing TO. Practitioners must observe and replicate Boal’s fervor for inventing, borrowing, and adapting new theatre exercises, taken from every country and culture he encounters, in their own Theatre of the Oppressed constructions (Jackson, “Introduction” Games xxii).

To insure that TO adaptations have utility for their participants, particularly within the United States, practitioners should also take note of problems that occur when trying to achieve the specific outcomes desired by an oppressed group. Schutzman criticizes loose translations of TO from its South American roots to industrialized continents such as North America and Europe: a “third-world aesthetic of resistance” cannot be equated with a “first-world aesthetic of self-help” (“Brechtian” 139). Schutzman worries that translating Theatre of the Oppressed to the United States amounts to an appropriation of the oppressed’s framework by the oppressors. When North Americans practice Boal, they must locate oppressors to whom they feel subjugated. The oppressors in such contexts are necessarily different from those identified by South Americans. Boal acknowledged this contrast and
adopted the “cops in the head” exercises for those who struggle with psychological rather than material oppressions. Still, the fundamental ideology of TO involves a people who exist in a shared oppression, and the plurality of the United States makes transferring the practice here difficult. Schutzman identifies an apolitical attitude that prevails in the U.S., while also recognizing the difficulty of uniting people around a common or shared oppression. She further recognizes that TO practitioners in North America typically do not belong to the oppressed groups with which they work, and therefore might represent, symbolically at least, the oppression that the group hopes to alleviate (“Brechtian” 140-41).

Finally, this project led to recommendations for the practice of performative pedagogy, especially as it has been elaborated within the Performance Studies discipline. Throughout this study I have used the terms “performative pedagogy” and “critical performative pedagogy” interchangeably. Warren adds the term “critical” to his definition of performative pedagogy in an effort to foreground the active role that students adopt within that pedagogy. He describes the central charge of critical performative pedagogy as asking students “to be more fully present, to be more fully engaged, to take more responsibility and agency in their own learning” (“Promise” 3). In the definition that I proposed in chapter 3, I also located critique as a central ingredient of performative pedagogy. I have argued that performative pedagogy, as it has been defined and implemented across academic disciplines, is marked by a commitment to the body, an emphasis on contingent dialogue, and the necessity of risk. All these characteristics allow, encompass, or engender a critical perspective, particularly as it has been understood by critical theorists to refer to a close antagonistic reading of the social status quo. For this reason, a performative pedagogy must also be a critical performative pedagogy.
The principal implication of defining performative pedagogy as a pedagogy of and for critique concerns the construction of a crucial criterion by which a pedagogy is measured as a performative practice. To be identified as performative pedagogy, it is not enough, for example, that an art history instructor uses a role-play assignment during a lecture on the social context of certain modernist painters. That instructor also needs to recognize and implement performance within a framework of critique. Theatricality does not necessarily engender critique. However, a thorough investigation of the physical body as a site of social and cultural contestation, combined with a classroom pursuit of dialogue, moves a pedagogy in the direction of critique and performance. Performative pedagogues should heed the criteria laid out in a Performance Studies definition of a performative pedagogy, while recognizing that neither drama nor a dramatic view of the classroom satisfies those criteria.

My argument for critique, of course, raises a significant question: What constitutes the sort of performance that reflects the critical expectations of a performative pedagogy? I have called for a pedagogy that revolves around a critical perspective and mobilizes the bodies of students and teachers. How should this be carried out within the classroom? Warren states this very issue as the mission for those doing performative pedagogy and proposes performance activities within the classroom that require live action by students situated within appropriate theoretical frameworks and followed by debriefing discussions (“Body” 260). Aside from Warren’s call for a pedagogy of “enfleshment,” where the active body is centrally located amidst the critique rendered by performative theory, few explicit instructions exist for how to carry out the expansive criteria of performative pedagogy. Even Warren resists specificity regarding the methods to be applied within a performative
pedagogy. If performative methods must operate within a critical theoretical framework that begins with the body, what does that look like?

