

Book Reviews

12 Short Plays for the Language Classroom and Beyond!

[Chris Parham. Intergraphica Press, 2021. Pp. 94. ¥2,000 + tax. ISBN: 978-4-9911991-0-3.]

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Introduction

While role-play is a common activity utilized in classrooms for learners of English as a foreign language, it can be challenging to find ways to expand role-playing into more meaningful or emotional situations. *12 Short Plays for the Language Classroom and Beyond!* was designed for teachers who are looking to find ways to bring dramatic scenes into the classroom in a way that can also serve a traditional language class format and course curriculum. This text is best suited for high-school and university students, but the language and themes might also be suitable for higher level junior-high students. The plays, written for intermediate-level English language learners, give students the opportunity to explore a variety of situations.

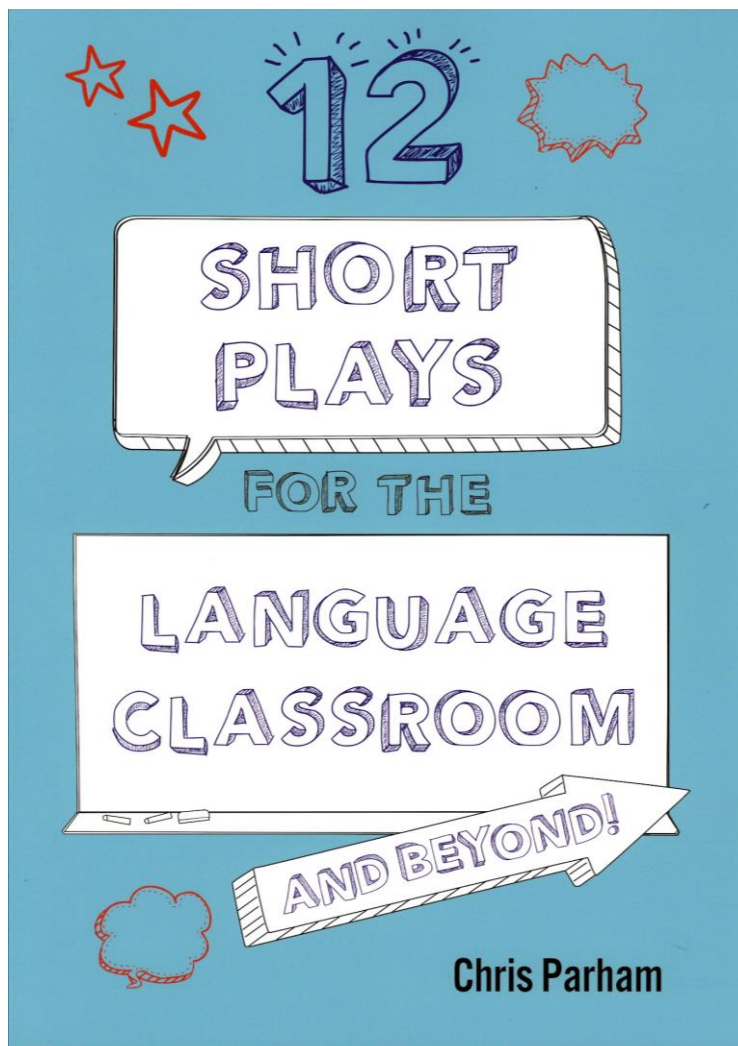
There are not many books available like *12 Short Plays*. Current ELT catalogues in Japan list few textbooks with a dramatic focus, and the ones that are available tend to be aimed at advanced learners. This book seems to be a fun and more accessible alternative.

Description of the Book

This B5-sized, 94-page book consists of 12 short plays. The textbook begins with an author’s introduction followed by 12 units. Each unit has the same layout, beginning with a 3–4-page play followed by a series of language-based extension activities. In the back of the book, you can find an “Approaches to Rehearsal” section with tips for practicing dramatic techniques and presentations. The final page has an answer key for the extension activities. There are no illustrations. Although the book was written and published in Japan, there are no Japanese translations or explanations. The following sections of this review will examine each part of the text in more detail.

