

A Day in the Life Of ... : A Drama-Based Activity

by **BRITTANY GNAU**

LEVEL: Upper Beginner and above

TIME REQUIRED: It can vary according to class size and students' ability level: expect about 20 minutes to introduce the activity and have students draw rough sketches; 30 minutes for groups to share stories and select a story to act out; and additional time for groups to rehearse and perform their short skits.

GOALS: To create and present a short, mimed drama to the class; to use English to re-create stories using student-made art and context clues; to produce and revise language to accurately describe a specific situation; to collaborate and share; to effectively describe the work of others

MATERIALS: Blank storyboards or paper that can be used to make a simple storyboard (see the sample template in Figure 1); writing utensils; and—if possible—a room or place with enough space for multiple small groups to move around freely

BACKGROUND:

Performance-based activities adopted from dramatic arts and theater education can lower affective and linguistic inhibitions in English language classrooms. These activities can also be motivating emotionally and socially for students, while serving as an alternative assessment for the teacher. Working with drama strategy, scripts, and performance incorporates the four basic language skills,

expands vocabulary development, fosters group participation, engages learners' cultural identities, and compels them to participate in and create their own language experiences.

I pair drama with my lessons and professional-development workshops because it fosters the acquisition and growth of soft skills, focuses attention, promotes group activity, prioritizes student learning over teachers' instruction, and helps create concrete neural pathways that reinforce the learning experience. Perhaps most importantly, theater exercises can give language students a chance to play creatively with new expressions and language content in low-risk contexts.

The teaching tip I share here is based on the activity "A Day in the Life" from the book *Story Drama: Creating Stories through Role Playing, Improvising, and Reading Aloud* by David Booth (2005). The original suggestion proposes envisioning "A Day in the Life" of a key character in a specific drama-resource text that the class is working on; it is meant to be a character-extension exercise for literature study or performance preparation.

The original activity suggestion reads as follows:

A Day in the Life: The class creates a sequence of improvised scenes built around 24 hours in the life of the main character of the drama resource. Groups can prepare scenes revealing

the incidents in the character's life that help explain the inner conflicts that determined the character's actions and the circumstances. The scenes are then shared in a chronological order, and afterwards, students can revise their scenes from the information gleaned from seeing the entire day's events.

Booth (2005, 43)

My adaptation, presented here, involves formal English practice in listening, speaking, writing, and reading, with the addition of drawing, mime, and a gallery walk. The materials needed for this activity are readily available and inexpensive.

PREPARATION

As mentioned above, the required materials are writing utensils and blank storyboards or paper that can be used to make a simple storyboard. Prepare a storyboard template that you can copy and distribute to students or draw on the board for students to copy on their own. Figure 1 shows an example of a template for six scenes, with spaces for quick

sketches of the scenes and a short description of each scene below the sketch.

It is helpful to have a room with enough space for multiple small groups to move around freely in their designated areas, along with sufficient time for preparation and rehearsals.

Being familiar with dramatic conventions can assist students' performance and the audience's reception of their work, but such familiarity is not essential to the success of this activity. However, refined techniques often result in higher-quality performances.

Tips that can elevate student performances include the following:

- keep mimed actions aimed towards the audience,
- make gestures with the upstage hand (that is farthest from the audience) to maximize visibility,
- don't block the audience's view of other performers, and

1 Scene Description: _____ _____ _____	2 Scene Description: _____ _____ _____	3 Scene Description: _____ _____ _____
4 Scene Description: _____ _____ _____	5 Scene Description: _____ _____ _____	6 Scene Description: _____ _____ _____

Figure 1. An example of what a storyboard template might look like at the beginning of the activity

- rehearse the scene at least three times so they will know exactly what to do at performance time!

PROCEDURE:

Step 1

Students begin individually. Ask them to think about a day that stands out in their memory. Tell them that it could be a day that was joyful, embarrassing, scary, exciting, or disappointing. It could also be a day when something funny happened. Ask students to choose a story from that day that they would like to tell. Emphasize that they should choose a story that they will be comfortable sharing with their peers. Ask them to think about these questions: “What important events happened in this memorable story? What happened first? What else happened in the story, up until the end?” Have them think of four to eight important events that were part of the story.

Step 2

When students have their memorable day and important events in mind, ask them to draw

the sequence of events using pictures—but no words. Remind them, “Only draw pictures now. There should be no words on your paper.” The important thing is that, for this step, they are making only a quick cartoon. In Figure 2, I have provided six sketches in my storyboard. Again, I recommend asking your students to produce about four to eight frames of the story’s action; this number of frames will keep the stories at a manageable, but still compelling, length.

In this step, students should just create a visual representation of the order of events. I like to provide them with a sample storyboard to give an example of what they should produce. I usually make the drawing quickly and in the moment, in front of the class, to emphasize that they shouldn’t overthink the art. In fact, sillier pictures often lead to more-interesting conversations in this activity. Figure 2 shows quick sketches that will be the basis of my story.