Certainly this study offers one answer by describing the application of Boal’s Theatre of Oppressed practice to an ESL classroom. Other examples frequently appear in Performance Studies research, though scholars may not explicitly identify their methods as performative pedagogy. All the examples cited in chapter 3 of this study, for example, provide insight into doing performative pedagogy. Alexander suggests a way to introduce the instructor’s body into the pedagogical picture by exposing that body to the same risk that student performers encounter. Fuoss and Hill suggest performance as a method of learning academic content, and their description of a course in social movements suggests a way that performance engenders experiential learning. Bowman and Kistenberg propose using semiotic theory in performance of literature courses to incite performative “arguing,” where students craft their own texts in response to or critique of a literary text. Their approach offers still another critical performative strategy that might be adapted for interdisciplinary use. With some effort, I might indefinitely lengthen this brief list of performative pedagogical strategies. The principal chore for a scholar interested in doing performative pedagogy involves inductively constructing a classroom project from the rich collection of pedagogy-focused performance research. Such constructions should meet the aims of embodiment, dialogue, and risk that I have argued define a critical performative pedagogy. They should also resonate with the discrete sites to which they will be applied. Because every performative pedagogy must answer to its respective contingency-filled classroom, it is difficult to suggest either that scholars offer explicit blueprints for doing performative pedagogy or that pedagogues adopt such blueprints in their entirety.
Yet as practitioners collect, revise, and implement their own instructional projects, they should recognize that no performative pedagogy serves a miracle drug function. No performative pedagogy provides an inevitably successful remedy to traditional banking education. Performative pedagogy does not always transform the monologic classroom into a dialogic one. Performative pedagogy does not easily apply to all educational contexts. Performative pedagogy is frequently resisted by students accustomed to more passive approaches to education. In short, doing performative pedagogy is not easy. I do not state these shortcomings in retrospect, having solved them for myself during a heroic ESL fieldwork ordeal. I point to these potential problems because I continue to experience them within my college communication classrooms.

While conducting the fieldwork for this study, I also experimented with applying elements of performative pedagogy within communication courses I taught at a community college. Throughout my work on this study, I reviewed the theoretical underpinnings of performative pedagogy as well as several performance scholars’ efforts to practice it within their classrooms. At some point while engaged in this research, I convinced myself that this practice should and could be applied to all the communication courses that I taught: public speaking, interpersonal communication, fundamentals of communication, and business communication. So I brashly inserted various elements of performative pedagogy into those courses. Nothing comprehensive, understand, but an attempt nonetheless to privilege student-driven dialogue and student production of knowledge played out on their respective bodies. To that end, I refashioned my typical classroom format from a lecture-heavy session to plenty of opportunity for questions and answers. I substituted various Boal-based image or forum exercises and role plays for small group discussion exercises. For the first few
weeks of several semesters, I excitedly played out mental scenarios whereby these basic communication classes would be transformed into critical, performative stages dominated by student involvement and empowerment. Then I waited for my dream to materialize, never explicitly sharing my goals with students. I waited some more, never describing for students a rationale for the question-heavy class sessions or the repeated performance exercises.

While I waited, I grew uneasy. Students didn’t talk more when I asked them questions. Worse, I couldn’t quite figure out how to ask them questions that were anything more than dressed-up lecture statements. The role plays became more and more predictable, and my instructions for them resembled requests to theatricalize the small group discussions that I had previously used. At some point I subconsciously shifted away from my so called “performative pedagogy” and returned to a more comfortable lecture format colored with questions to stimulate student interest and the occasional classroom small group discussion topic. As excited as I was to extend my performative experiment to a college classroom, I found that I was much better at doing traditional, banking education. I felt better doing it. It was less risky. Students knew their roles. I knew mine. No one got out of line.

The optimism that performative pedagogy contains should not disguise the various practical concerns that pedagogues must address before applying it to their respective classrooms. Teachers must first determine their own readiness and training for applying a performance-based pedagogy that rests on critical theory. As theoretically prepared as I felt, I did not know much about transforming a traditional, monologic classroom space into a dynamic, dialogic one. Nor did I have practice in adapting a critical framework within classrooms whose institutional identities are confined to public speaking assignments. Doing performative pedagogy demands that the practitioner carefully prepare for the specific
context in which it will be done. Doing performative pedagogy demands that the practitioner identify the utility and the limitations of the practice for a given context. Doing performative pedagogy demands that practitioners accept that their “doing” will likely occur at drastically different levels and in different forms than they first intended. The key difficulty, I discovered, occurs at the moment of application, when one must react to a plethora of constraints—institutional, participant, personal—while retaining one’s resolve that performative pedagogy can and does engender embodied learning and embodied critique.