Figure 1

Cover of *12 Short Plays for the Language Classroom and Beyond!*



In the introduction, the author describes his background and states that his goal was to write “a collection of short plays for intermediate level language students which could be understood, explored and performed by students in a short space of time.”

Table 1

Contents of *12 Short Plays for the Language Classroom and Beyond!*

Play Title	Situation	Number of Characters	Language Target
The Wedding	Two guests are at a wedding.	2	tag questions
Future Homes	A couple looks at a home with a real-estate agent and a speaking robot.	4	modal verbs, imperatives
The Candidates	A doctor and nurse interview two candidates for employment at a hospital.	4	adjectives, question words
The Headmaster's Office	A headmaster interrogates three students about a prank.	4	spelling, past continuous form
The Flight	A pilot, attendant and two passengers are on a plane.	4	phrasal verbs, preferences
Incognito	A fan discovers a celebrity at a cafe.	2	reported speech

Play Title	Situation	Number of Characters	Language Target
The Buckingham Residence	Five people chat at an upper-class home.	5	prepositions, differences
The Queue	Three people in line are deciding what movie to watch.	4	listing, genres
Stage Directions	A teacher and three students are rehearsing Shakespeare.	4	similes, stage directions
The Great Gourmet Grill Off	Four people are cooking on a live tv show.	4	ingredients, giving instructions
A Tale of Two Umbrellas	A boy and a girl are talking about school and possible romance.	2	dating language, reviewing books
The Top	Two girls are at a shop when a famous, internet influencer arrives.	5	shopping language, millennial slang

The Plays

The plays are written with a language appropriate for high school intermediate-level students of English as a foreign language and would also be suitable in a university setting. The plays present a variety of situations and settings with characters from a wide breadth of backgrounds, jobs and ages (see Table 1). Some of the situations are very friendly and casual, the characters speaking as friends or colleagues. Others are more formal with characters in positions of different social rank, for example, an employer and an employment candidate, or

a wealthy person and their house-staff. This presents opportunities for students to interact with situationally appropriate language. Most of the plays have four speaking characters, while a few of them range from two to five characters. The plays are mostly three to four pages in length. The final play is five pages long. There is some advice in the rehearsal tips in the back of the book with information about how to utilize these plays with a varying number of students.

The Extension Activities

Each unit's extension activities follow the same format: First, there are three typical warm-ups that are thematically related to the play and give students the opportunity to have an easy English conversation as a warm-up. Here is an example from "The Headmaster's Office:"

-What was your favorite subject at school?

-Can you remember a time when you got in trouble at school?

-Who was your scariest teacher?

The questions are simple and can be answered easily by lower-level students but also invite more extensive answers from students who want to challenge themselves to speak more. This is followed by a vocabulary list. Each list consists of 15 words from the story accompanied by two vocabulary tasks. Here is an example:

-Make 5 statements using one or more of the (vocabulary) words in each statement.

-Tell a story about a _____ experience using as many of the words as you can.

The second task is always related to the setting of each unit. These two tasks always follow the same format. These tasks are followed by ten comprehension questions and five true or false statements, all of which can be answered by a careful reading of the contents of the play.

The next two activities reflect the language target of each unit. These activities are generally presented as an explanation of that target language and then a task or tasks to practice it. Here is an example from Unit 1:

Tag Questions

*A tag question is a statement followed by a mini question. There are several tag questions used in this scene, for example, the woman says, 'The bride looked absolutely gorgeous, **didn't she?**' and shortly after that she adds, 'And the flower girl and the little ring boy were so sweet, **weren't they?**' Now try these exercises.*

-Underline the tag questions in the scene.

-Write out three tag questions of your own.

-Ask your partner the tag questions.

Some of these specific activities involve checking the text, others involve dialogue with a partner, and some are more physical and dramatic activities that require getting up and moving around the room. The “Stage Directions” unit introduces technical vocabulary useful for actors’ movement on stage.

The final two tasks are the same for every unit but are situationally specific to the theme of that unit’s play. One task is a role-play section that gives two situations with an opening line of dialogue. Students are expected to improvise these conversations. The second task contains 3 questions for discussion in small groups.

