

# A teacher's guide to EFL theatre in the classroom



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# 1. Children's EFL Theatre Club: The idea behind the curtain

Children's EFL Theatre Club is based on the idea of using Theatre as an activity for students of English as a foreign language. The basic idea is simple. Getting students to practise the English they already know or are learning in the classroom, in a real context. That real context is amateur dramatics, by which I mean short plays specially designed for young learners of English. The plays can be used as an exciting, rewarding and challenging classroom resource in their own right. But the real joy of doing theatre both for the children, as well as the teacher, comes from performing the play in front of an audience. Be it of fellow students, and teachers, parents, or both.

The idea of using drama in E.F.L is not new. There are quite a few excellent resource books available dealing with this area, books which show how drama techniques such as mime, improvisation etc can be incorporated into the classroom. However, in my scripts, I have put the emphasis deliberately on "Theatre" rather than "Drama". The plays are designed to be fun to perform and enjoyable to be watched.

Of course, in reality involvement in Theatre has an immensely positive effect on a student's English. The scripts are deliberately not linguistically challenging, i.e. they are written at a level of English the student will be familiar and therefore comfortable with. (To modify Steven Krashen, one could call it "Input *minus* 1") The linguistic benefit of involvement in Theatre lies in the increased confidence it gives students in their own oral abilities. To some extent this will help improve fluency, but the real benefit is more subtle. When the students are acting out the play, the English is full on. Even low level students, who only have a few lines to say, nevertheless have to listen to and contend with a huge volume of spoken English. They have to follow the script to know when to say their few lines. And the amazing thing is that they can do this. Very low level students become used to a fairly long complicated, linguistically for them, script, and manage to pipe in at exactly the right moment. In fact it may well be that it is the very low levels which feel the maximum benefit of Theatre Club. Students who in the classroom are only (necessarily) expected to produce short utterance can be made to take part in an extended dialogue. Do not overestimate the effect on such young learners. They are, of course, simply repeating a script they have learnt off by heart, but the boost in their confidence cannot be emphasised enough.

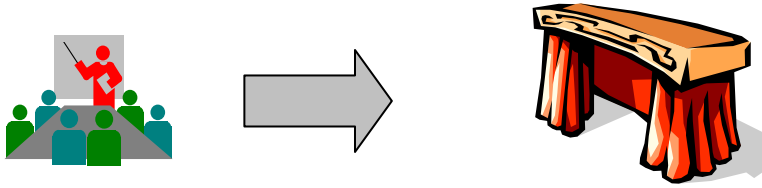
But one can go further still. For me, it is the putting on of a final performance, for another class or even parents, which really makes it worth it. With a little bit of scenery made from painted cardboard boxes, a few well chosen props and the odd sound effect, the final performance can become enormously entertaining and a night that the parents and children won't forget for a long time. Once any teacher starts practising a play, the urge to really turn the final performance into something special is irresistible. We are not just practising English, we are not just going over a script in class. What we are doing from day one is preparing for a thoroughly entertaining show, a night that the students will be utterly proud of. That is EFL Theatre!

To sum up, using theatre in the classroom works well because:

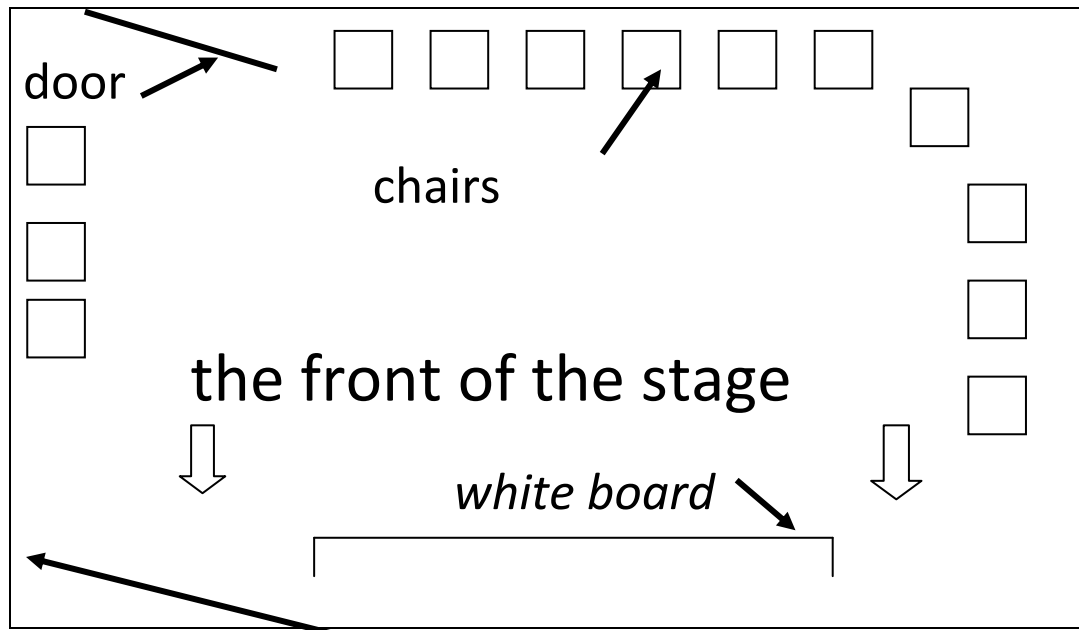
- Children's love of acting and dressing up.
- The language is in a clear context.
- It recycles a wide range of grammar and vocabulary.
- It takes the pressure of the student to invent.
- Repeating the sketch (drilling) achieves a level of fluency *above* what they may be used to.
- The opportunity for humour adds to the enjoyment of the activity
- Aiming at a performance provides a wonderful motivation.
- Performing the play is extremely rewarding for both teachers *and* students!
- Parents love it!



## 2. Turning the classroom into a stage



You can make the whole experience of doing the play much more exciting by treating the classroom as a stage and getting the children to enter and exit on cue. First decide which wall is the front of the stage, for example, where the whiteboard is. The children have to imagine that as they look at the whiteboard they are facing the audience



Students enter/exit from this corner of the classroom

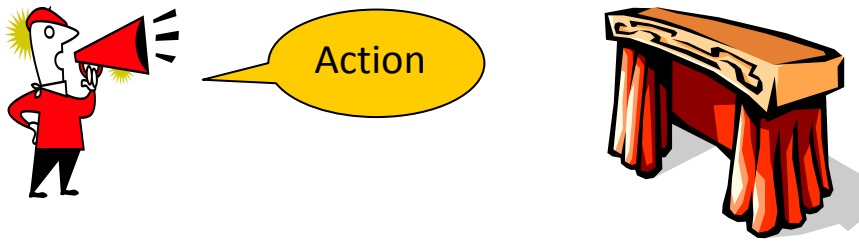


In the above diagram, I made the classroom represent the stage we were actually going to be using. We were going to have to enter the stage from the left-hand corner. So I made all the students come on and off stage from this corner of the classroom. At first the students will find this an odd thing to do, but bear with it. It really will make a huge difference to a performance if they know more or less where they will enter and exit from. It will give them a lot more confidence to move around the stage, and help diminish the inevitable nerves on the night.

It may look a bit odd but it does work. Obviously the ideal situation is to be able to rehearse on the actual stage but it is unlikely teachers will get many opportunities to do this for two reasons. One is the cost of hiring the stage, or hall. The other problem will be organising how to get the students to and from the venue during the normal theatre club time. I have never had more than one chance to rehearse on stage, and have done many plays with no rehearsals on stage at all. The final performance was the first time and so it can be done.

It is a good idea to find out where you can perform the play as soon as possible and go yourself to get an idea of the layout. And it may be the only way for them to learn how and when to enter and exit when they are not actually practising in the theatre.

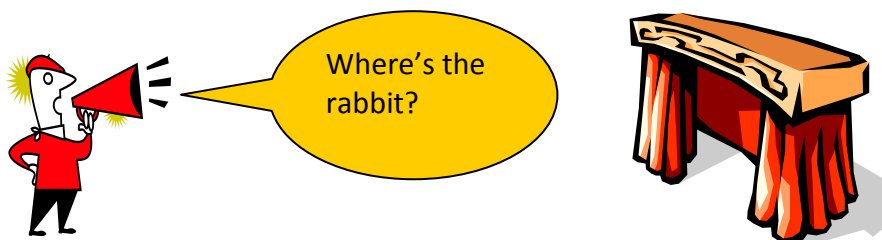
### 3. Tips on getting children acting



We are not talking about achieving Oscar winning performances here. I am no expert in drama. I am simply talking about the simple basics which adults take for granted but young children may not. They need to be reminded. For some it may simply be that they would naturally do these things in their own language but when the play is in a foreign language it takes all their concentration to follow the script, and they simply forget to do some seemingly obvious things. The tips below represent all the things which I have noticed young children tend to need reminding about.