As a byproduct of the Performance Studies tradition, performative pedagogy represents the discipline’s proclivity for coming to the aid of other academic arenas. Like the discipline from which it emerges, performative pedagogy can be represented through an expansive and inclusive umbrella metaphor. As I demonstrated within this study, performative pedagogy can be and has been applied across disciplinary boundaries. For example, performance, as both a theoretical construct and methodological practice, enhances the theory and practice of critical pedagogy. Likewise, performance enhances the theory and practice of language pedagogy. Performance can be observed within a wide range of social, cultural, and academic practices, including language and pedagogy. Yet it is not enough to identify and describe how performance operates within those practices. The true benefit of a performative approach to any of these practices occurs when performance theory and performance method are activated within them. That is, the utility of performance becomes apparent when performance is theorized and done in specific, concrete situations. For the critical pedagogical arena of ESL, these acts represent a unique means of re-considering and enacting a set of goals that have repeatedly troubled language scholars and pedagogues.
Notes

1 The ESL program in which I conducted this project used both a standardized test and an oral interview as placement instruments. Students also took tests twice during every eight-week session, and their instructors, with occasional input from the program director, used the test scores to make promotion and demotion decisions. Several ESL participants were familiar with the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the Test of Written English (TWE), the standardized English tests used by American colleges and universities to determine admission for non-native English speakers.

2 In applying Shalem’s notion of instructor authority to critical pedagogy, I am aware of the active critique lodged by feminist scholars against critical pedagogy, particularly as regards their claim of a rationalist bias. I adopt Shalem’s “epistemological labor” perspective not to undermine that critique nor in an effort to appropriate her definition in the name of critical pedagogy. I instead suggest that critical pedagogy reconsider its expansive and idealistic explanation of pedagogical authority. Shalem’s description of an acknowledged, discrete authority role for educators seems to rein in the abundantly hopeful vision that critical educators such as Giroux and McLaren have fashioned.

3 The rigid demands of the facility service employees, as well as their usually unfriendly demeanor, became a frequent topic for the program director during staff meetings. Instructors were told on numerous occasions that students left the classrooms with litter still on the floors or tables, with forbidden food or drink containers in the trash cans, and worse, with ink or pencil writing on the tables. The director claimed that facility service employees had complained about these problems more than once to diocesan administrators. Though teachers joked that the strict requirements for maintaining the classrooms seemed more reasonable for elementary school students, they also took seriously the warnings about moving furniture. Even if teachers needed extra chairs to seat students, they cautiously searched for facility service employees before removing them from another classroom.


Schutzman, Mady. “Activism, Therapy, or Nostalgia? Theatre of the Oppressed in NYC.” The Drama Review. 34.3 (1990): 77-82.


APPENDIX A

PROJECT CONSENT FORM

With my signature on this sheet, I agree to volunteer to participate in the experiment involving English as a Second Language and theatre workshops conducted by Ross Louis.

The experimenter indicates that I understand that all subjects in the project are volunteers, that I might withdraw at any time from the experiment, that I have been or will be informed as to the nature of this experiment, and that my performance in this experiment may be used for additional approved projects. Finally, I shall be given an opportunity to ask questions prior to the start of the experiment and after my participation is complete.

________________________________________  ___________________
Subject’s Signature      Date
APPENDIX B

DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Participants in both the performance workshop and the intermediate-advanced ESL course represented a diverse range of backgrounds. Participants came from numerous countries, though a majority were immigrants from Central or South American nations. Participants also reported varied reasons for coming to the United States and for enrolling in English as a Second Language courses. The performance workshop solicited participants from a community-based ESL school’s highest levels, though for one session students from more levels were invited to attend. Participants in the intermediate-advanced ESL course were enrolled in the school’s second highest language level.

During the initial performance workshop, six participants regularly attended, included four who attended every meeting. Yomaira, a native of Venezuela, came to the United States when her husband, who works as an engineer, was transferred to Louisiana. They had lived in the United States for two years and intended to remain for at least one more year. Aleida is also from Venezuela, and she had lived in the United States for two years while her husband worked on his doctorate degree. In Venezuela, Aleida worked as a dentist. In the U.S, she baby-sat children. Rosalina, a native of Mexico, had spent nine months in the United States prior to joining the performance workshop. She came with her husband who entered an American doctoral program in engineering. Also from Mexico, Adela lived with her husband and three daughters, all of who spoke fluent English. Adela left the workshop to spend more time caring for her family when her husband began studying for his doctoral general exams, but she rejoined the project when I entered the intermediate-advanced ESL course. Theirry was an elementary school teacher from France, and attended
several meetings before reporting that the commute from his home, thirty minutes away, was too long to make the workshop on time. A Russian participant, Xenia, attended the initial meetings but stopped attending halfway through the workshop.