Step 3

Now it is time for students to share their storyboards with a small group—ideally

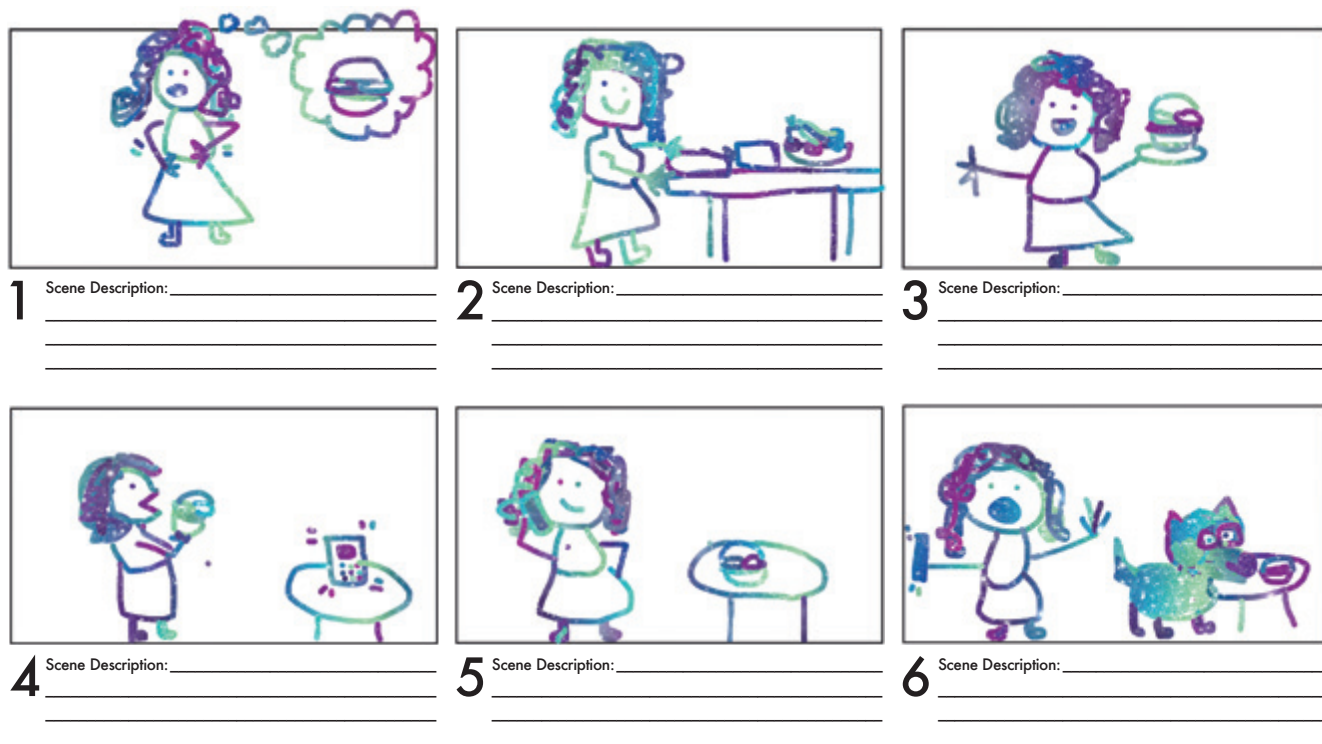


Figure 2. A storyboard with quick sketches that will be the basis of the story

no more than five students per group. At this point, the illustrator should not use words to help their group mates decipher the storyboard; the other group members must try to understand the actions and story simply from the pictures alone. The person who drew each story should refrain from divulging or correcting details until the rest of the group has constructed a guess about what is happening. The illustrator may confirm or deny information but should not freely offer specifics. When the story is confirmed, the group should be able to write a “tagline,” or scene description, below each sketch in the storyboard in a way that connects the narrative and the story. They should write out the text of the storyboard for each student in the group. See Figure 3 for an example.

Step 4

Each group will now choose one story to act out and to perform as a mime for the class. If the chosen story has only one character, consider having members serve as inanimate objects in the scene. My classes have enjoyed student performances of cars, trains, and even washing machines! Or, non-acting members

may take care of any props or set pieces the group might want to use. It is crucial that the audience—the other students in the class—be able to understand all the action without words being spoken. That is because, after each performance, the rest of the class will have to tell/verify the story with the performing group. I usually ask the person whose story was chosen to be the director and make final, creative calls about how the performance is staged. They can either participate on stage or guide the rehearsals without playing a part. Give the groups time to practice. Insist that they practice at least three times. Stress that they should decide as a group about entrances and movements and that each rehearsal should solidify those choices. Invite them again to make strong choices with their movements.

Step 5

After sufficient rehearsal time, the groups take turns performing their skits for the class. When they are finished, the students who were in the audience now have a chance to explain “A Day in the Life Of . . .” Insist that they recount each detail of the scene.