- Practise entering
- Practise exiting
- Never speak with their back to the audience
- Use gestures and intonation to add dramatic effect (see *Mini-sketches for getting children acting* for a useful resource)
- When they are on stage they must always act, even if they aren't saying anything.
- Speak slowly
- Project their voices

#### 3.1 Practise entering and exiting



Where are they entering from? How do you want them to enter? Walking? Running? Are they looking for something? Are they lost – looking around? Are they running away? Should they look scared? Are they deep in conversation?

Where do they go? To the centre of the stage? To the far end – maybe to leave lots of space in the centre of the stage if lots of children are about to charge on. When they exit, where will they exit to - left or right? How will they exit? Walk? Run? Excited? Scared?

#### 3.2 Never speak with their back to the audience

Many children will forget to do this. Don't worry; just keep drumming it into them! See *Turning the classroom into a stage* for ideas on how to deal with this.

### 3.3 Use gestures and intonation to add dramatic effect (see *Mini-sketches for getting children acting* for a useful resource)

Probably because they are concentrating so much on the words (being a foreign language) most children tend to stand very stiffly, arms at their sides – looking like robots. The problem is it looks very boring from the point of view of an audience. It is incredible the visual difference a few simple gestures make. Most of the time I simply get children to use their hands and arms to add a bit of life to their performance.

I usually demonstrate this with an example. I enter and say “Hello, how are you? My name is Dominic.” In a very monotone voice, standing stiffly with no gestures. I exaggerate this a lot. The children usually laugh – which is good because they can see that what I am doing is not very interesting. I then repeat this using intonation and using gestures with my hands. They can immediately see the difference such gestures make.

### 3.4 When they are on stage they must always act, even if they aren't saying anything

When not speaking, many children will simply stand there, with a blank expression. This is natural since up until now they have been focusing on a script, and the script does not usually mention what every must act. Scripts tend to focus every one's attention on whoever is taking part in the dialogue at that moment. The problem is that when there are 7 or 8 children standing on a stage looking blank whilst 2 other children hold a dialogue it looks boring. They 7 or 8 are not invisible, the audience can see them and so by not acting they detract from the overall effect. If something exciting is happening on the stage, the other children need to react to it. If their friend is about to be eaten by a monster, they should look worried, or scared. If they can react like this, the visual effect is impressive. The whole scene comes much more alive. Don't worry, they will need to be constantly reminded of this. I usually make a joke about it, imagining my friend is about to die and I am looking bored. They always see how funny this is and realise that they need to react in some way to what is happening.

### 3.5 Speak slowly

“Really?” I hear you say. “But my students usually speak very slowly anyway!” I know. I don't understand it, but it is a phenomenon that I have seen in almost every child I have ever done theatre with. Once they have learnt their lines, children tend to garble them out very quickly. In a native speaker this might not be so bad, but when we take into account the fact that their pronunciation will usually be not so perfect (good, but not excellent – of course!) the result can be that what they say becomes incomprehensible. It can be easy for teacher's to not notice this. The teacher knows what they are saying because the teacher knows the script. We need to get used to listening as if we were someone who has no idea of the script – i.e. someone in the audience. You will often have to get the children to really slow down. Slowing down also, by the way, tends to make what they say sound more dramatic. An added extra!

### 3.6 Project their voices

This is only important if you want to perform the play in a larger space, for example in a hall, but you are practising in a smaller classroom. Children will not automatically speak louder when in a big space. What can be perfectly audible in the classroom is usually inaudible in a hall. There are a few tricks for getting children to speak up. Emphasis how speaking in a loud voice is not necessarily the same as shouting.

1. Put two children at opposite ends of a class, or corridor, and ask them to have a conversation.
2. Put one child outside the class and close the door and make them talk to someone inside the class.

## 4. How to create a simple play

The idea is to take the main grammar and vocabulary points of a book/syllabus and construct a very simple and short (5 to 7- minute) play. The secret is to keep the story and the dialogue as simple as possible so as to allow the students to learn it off by heart.