Of the six participants who participated in the first performance workshop, only Aleida and Yomaira continued the project into the second workshop. While the first workshop included participants from the highest two levels of classes offered in the ESL school, the second workshop was extended to all but the lowest level of students. Aleida and Yomaira came from the school’s highest level. Two other participants from their class, Pedro and Anna, joined them. A middle-aged native of Venezuela, Pedro worked as a chemist in the United States. Though her native language was Spanish, Anna was born in England and was married to an American. Phoufay and Gloria attended from the second highest ESL level. Phoufay, a neurosurgeon from Laos, was engaged in a research fellowship at a local hospital. Gloria, an engineer from Colombia, was studying English so she could pursue her engineering career in the U.S. As many as eleven other participants from lower ESL classes attended the second workshop. Among those, Maryo, Sara, Francis, Uriel, Maria, Mimi, and Juan consistently attended. A refugee from Sudan, Maryo studied English and worked full-time in an electronics factory in preparation for enrollment in an American college. Sara, a native of Mexico and the mother of four teenagers who also attended ESL classes, worked as a nutritionist. Francis, Sara’s son, was a high school student. Frensly was one of Sara’s daughters and attended middle school. Uriel, a lawyer from Columbia, was married and had three children. Maria was a native of Brazil and spoke almost no English. She typically attended the workshop with Sara and her children, looking to them for guidance during workshop meetings. Mimi, a teenager from Mexico, joined the
workshop late. She was a high school student visiting family in the area for six months in an attempt to learn English before returning to Mexico for college. Juan was also from Mexico and worked in the United States as a painter.

During the third and final performance workshop, attendance drastically dropped. Only four participants attended regularly: Aleida, Maryo, Raquel, a native of El Salvador, and Giorgio, a native of Peru. Raquel lived with family in the United States during a six-month visit. She had just graduated from high school in El Salvador and was studying English to help when she returned to El Salvador to attend college. Giorgio had also recently completed high school. He was visiting his sister, who was a college student in the United States, and studied English in preparation for his subsequent return to Peru to attend college. Two other participants attended at least one meeting during the third workshop. Gloria was a native of Colombia (not the same Gloria who attended the second workshop and who later attended the ESL course). Marian was a native of Ghana and worked as a custodial worker. She had lived in the United States for five years.

When the project moved into an ESL classroom, a number of students who had attended earlier workshops were also enrolled in the intermediate-advanced course. These students included Adela, Gloria, Maryo, Raquel, Phoufay, Sara, Francis, and Frensly. There were nineteen other students who regularly attended the course and participated in various Theatre of the Oppressed exercises. Ted and Elaine Ku were married and had lived in the United States for twenty years. They were both natives of Taiwan and reported that their primary English problems concerned grammar and writing. They owned a gift store in the area. Luis was a graphic artist from Colombia who worked in the United States on a painting crew. During the fieldwork he completed training for a hazardous materials certification so
that he could paint in industrial locations. His wife and two sons lived in Colombia. Maria was also from Colombia and lived with her mother in the United States. She had completed college in her native country and worked full-time for a furniture company. Juan Carlos, an immigrant from Colombia, worked full-time on a paint crew, part-time for a catering business, and took classes at a local culinary school. He hoped to pursue a culinary occupation after completing his training.

Raquya was a recently married immigrant from Yemen. During the final class session, she revealed that she was pregnant. Lavrent, a native of Kazakhstan, worked as a postdoctoral researcher for a local university. Lorena, an immigrant from Colombia, worked full-time providing childcare for several local families. Jesus had attended the previous ESL course I had taught several years earlier. He had returned to his native El Salvador following that course and had since returned to the United States to locate more work as a truck driver. Naim, an Afghan refugee, joined the class relatively during the latter meetings of the final session. He worked full-time as a custodial worker and part-time in a restaurant. His wife and daughter remained in Afghanistan. Ly was a Vietnamese immigrant who lived with his family in the United States and worked for a carwash business. Three students moved to the United States after marrying Americans. Saengaroon was native of Thailand, Ana was a native of Venezuela and had two young boys, and Izabella was from Poland and also had young children. Andrew was a college student from China who moved here to enroll in a local university’s comprehensive English language school. He attended the community ESL program for additional English training. Other participants attended the course while visiting friends or family in the United States, including Emilce, Nick, and Lianna. Emilce was an elementary school teacher from Argentina, Nick was a native of Taiwan, and Lianna was a
recent college graduate from El Salvador. Yuli, a Vietnamese student from the advanced ESL level, attended one intermediate-advanced session when her instructor was absent.
APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT OBSTACLES AND SOLUTIONS

During two eight-week sessions of ESL classes and workshops, students described various problems they faced while generally attempting to communicate with Americans in their everyday lives. Students discussed the problems with each other in small groups and then reported their experiences to the entire class. Then, students volunteered to demonstrate their various problems through theatre exercises that were adapted from Augusto Boal. Using Boal’s forum theatre – in which participants demonstrate a problem and then involve the audience in solving the problem – ESL students attempted to identify ways that their communication problems could be solved.