The Approaches to Rehearsal

In the back of the book is the “Approaches to Rehearsal” section. The text suggests some reading exercises with methods for students and teachers to read through the plays. These exercises are designed to give reading opportunities within a larger class, where students take turns reading, without necessarily being assigned characters. There are also methods of reading for pairs or small groups. In addition, there are then questions that offer

students advice on how to gain a deeper understanding of the characters beyond what is written explicitly in the scene. These questions can be answered within a group discussion or as a writing exercise. Finally, there are more tips about stage movement, character physicality, and performance. This section is particularly useful for teachers, providing good ideas for managing the plays and activities in a class.

Evaluation of Textbook

The chosen language is effective and appropriate for teaching high school intermediate or higher-level students of English as a foreign language. Although the plays are written in British English, they are easily accessible to speakers of American English. The situations in these plays are often comical but are occasionally dramatic. The plays effectively present a variety of situations and settings with characters from different backgrounds, jobs, and ages. This diversity of scenes and characters provide many windows into what kinds of English can be used by different kinds of people in a variety of settings. The situations remain grounded enough to provide useful dialogue for learning language that can be used in everyday situations. The situations occasionally touch on romance or conflict but remain tame enough that most students should be able to engage with the scenes comfortably without embarrassment. Teachers should always be thoughtful of their students in that regard.

The goals of this book are to serve as both a traditional textbook and a book of plays for dramatic presentation. As a traditional textbook it succeeds in that goal by being effectively organized into chapters with clear thematic language patterns and exercises that teach them in a variety of different ways. The 12 units could be easily broken down into a one-term course with a focus on the English content of the plays. If a teacher wanted to spend more time with the book, perhaps one class focusing on reading, another on the questions, and third on performance, the book could be utilized over a longer time. The layout of the book allows for a flexibility in utilization within an English course. The consistent length of the plays and content, as well as the set format of extension activities make it ideal for planning. This allows students to become comfortable with the main pattern of the plays and activities while each unit retains new and unique activities to keep things fresh.

As a dramatic collection of plays this text also succeeds in its goals. If a teacher wanted to step out of the more traditional class setting and utilize this textbook in a strictly dramatic format: reading, memorizing, performing, and presenting, these plays would work for that type of class as well. This book would be suitable for experienced teachers of English as a foreign language, whether they have a dramatic background or not, but it might be more challenging to teach for new, inexperienced teachers.

Points for Possible Improvement

The vocabulary lists are useful. A simple dictionary with easy definitions of the vocabulary of each unit could be a nice addition.

The English of each play is noticeably British English. While there is a good variety of characters and settings, perhaps the author might consider using more English varieties as well, perhaps New Zealand English for one play, American English for another.

Many textbooks include CDs or links to audio of the readings. It might be helpful to have dramatic readings the students could access. Although teachers might not want this, as it could interrupt creative interpretation, having the audio available could give the teachers a choice. This could also give teachers a resource for testing listening that is related to the text.

Since the book is targeted to teachers and students in Japan, some Japanese content would be a welcome addition. The author might consider Japanese scene summaries. The “Approaches to Rehearsal” activities would be another section that would benefit from Japanese explanations.

Conclusion

The author has succeeded in his goals. *12 Short Plays for the Language Classroom and Beyond!* is a fun and unique way to bring drama into a course for students of English as a foreign language. The variety of characters and situations keep the book interesting from beginning to end. The activities provide useful opportunities to dig into new vocabulary and language patterns. As a teacher who uses drama in the classroom, I would be happy to utilize

this book myself within my own classes. Although I am not currently teaching a dedicated drama class, I do intend to use a few of the plays from the textbook in my English presentation class. This book is a good choice for teachers of intermediate-level students of English as a foreign language.

Zach Strickland came to Japan 17 years ago and has taught all ages and education levels from infants to seniors. He was a member of the Pirates of the Dotombori bilingual, improv comedy group for 10 of those years and performed across Japan and Asia while also teaching performance workshops. He currently lives with his wife and daughters in Osaka. <st-marcus@mail.koka.ac.jp>