### 5 simple steps

1. Think of a story theme (Cowboys, aliens, knights and dragons etc).
2. Think of a story outline. Who comes and meets who? What are they trying to do? Aliens visit a school? A boy meets a princess and a dragon? Robbers try to steal a diamond? Some children find a treasure map? Break down your story into between 3 and 5 parts. These become the scenes.
3. Think of the first scene which introduces the characters. For example, the baddies. Think of a dialogue using the language, that could be part of this story. Think of the language the students already know!
4. Now build more scenes around *this* scene and the language *already identified*. If scene 1 introduces the baddies scene 2 can introduce the goodies. They then meet, maybe at the end of scene 2. The baddies steal something, kidnap someone or cause some other problem, which is resolved in scene 3. You can build up the script as you go along. See **Doing plays without a script**.
5. Add extra scenes such as in a restaurant or shop. Have children act out a simple dialogue using functional language for a shop or restaurant, and then have the baddies or alien enter.

Here is the first part of a play called "**The Diamond of Wimberly Boo**". The children had been studying comparatives and superlatives, be going to, and possessive pronouns. The interview part with the police also allows for revision of any questions the children know.

#### Scene 1 *In the museum*

*(Enter thieves)*

Pete: *(Sneezing)* Achooooo!

Mr Black: Shhhhhh!!!!!!

Mary: Where are we?

Mr Black: We are in the museum.

Jane: What's this? *(Pointing to the diamond)*

Mr Black: This is the diamond of Wimberly Boo. This is **the most beautiful** diamond in the world.

Pete: It is **the most expensive** diamond in the world.

Mary: It is **the biggest** diamond in the world.

Jane: It is **the heaviest** diamond in the world.

Mr Black: Yes, and we are going to steal it. I am **the most intelligent** thief in the world.

Pete: I am the fastest thief in the world.

Mary: You? I am **the fastest** in the world.

Jane: You, ha, ha, ha. I **am the fastest** thief in the world.

Pete: I am **faster than** you!

Mary: I am **faster than** you!

Jane: I am **faster than** you and you!

Pete: I am.

Mr Black:  
and I am Be quiet! I am **the fastest** thief in the world, I am **the most intelligent** thief in the world  
**the best.** Come on, take the diamond. Look, children, hide.

**(they take the diamond and hide)**

**(Enter Teacher and students)**

Teacher. Ok, be quiet, be quiet.

John: Can I go to the toilet?

Teacher: No. This is the famous diamond of Wimberly Boo. Who can tell me about this diamond?

Wendy: It is **the most important** diamond in the world.

Julie: It is **the heaviest** diamond in the world.

Sara: It is **the biggest** diamond in the world.

Bob: It is **the most beautiful** diamond in the world.

Bill: It is **the most expensive** diamond in the world.

Teacher: Correct. It is expensive, it is big, it is beautiful, and it is...gone!!!!

Everyone: Gone?

Teacher: The diamond is gone! Where is the diamond? Oh no, call the police

Wendy: **(Speaking into her mobile phone)** Police, police, come quickly, there has been a robbery!

**(There is the sound of a police siren and then the Police enter)**

Inspector Big: Hello.

Teacher: Hello

Inspector Big: My name is Big, Inspector Big.

Sergeant Green: My name is sergeant Green.

Sergeant Blue: My name is sergeant Blue.

(The Inspector and the sergeant(s) now ask the children and the teachers some basic questions:

For example: *What's your name? Where do you live? What is your favourite colour? Can you swim?*

The students invent their own script at this point depending on what language they know

*(The children and the teacher all stand in a line, slightly facing the audience)*

Inspector Big: **Who is this?**

Teacher: This is Emily.

Inspector Big: Where do you live?

Emily: I live in....

Inspector: Do you speak Spanish?

Emily. Yes, I do.

Sergeant Green: **Who is this?**

Teacher: This is John.

Sergeant Green: What school do you go to?

John: I go to .....

Sergeant Green: What do you do in your spare time?

John: I .....

*Etc...*

## 5. Doing a play without a script

I have done various plays with my primary school classes (average number of children: 25) over the last few years without using a script. This of course saves photocopying but it also allows you to adapt/make it up as you go along. Here are 4 simple steps to creating a play without needing a script.