In the following summary, the students’ problems and the recommended solutions are described. Students proposed all solutions.

1. PROBLEM: Communicating with Americans during social events.

   The problem occurs during social events, such as a party. What do you do if the other people at the party do not communicate with you, perhaps because you do not speak English well? What do you do if they only stare at you or do not begin conversations? (Suggested by Saengaroon.)

   Proposed Solutions:

   a. Attempt to speak to the person, even if you feel shy or nervous. Make the effort to communicate at least a short greeting or question.

2. PROBLEM: Understanding Americans and the English language during your first days in the U.S.
The problem occurs during a person’s first few days in the United States, especially if the person knows very little English. When people talk to you or try to start conversations with you, you cannot understand what they say. Or, maybe you want something or need to respond to an important question, but you do not know the words to use. The problem also occurs when you are not certain if Americans understand you when you speak English. (Suggested by Raquel, Maryo, Gloria, Soleiman, Maria, and Mohammed.)

Proposed Solutions:

a. Use nonverbal gestures and facial expressions that communicate “I don’t understand.” Also use nonverbal behaviors to communicate what you want or need.

b. Observe Americans behaviors and then say and do what they do in a particular situation (for example, Adela’s daughter at school.)

c. Ask the American to slow down.

d. Tell the American before the conversation begins that you do not speak English well—that is, prepare the American to speak with you.

3. PROBLEM: Americans being impatient because you do not speak well or do not understand something at a store.

   The problem occurs when Americans look at you angrily if you take too long at a store when you don’t understand what a salesperson is saying. Or, perhaps you are having trouble explaining what you want at a store, and the other people in line are impatient. (Suggested by Giorgio, Maryo, and Raquel.)
Proposed Solutions:

a. Refuse to accept the American’s impatience. Tell them that you are not “dumb” or “stupid,” but you are only learning the language.

b. Apologize and explain that you are new to this country. Explain that you do not understand because your culture and language are very different than the United States.

4. PROBLEM: Communicating with doctors (over the phone and during an appointment).

The problem occurs when you call a doctor’s office to report a medical problem with yourself or children. Or, when you are in a doctor’s office, you do not understand why the nurse and doctor do not spend time with you. Instead, they act quickly, ask short questions, and give short answers. (Suggested by Adela, Ana, Elaine, and Frensly.)

Proposed solutions:

a. Ask a better English speaker (a friend or family member) to speak for you on the telephone or to come with you to the doctor’s office.

b. Ask a better English speaker (a friend or family member) to write down your concern or questions, and then you can give a written description to the doctor.

5. PROBLEM: Communicating with nurses over the phone.

The problem occurs when you call a doctor’s office and ask to speak to an on-duty nurse. You may not understand the nurse’s suggestion or the nurse may not understand the importance of your problem. The nurse may not offer any solutions
for you, but only tell you to schedule an appointment. (Suggested by Ana and based on her phone call to a pediatric clinic.)

Proposed solutions:

a. Ask the nurse to tell you his/her opinion.

b. Speak to the nurse in a nice manner.

c. Be persistent. Be sure that the nurse understands the nature of your problem and how important the problem is to you.

6. PROBLEM: Locating an office or building for a scheduled appointment.

The problem occurs when you have directions to a building or office, but get lost and cannot find the place. For example, if you have a doctor’s appointment in an office building where many doctors have their offices, what happens if you get lost? (Suggested by Vivian.)

Proposed Solutions:

a. Call your family (husband, wife, friend, etc.)

b. Bring a cell phone so that you can call the doctor’s office – always remember to bring the number of the place you are looking for.

c. Prepare yourself before you look for the place.

7. PROBLEM: Being confused when talking to an operator for a company.

The problem occurs when you make a call to a company and have problems understanding the operator who answers the phone. Maybe the problem happens with your own workplace. Or, maybe the problem happens when you call for information about a company or organization. (Suggested by Pfouphay.)
Proposed Solutions:

a. Ask to speak to the operator’s supervisor.

b. Immediately seek help from your own boss or supervisor.

