Reader-based drama activities

The Reader-based drama activities that follow move from warm-up activities that can be used as a pace-changer in normal lessons to much longer activities that require children to assign and play roles or complete a drama project. Throughout these pages, the aims for each activity are given, together with a suggested level and age for participants.

It is important to note that drama activities do not always involve speaking lines. It is equally important to spend time working on facial expressions, body language, following instructions and other non-verbal aspects of acting.

Short drama activities

It is important to build up to longer drama activities, particularly if children are unfamiliar with participating in these kinds of activities in class. Before children begin to play characters and scenes from Readers, start off by trying some of the quick and easy drama activities in this guide. These activities can help children:

• Relax, release energy and break down barriers in the classroom.
• Practise the use of gestures, facial expressions and body movements.
• Be more observant.
• Understand and follow instructions.
• Identify with story characters and understand their emotions.

Drama is a natural extension of storytelling.

The drama activities on these pages can be used in reading classes, but they can also be used in other classes to:

• Warm up and energize the class at the start of a lesson.
• Change the pace between other classroom activities.
• Round off the lesson in a motivating way.
Chant, poems and mime (beginning or developing readers, aged 4–7)

**Aim:** to release energy and get children used to miming.

Chant-based activities can be done with older children, but they are particularly suitable for those aged 4–5, who are not yet able to read. For these children, chants can provide a structure which helps them remember key words and actions in the story.

1. Choose a chant or a poem from a Macmillan Young Reader, such as the chant from *The Biscuit Man* (Little Explorers, A) or the poem from *We Love Toys: An Adventure Outside* (Macmillan Children’s Readers, Level 1).

2. Ask children to mime the actions in the chant or poem. They could also use puppets to do the actions. As a class, agree on the best mimes. For example, in the chant from *The Biscuit Man* children could mime the following actions:
   - Running slowly, then faster and faster
   - Trying to catch something
   - Pointing at themselves to indicate ‘I’
   - Eating a biscuit

3. Play the audio. With their books open, children listen, say the chant or poem and do the actions. Repeat a few times until children can perform it easily.

4. Without the audio, say the chant or poem as a class several times, doing the actions. Increase the tempo each time, getting faster and faster until children can only just keep up. Alternatively, you may like to divide the class into three groups. Ask each group to say a different line from the chant, with all children miming the actions. Repeat several times, increasing the tempo.
Conveying emotions

Let’s laugh  (any level and age)

**Aim:** to break down barriers in the classroom and relax the children.

1. Stand children in a circle and explain that you are going to pretend you have just heard a very funny joke.

2. Move into the middle of the circle, and pretend to laugh. (Remember that laughing involves your diaphragm and whole upper body as well as your face.) If you laugh convincingly, children will begin to smile at you. At this point, laugh harder. Laughing and smiling are infectious. Slowly, everyone in the group will begin to laugh.

Pass the emotion  (any level and age)

**Aim:** to get children used to acting different emotions.

The characters in Readers exhibit a wide variety of emotions, and it is important for children to be able to convey these when they act. For example, at different times in *Tom’s Haircut* (*Young Explorers*, Level 1) the characters show worry, hunger, relief, excitement, surprise, anger, sadness and happiness.

1. Ask children to sit in a circle, making sure there is one empty seat or cushion left for you to sit on. Explain that you are going to play a game called ‘pass the emotion’. Pull a few faces and ask children to tell you what the emotion is each time.

2. Explain that you are going to pull a face to show an emotion (for example, a sad, happy or angry face). Tell children that they should ‘pass’ the emotion around the circle. Each child to the right of you will pull the face in turn so that it moves around the group.

3. With older children, sit in the circle and pull one of your faces. The child to your right pulls the same face, and it passes around the circle. When the emotion has begun to move around the group, pull another face. In this way, several ‘faces’ move around the circle at the same time.
Listen and act (any level and age)

**Aim:** to get children used to miming and identifying characters’ feelings.

1. Choose audio for a part of your Reader where the story characters show different emotions. For example, the characters in *Making Music: The Talent Contest* (Macmillan Children’s Readers, Level 4) experience different emotions as they prepare for a talent contest.

2. Brainstorm words to describe feelings in English, such as *happy*, *sad*, *angry*, *bored*, *frightened*, *surprised*, *cold*, *hungry*, *tired*, etc. Write the words on the board. Cue where necessary to make sure that all the feelings the children will identify when you play the audio are up on the board.

3. Ask children to mime each word on the board. For example, they could pull a sad face and rub their eyes for *sad*, shake their fist and frown for *angry*, shiver for *cold* and rub their stomachs for *hungry*.

4. Play the audio. Children listen to part of the story and identify or guess the feelings of the characters.

5. Play the audio again. Children mime the feelings of the characters that they previously identified.

**Following instructions**

**Simon says** (any level and age)

**Aim:** to train children to listen very carefully to instructions.

1. Tell children that they are going to play a miming game called ‘Simon says’. The teacher, a puppet or a child will play the part of ‘Simon’. The mimes in your game can be based on verbs that children know from course books or from a Reader. For example, *We Love Toys: An Adventure Outside* (Macmillan Children’s Readers, Level 1) contains many actions in both the factual text and the story.