**Step 1:** Think of a story theme (Cowboys, aliens, knights and dragons etc). Lets try knights and dragons (St George and the dragon)

**Step 2:** Think of a rough outline of the story. Think in terms of scenes: What happens in scene 1, what happens in scene 2, etc. I usually try to break down the story into 4 or 5 scenes. For example: A play with knights, princesses, witches - St George and the Dragon

**Scene 1** - In the Forest: George and friends meet princess and friends. Lots of chatting, asking simple questions or making simple statement (Look, a bird is flying). The dialogue does need to tell the story. Then some witches turn up and tell him he can't marry her. The witches decide to marry/kidnap the princess.

**Scene 2** – In a restaurant. Some people are eating in a restaurant when a dragon turns up.

**Scene 3** – In the castle: The people from the restaurant run to the castle to tell the Queen about the dragon. The Queen decides to hold a competition to see who can kill the dragon.

**Scene 4** – In the village: The dragon scares of some knights who read about the competition. The witches capture the dragon and use it to capture the princess and her friends and take them to their castle.

**Scene 5** – In the witches' castle: The witches lock up the princess and her friends and everyone else in the play turns up, there is a big (choreographed) fight, and George saves the day.

or...

**Scene 1** - In the Forest: George and friends meet princess and friends. Lots of chatting, asking simple questions or making simple statement (Look, a bird is flying).

**Scene 2** – Witches come on, find a dragon, decide to kidnap princess.

**Scene 3** – In the village: princess goes shopping, meets lots of people selling things in shops. Witches come and kidnap princess.



**Scene 4** – In the witches' castle: The witches lock up the princess and her friends and everyone else in the play turns up, there is a big (choreographed) fight, and George saves the day.

**Step 3:** Now act out scene 1 and together with the children, think of simple things they can say. They can introduce themselves to the audience "Hello everyone, my name is Zog", they can ask each other questions - any questions "How old are you?" "Do you like apples?" It doesn't matter. Most of the dialogue will be the simple language your students already know. You only need a few lines here and there to actually keep the story going. For example, someone says, looking at the computer, "Oh no, Bongo the bad has escaped from prison" "Oh no, where is he?" "He is on a planet Earth" "Let's go to planet Earth" etc. Keep it simple!

**Step 4:** Repeat with the other scenes and practice them. Watch to see if anyone is not coping with their lines. If necessary, make them easier, or get another child to say the same thing just before. For example, "Let's go to planet Earth" "Yes, lets go to planet Earth"

Although you don't need a script, here are some more detailed notes about a play my class performed with a script. I wrote up the "script" after the performance to give a more detailed idea of how I built up the whole play from simple bits of dialogue.

Here are some simple outlines of plays. Just add a little dialogue, and off you go!

A play with aliens - The Space Detectives

**Scene 1** - In space. We meet the alien Space detectives who are looking for the galactic criminal Bongo the Bad.

**Scene 2** - In a village on planet Earth. Some people are shopping, chatting etc. A robber come on and robs them. They call the police. The police arrive, try to stop the robber but can't because he is too powerful - he is in fact Bongo the bad!

**Scene 3** - The space detectives land and look around. Bongo sneaks on and steals their hats/guns/sandwiches while they aren't looking and runs off chased by detectives.

**Scene 4** - in the forest. Police look for Bongo. They find him. Bongo is about to shoot them when the Space detectives turn up and save the day.

## Using radio plays

Radio plays are 2-page sketches designed to be recorded on tape/Dictaphone, although they can be used as short 5 minute plays which can be performed during an end of year show. In this case, the sound effects could be omitted. The children sit in a circle and read from the script. Allow 10 to 15 minutes for the children to practise before recording. If you have a large class, divide the class into smaller groups and let each group practise separately. The teacher can then record the children. One group could be recorded on one day and another group in the next class, for example.

### Recording the children

The teacher may need to hold the Dictaphone and move it closer to each child as they speak. It may be necessary to pause the recording after one child speaks if the next child to speak is sitting very far away. The children make the sound effects themselves. Stamping on the floor for footsteps, or making strange noises for a spaceship. A special effect CD could also be used by isn't necessary.

Playing them back becomes a wonderful listening exercise in itself. I have never seen my children listen so intently to a listening! These sketches could also be performed in front of an audience.