8. PROBLEM: Being confused when calling on the telephone to make a complaint to a company.

The problem occurs when you call a company to complain about problems with a product or a service, such as long distance complaints or buying a product that does not work. You cannot understand the company employee or the employee will not help you. (Suggested by Izabella and Ana and based on their long distance phone complaints.)

Proposed Solutions:

a. Ask to speak to the caller’s supervisor.

b. Write a formal letter of complaint.

c. Seek help from a friend or neighbor who is American or who speaks English.

9. PROBLEM: Not understanding a salesperson who speaks too fast on the telephone.

The problem occurs when a salesperson calls you to offer you a product or service, but you cannot understand them because they speak too fast. Also, you may not know what they are calling about. Is it a sales call? Is it a call from your workplace? Or from the doctor? (Suggested by Kim, Sara, Maryo, and Aleida.)

Proposed Solutions:

a. Tell the salesperson you are interested, but he or she must slow down or you will not be able to buy the product. (You may say this even if you do not intend to buy the product.)
b. Learn and repeat any of these sentences: “I’m not interested right now, but I will call you back later if I am interested.” “I’m sorry. I don’t speak English.” “Could you call back later when my husband/wife/friend, etc. can speak to you?”

10. PROBLEM: Problems with store employees understanding your question.

The problem occurs when you ask a store employee a question about where to find a product and he/she does not understand you. Or, perhaps you are ordering some product or service and the salesperson does not understand either because you are using the wrong vocabulary words or because of your pronunciation. (Suggested by Adela and Lorena.)

Proposed Solutions:

a. Write your request on paper if the employee does not understand after two attempts.

b. Turn to next person in line and ask if they can help you explain your request to the employee.

11. PROBLEM: Not understanding something that a salesperson or store employee says to you.

The problem occurs when a store employee answers your question, but you cannot understand exactly what they say. For example, if you ask the price of a product, but don’t understand that the employee tells you the price of buying one pound of meat, rather than a five-pound bag. (Suggested by Maria.)
Proposed Solutions:

a. Ask many questions if you do not understand a price of a product. Do not try to figure it out all by yourself. Do not be afraid to ask specific questions about a product or its price. The employee will not help you unless you ask specific questions.

12. PROBLEM: Communicating with employees at fast-food restaurants.

The problem occurs when you try to order food at a fast food restaurant like McDonald’s, and the employees are not patient with you or do not understand what you say. (Suggested by Juan Carlos, Izabella, Jesus, and Saengaroon.)

Proposed Solutions:

a. Be nice to the employees. Recognize that they may not like their jobs. Say, “Hello. How are you?”

b. Do not stand in line until you are ready to order.

c. Avoid drive-thru lines and go inside to order your food directly so that you can see the person you are communicating with.

d. Speed up your order during busy times for the restaurant.
APPENDIX D

PERFORMANCE WORKSHOP POSTER

Practice Speaking English in a Conversation Group

In this group, you will be able to talk about the problems you have when learning and speaking English. You will be able to tell your stories, listen to others’ stories, and create solutions to the group’s problems. Group members will practice conversation and demonstrate their ideas to other members using drama techniques.

HOW DOES THIS HELP YOU?
* you can practice your conversation skills
* you can talk about ideas and issues that interest you
* you can learn techniques that will help you think about ways to solve problems with adjusting to American English culture
* you can participate in research that might help other ESL students

Mondays and Wednesdays
5:30-6:30 p.m.
At the Catholic Life Center

Ross Louis, Facilitator
Any questions? call Ross at 751-7878
VITA

Ross Louis is a native of Arlington, Texas. He graduated from Sam Houston High School in May of 1992 before enrolling at Texas Christian University in the Department of Speech Communication. He graduated in May 1996 with a Bachelor of Science degree in speech communication. In the fall of 1996, he entered the performance studies track of the Master of Arts program in speech communication at Louisiana State University. He completed the degree in December of 1998.

In the fall of 1998, he began coursework toward the doctoral degree in speech communication at Louisiana State University. In addition to his primary interest in performance studies, his coursework included rhetorical theory, cultural studies, pedagogical theory, and sociolinguistics. He received top student paper and top paper awards for research in the areas of instructional communication and language and social interaction at Southern States Communication Association conventions. He also published in The Louisiana Communication Journal. He will receive the Doctorate of Philosophy degree on May 24, 2002 at Louisiana State University’s spring 2002 commencement exercises.