2. The class stands in a semicircle, facing Simon. Tell children that Simon is going to call out commands. They should only follow a command if Simon begins the sentence with ‘Simon says’. If Simon calls out a command but doesn’t say ‘Simon says,’ the children must stand still.

3. Simon calls out commands: for example, ‘Simon says ride a horse’ or ‘Simon says swim’. Children mime the actions. But Simon also calls out commands without the words ‘Simon says’. For example: ‘Drink water’ or ‘Throw a ball’. If a child mimes a command without ‘Simon says’, they are out of the game and must sit down.

Try a different, slightly trickier version of this activity by asking Simon to mime one action and say another, instead of beginning some commands with ‘Simon says’. Children must mime the action that Simon says and not the action that Simon does.
Mirror me (any level and age)

**Aim:** to teach children observation and motor skills.

1 Divide the class into pairs, allocating roles A and B for each pair. Explain that child A should mime an action: for example, cleaning their teeth or drinking something. Child B should observe their partner, copying the action as closely as possible – as if they were a mirror. Every time you say ‘change’, child A should mime a different action.

2 As children mime, call ‘change’ from time to time, decreasing the intervals between changes until child B is racing to keep up with child A.

3 Change roles and repeat.

You may want to ask children to mime actions from your Reader. For example, children could mime the everyday actions from the chapter “Daisy’s Day” in *Daisy the Dinosaur* (Little Explorers, A), or mime playing the different musical instruments in *Making Music: The Talent Contest* (Macmillan Children’s Readers, Level 4).

Alternatively, children can mime actions that are not in the Reader, but perform them in the manner of a story character. For example, children could mime everyday actions like getting up, cleaning teeth, getting dressed, etc. in a lazy manner to mimic the characters in *Lazy Lenny* (Young Explorers, Level 1).
**Robots** (developing and confident readers, aged 6 and above)

**Aim:** to get children used to listening to and following instructions.

This activity can be used as a warm-up in any drama class. It is particularly good for children reading *Incredible Sculptures: A Thief in the Museum* (*Macmillan Children’s Readers*, Level 4), a story which involves a remote-controlled robot.

1. Divide the class into pairs, allocating roles A and B for each pair.

2. Explain that child A is a voice-activated robot and child B is the controller. Child A cannot move unless child B calls out a command. You may wish to give children empty matchboxes or a playing card to represent a remote control.

3. Demonstrate the activity with two children. When child B calls out a command such as ‘walk’ or ‘sit down’, child A must perform the action. Make it clear that the actions must be practical and safe to perform in the classroom.

4. Children control their robots in pairs for about two minutes while you monitor. Then change roles and repeat.

**Identifying and portraying characters**

**Who’s speaking?** (developing readers, aged 6 and above)

**Aim:** to help children to listen carefully and identify speakers.

1. Choose a part in your Reader where several characters are speaking in the same scene. For example, this part of the story in *Lights, Camera, Action! On Location* (*Macmillan Children’s Readers*, Level 4).

2. Make enlarged photocopies of pictures from the Reader that clearly show the different characters. Then cut these characters out of their background pictures and stick them up in different places on the classroom walls.

3. Play the audio. Children listen and point to the character who is speaking.

4. Divide the class up into groups, each of which takes one of the roles on the audio.

5. Play the audio again. This time, children speak along with the audio, saying their character’s lines.
Mingle and meet (confident readers, aged 8 and above)

Aim: to get children used to ‘getting into a role’, using their whole bodies to act out a part.

The characters in many stories will have easy-to-mimic body language, either because they are physically different or because they have different personalities. In Elephants: The Elephant’s Friend (Macmillan Children’s Readers, Level 4), each of the five main characters in the story has different body language which can be mimed:

- Ela the elephant (swaying her trunk, moving slowly, trumpeting)
- Jay the stray dog (looking hungry, barking, panting)
- Omar – an old, hunched, dishonest elephant keeper (wearing a hat, walking bent over, looking sad and furtive)
- Bindah – a wise, old woman (wearing glasses, carrying a staff, examining things, looking thoughtful)
- King Daman – a happy and kind king (striding confidently, puffing out his chest, smiling)

1 Discuss the characters in the story, asking the children to describe each character. For example, are they old or young, shy or confident, thin or fat? Ask children to think about how this character moves. Give an example of different body language: for example, how a confident, young person and a shy, old person would walk.

2 Ask children to choose one of the characters, without telling anyone who they are. Children then stand up and circulate around the room, miming their characters. When children meet each other, they try to identify each other’s characters, asking ‘Are you (character’s name)?’

3 Encourage children to act as much as possible, improvising and adding to the agreed actions of their character. For example, in the story above, Ela could use her trunk to eat things, and King Daman could put on and take off an imaginary crown.

If you have a Reader which features different animals, such as How the Camel got his Hump (Explorers, Level 3) or Endangered Animals: A Safari Adventure (Macmillan Children’s Readers, Level 3) it’s possible to do a simpler version of this activity. Ask children to each choose an animal from the Reader, then mingle and mime their animals.