## 6. Putting on a show

Here are a few options for shows:

1. One performance for parents and teachers. Duration 30 minutes. The plays last about 20 minutes. However, it is best to allow time for late arrivals, and hiccups between scenes. For a small show with a 20-minute play, advertise it as lasting 30 minutes. For example, Show starts 7:00, finishes at 7:30.
2. A play + a couple of songs sung by students from other classes in the language school.

This would need to be co-ordinated with and done with the consent of both the Directors of Studies and the teachers concerned. A good way to go about this is to sound teachers out first about their willingness to practice a couple of songs over a 2/3-month period. Then brainstorm some possible songs. Favourite among the younger learners have been *"If you're happy and you know it, clap your hand..."* or *"Heads, shoulders knees and toes"* for example. Older/higher level students might enjoy *"Stand by me"* or *"Wonderful World"* by Ben E. King. Give the teachers as much time as possible (At least 2 months) so that practising the songs in class doesn't interfere with the syllabus they have to get through.

3. If you have enough students, combine two plays (as long as they are doing different plays) in one show. Duration of show: 1 hour maximum

As each play is only about 20 minutes, this makes a fun evening which isn't too long for students or audience. You could also combine a couple of songs by other students (see above) as this will only add 10 minutes or so the length of the show.

4. A show put on in the summer could be turned into a general **End of Term School Show** with teachers performing short five-minute sketches. In my school, this has proved very popular. Timing wise, it is best not to exceed an hour and a half. Any longer would get a bit boring for the children and parents, so when planning such a show, limit those involved to what can be fitted into this time frame. Typically, our end of term show includes two Theatre club groups (1 hour), 2/3 short teacher sketches (Total 15 minutes) and one or two songs by younger learners (less than ten minutes) Total time: 1½ hours

As early as possible you need to choose a venue and a suitable date for the show.

### Factors to take into account

#### Venue.

The venue needs to be somewhere with a lot of space. You will need a stage area, space for the children to get ready, store props, a waiting area for those off stage and room to seat the audience. The size of the audience will of course depend on what type of show you opt for. With a Theatre Club of 14 children you can easily expect 30 to 40 parents/grandparents. You will need to think about seating for teachers who often come to watch their students or support you, as well as other invited children. If you have two Theatre club groups, one group will need seats whilst the other is performing the other group.

You may find such a space in your school. Alternatively, you may be able to find a small local hall with a small stage, for example, a local school hall. Many local primary or secondary schools will hire out their hall cheaply. Alternatively, local community halls may be available, sometimes for free. If you don't know of any venues, ask the secretaries or admin staff in your school, as they will likely know of local possibilities.

#### Choose the date

Once you have found a venue, the next thing is to fix a date. Generally, the plays included take about three to four months to rehearse. They are designed so that two plays can be performed over a nine-month "course".

If the term starts in October, mid February would be an ideal time to put on the first play. The second play could then be scheduled for June, giving them time to learn their lines over Christmas or Easter.

In order to choose the exact day you will need to take into account some of the following factors.

- Which day of the week?
- Sunday to Thursday may be difficult if the students have school the next day.
- Saturdays may be difficult if families tend to go away at the weekends.
- Fridays tend to be the best days but this will depend on local circumstances.
- Once you have chosen a possible date, check that there are no local or national holidays or festivals at the same time, since the children and/or families may not be free.
- If it is at the end of term, be careful that the families won't have already gone on holiday. For this reason, it might be best not to choose the very last day of term.
- Are there any school exams at your language school that week? Try to avoid having the show the same week as exams, since the students won't have time to spend learning/revising for both at the same time.

Once you have finally chosen a date, book the venue as soon as possible.

## Telling the parents

Once you have chosen the date and booked the venue, send a letter to all the parents of the students in the Theatre Club informing them of the date. This should be done immediately. The last thing you want is three weeks before the show one of the cast suddenly telling you they won't be there because they'll be on holiday! Of course, this can never be ruled out, and there have been occasions when teachers have had to go on at the last minute and be "Policeman number 2" because the real Policeman number 2 has gone on holiday. But the sooner you advise parents of the date, the less likely this will happen. If you do it early enough you may have time to change the date. Once one of my key characters found out he couldn't be there on the day. I managed to find out that we could have the venue the following week. The entire theatre club had to immediately ask their parents if they too would be here and get back to me the following week. In the end we managed it, but only because it happened two months before the show.