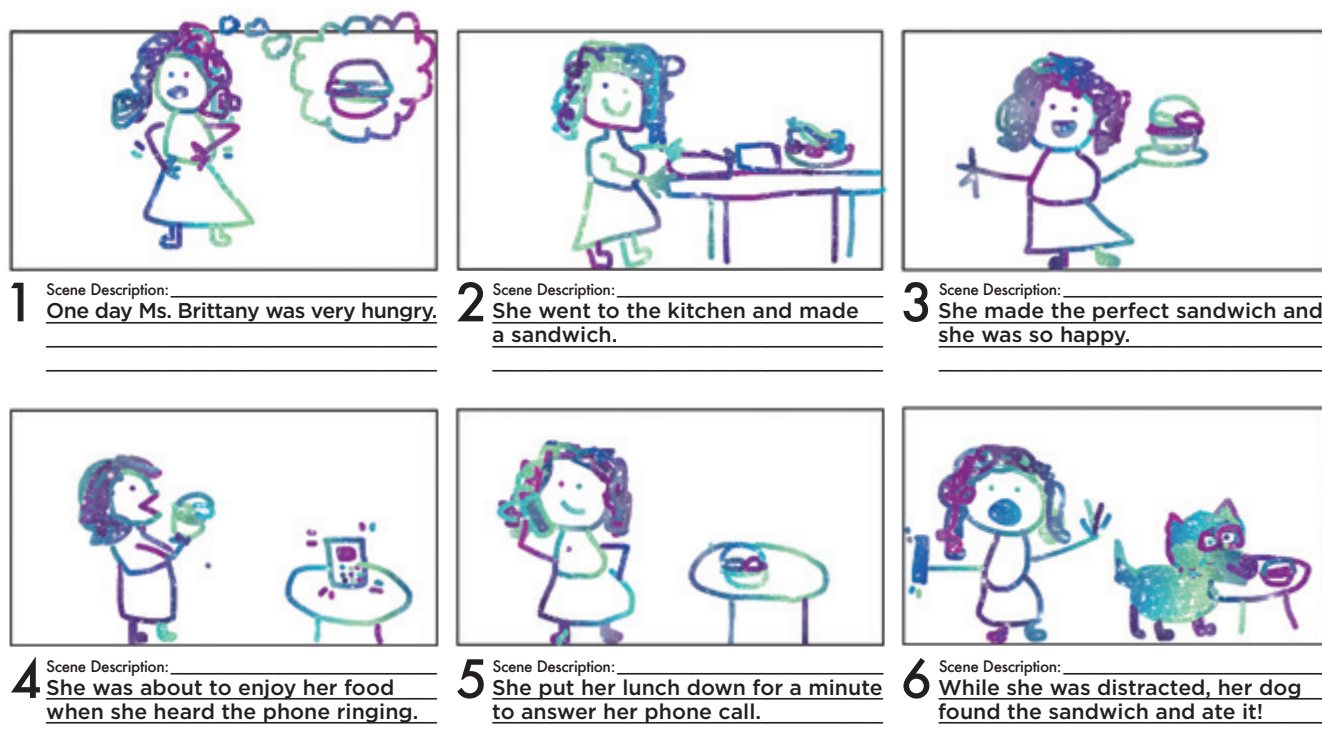


Figure 3. A storyboard with text written for each event in the story

One of the strengths of this activity is the range of skills that it incorporates.

Encourage them to talk through each element of the story with each other. There are usually small details they will neglect to voice or parts they will skip over explaining. Make sure they narrate all the important information to make the story cohesive. If time permits, as each line is narrated and confirmed by the performing group, the teacher (or a student, depending on the language level of the class) can write the story they recount on the board. When the story is written, the class can now read it together. This will make a connection between the lived experience, the auditory and visual, and the written word.

Step 6

When all the groups have performed and all the mimed stories have been inscribed into text, take the remaining cartoons that were not performed and display them around the classroom. The students can take a gallery walk to view the drawings and appreciate the work of their peers. An extra, curious twist is to have them hide the cartoon captions so that the text can be revealed only after students have another chance to guess the stories from the pictures alone.

BENEFITS

- Experiential learning fuses positive experiences and measurable learning gains for students.
- Teachers will be able to forge deeper relationships with their classes.
- The activity creates a low-risk space for innovative language use, creative thinking, and a growing complexity of ideas.
- Students' responses can give us insights into how they are processing life, school, and their personal liberty. We can understand how they see their experiences

as different from or similar to others in their age groups.

- Students have a chance to practice reading, writing, listening, and speaking, and the activity incorporates drawing, collaboration, and performance.

CONCLUSION

One of the strengths of this activity is the range of skills that it incorporates. It begins with nonverbal drawing; students then negotiate meaning through the spoken word before concretizing the narrative in written form. After that, there are mimed performances that can be elicited back again through speaking and into writing. Written narratives can then be read and appreciated by the larger group in a gallery walk. We can see a variety of student skills exhibited in one drama-based English activity. I hope you can try "A Day in the Life Of ..." in your classes and appreciate the results it brings!

REFERENCE

Booth, D. 2005. *Story drama: Creating stories through role playing, improvising, and reading aloud*. 2nd ed. Markham, Ontario: Pembroke Publishers.

Brittany Gnau is an English Language Fellow in Sri Lanka (2023–2024) and served as a Fellow in Tunisia before the pandemic (2018–2020). Her interests include exploring student-centered techniques for language learning and infusing art into educational opportunities.