

## I Have a Voice – Lesson's from Bertie

*Russell Lewis*

I was recently invited to introduce and open a season of films in English to which of course I graciously accepted before really registering exactly what I would have to do. Which was introduce the film that was due to screened with a 30min talk relating said film to the ELT classroom. Easy you might say – although if you think about it carefully maybe it isn't!...the audience was to be a mix of Students and teachers with levels of English ranging from B1 to C2 and I was not allowed to talk about the story of the film or its history!... ah yes...now I got you thinking “indeed not quite the walk in the park!”

Solution? Well, let's see...

The Kings Speech has been named and awarded for a variety of reasons and quite rightly so, but lessons for the ELT classroom? Actually, I was quite surprised what I managed to bring to the English Classroom and the skills it developed but in order to do so I had to enter that most horrible of places for most teachers – lessons without grammar and vocabulary!

And indeed even before you comment I can already hear someone screaming in fright through the radio waves of this internet connection!

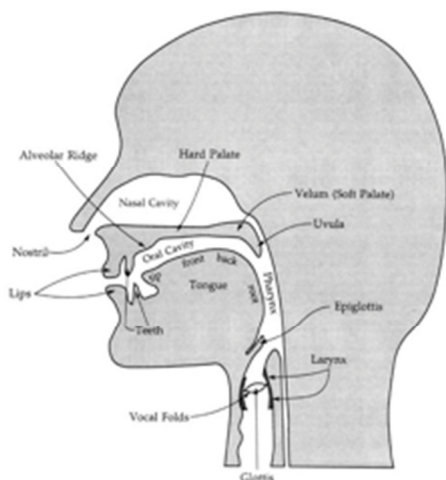
But let me explain.

I believe grammar and vocabulary are important and I do indeed do my fair share. But shocking as it may seem to some of you GRAMMAR AND VOCABULARY ARE NOT THE BE ALL AND END ALL to Language Learning. And yes, dear English Student, I have your attention now, don't I? =D

Let me continue. Language, whether it is L1, L2 or LX, is about communication. A little fact that often can be forgotten in the push to grammatical perfection, certification strategy and word list memorisation. Don't worry, I'm as guilty as the next teacher sometimes. But as I was watching the tale of Bertie's struggle to overcome the repercussions of childhood oppression and become the King and Voice of an Empire, I realised there were indeed lessons as a teacher to learn and also as a student in regards to learning a second language. And here are four lessons I picked out from 'The King's Speech'.

Speech Mechanics:

Have you ever drawn a picture such as this on the board?



Any reason why not? Sounds and phonemes change from language to language and often it is very unnatural for us to reproduce a sound that does not belong to our own mother tongue, examples could be the rolling 'R' in Italian for Germanic speakers or the 'th' in English for Latin speakers or the 'NG' for anyone who Chinese. Rendering the student conscious of how the mouth works on a physical level can aid them in pronunciation. Obviously just showing them a picture in class is not going to make any difference but two little things I like to do, and which students of all ages love are the following:

Working on the 'th' sound in English, I find it very successful to exaggerate the sound and then tone it down. How? By playing a game or better introducing a punishment. And no it's not as harsh as it seems. I introduce the sound by asking my students to all stick their tongues out, but with the mouth closed. They now have to talk for 30 or 60 seconds, depending on the level, like that – tongues out! What it does is exaggerate the positioning of the tongue when the mouth produces the infamous 'th'. To keep things interesting, when a student is talking too much in their mother tongue in my lesson as punishment every time they speak over the following 10 minutes they must do so with the tongue out!

Another physical game you can play – although please not with young children! – came from the auditions done by Marlon Brando for the Godfather – yes indeed! Placing two cotton balls in your cheeks and talking! What this does is physically encourage you to have to speak slowly and exaggerate the pronunciation in order to be understood. The whole point is to render the physical movement of the mouth conscious to the student. Once that has been achieved it is far easier to improve speaking and diction because the student has something tangible to work with.

### Public Speaking

To make a film about public speaking is a pretty tall order. But Tom Hooper with Colin Firth and Geoffrey Rush did do a fantastic job. And all you need to do is google the film to find a million sites talking about the 5 lessons in public speaking the film gives. But I thought there was one part of the whole public speaking thing which really did relate to language learning. And that is the act of speaking in front of others. What got me to thinking about this was watching a lesson in a school not so long ago whereby in preparing students for the speaking part to an Exam, the teacher called the student to the front of the class, sat them in a chair facing the rest of the students and basically said "speak about this picture". I don't think I need to describe the scene to you so let's just leave it at "embarrassing silence followed by frustrated teacher". Using techniques on public speaking is more than anything a great way in building confidence for students speaking in L2 with their teacher, classmates, friends, examiner and most importantly in the REAL world.

### Intonation Pronunciation and Fluency

There were some tremendous scenes in *The King's Speech* regarding these three elements of communicating with the spoken word but I think the one single fun thing we can do in class which really can improve all three skills is 'Learning Accents'. I mentioned this to a teacher the other day and their simple reply was: "Fine, but I'm not mother tongue, so I can't." I was shocked. Basically this teacher just stated that only Mother Tongue English People (preferably Teachers) can 'Do' accents. Are you all crazy????? I mean, accents are based on the skill of listening and reproduction. That single one skill we all did as children when first learning our own mother tongue language, and the reason our accents respect the places we live. So why not get your students working on them in class? Short clips from YouTube are all you need plus a theatrical sense to the activity. It really is that simple. Don't back away as a teacher – even if you aren't good at accents

yourself, learn with your students, enjoy the challenge and become their peer for a moment in the classroom. The benefits not only to their speaking skills but also to the relationship between Teacher/student are immense.

And finally Confidence.

I think The King's Speech, and more specifically Bertie's stammer and the cause of that stammer, really is a lesson in Teacher Behaviour in the classroom and towards our students. Bertie's stammer came from the oppression and continual put-downs received from his father. Let me ask you, Teacher, how often have you entered into your classroom, looked at your students, identified the weaker ones and thought or even said "you are never going to make it, kid"? Our attitude, our belief in our students really does make a massive difference in the success of that student in learning and communicating in a second language. If we are not there, as Lionel was for the King, believing and never giving up that belief in our student then each and every one of our students will gain their voice. Don't be the cause for their failure. Be the cause of their success.