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# ‘Call Me by My Name’: inclusive actor training for second language users

Evi Stamatiou 

Among efforts to decolonise and decenter the actor training studio, practitioners and scholars consider the barriers for students who speak English as a Second Language (ESL) and undertake text-based actor training in English. This essay draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of *linguistic capital* and *habitus* to examine the agency of ESL student actors in developing their acting skills in distinct ways, often against their embodied linguistic structures. Through a phenomenological assessment of how the *linguistic habitus* and *capital* of the student work in tandem with their training *habitus* and *capital*, the essay highlights the inevitable anxiety involved. A participatory action research model invites ESL acting students to embrace and lead the development of their acting skills alongside their language skills. Actionable interventions, such as the icebreaker exercise ‘Call Me by My Name’, prompt actor training institutions to develop pedagogies and curricula that acknowledge the individualised needs of ESL students and celebrate their contribution to English-speaking training. Giving the agency to ESL students to shape English-language actor training creates standards for what might be inclusive actor training for ESL student actors.

**Keywords:** actor training, Bourdieu, English as second language, anxiety, inclusive pedagogies

## Introduction: ESL competence as performative and social sign

Among efforts to decolonise and decenter the actor training studio, practitioners and scholars consider the barriers for second language users who undertake text-based actor training in English. Innovative and inclusive pedagogies draw on cultural studies and second language acquisition research to support ESL users in transcending barriers concerning dispositions about desirable accents; how these relate to career prospects; developing attitudes that challenge stereotypical representations of

second language users in characters and narratives, and; the difficulties with accessing their emotional range when performing in a second language. The unreasonable Standard American Speech expectations 'being upheld by theatre companies, as well as by critics and audiences' (Espinosa and Ocampo-Guzman 2010, 150) have led to 'sound erasure and gatekeeping for the Latinx actor' (Santos DeCure 2023, 117). More recently, the experience of Asian American bilingual students was juxtaposed with the experience of an Asian student, finding that the Mandarin accent of the latter limited her casting opportunities (Coronel 2023, 50). Innovative pedagogies have utilised and approached a second or native language as a superpower (Landon-Smith 2020) and enriched standard English with local dialects (Richardson 2023).

The English language overpowers ESL users, whose social power is measured against the abilities of native speakers to speak the language. In the UK, ESL competence is highly political, and associated with visa rights and naturalisation processes. However formal, migration processes have a low threshold, allowing people with multiple ESL abilities to live and work in the UK and become British through naturalisation. But the expectations of the acting industry are much higher, which is easy to argue considering the lack of ESL users among mainstream actors in the Anglo-Saxon world even though the industry projects to global audiences. The acting industry, more than other working sectors, is led by and perpetuates the deeply held dispositions concerning who has the right to be and become British. UK actor training unknowingly perpetuates industry discrimination, while shamelessly profiting from ESL users from around the world who register to develop their craft.

The ethical dimension of tackling the discriminated position of the ESL user becomes clearer when we consider that the linguistic characteristics of the student are part of their identity and ethnicity. Stuart Hall defines ethnicity as 'cultural features – language, religion, custom, traditions, feeling for 'place' – which are shared by people' (2003, 297). Patrice Pavis offers a nuanced categorisation of practitioners' efforts to engage with multiple cultures using the terms *intracultural*, *transcultural*, *ultracultural*, *pre-cultural*, *postcultural* and *metacultural* (1996, 5–8). These models of engagement have inspired a variety of theatre forms but sit outside the mainstream acting industry where many ESL users who enrol on acting courses wish to work.

Prompted by a phenomenological understanding that the experience of the ESL actor is dominated by increased levels of anxiety, the first part of this essay exaggerates the position of the ESL student actor as a social agent who chooses to train in English. It draws on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of *linguistic capital* and *habitus* to examine the agency of ESL student actors in developing their acting skills alongside their embodied linguistic structures. The second part of the essay suggests how the actor training field can start addressing such anxiety. It presents a participatory action research model that was developed as part of a screen acting class at the University of East London. Seven ESL students from the 2022-2023 cohort on the MA Acting for Stage & Screen were interviewed about how their individualised approaches to text-based acting interfere with

their *linguistic capital* and *habitus*. The third part of the essay presents how the student interviews prompted substantial adaptations of my actor training practices, from recruitment to developing showcasing material, including the original icebreaker exercise ‘Call Me by My Name’ that is illustrated in a recording with the 2023-2024 cohort. It invites actor training institutions to develop pedagogies and curricula that actively embrace cultural uniqueness in the training of ESL students, facilitating the development of their acting skills alongside their language skills.

### **Background: the anxiety of acting and training in a second language**

Drawing on how my experience as a native speaker of Greek who pursued English-speaking roles and trained in English resonates with the experience of my students who are training in a second language, I share my phenomenological understanding of what it feels to act, and train, in English for the second language user. The struggle of the second language user in actor training is illustrated in my below email communication with my student Qi Chen (the student asked me to use her real name), a native speaker of Mandarin who speaks English as a second language. Following a group email which invited me to a student show, I had the following private exchange with Qi Chen:

**Me:** Hi all, this looks amazing I wish I could attend! Break a leg!

**Qi Chen:** Dear Evi, I'm sorry to hear that, I hope your leg gets better soon! Take care of yourself.

**Me:** ‘Break a leg’ is an expression that means ‘good luck with the show’ it’s specific for theatre ☺

**Qi Chen:** Dear Evi, Oh, Evi... .. Oh My God! Somebody help me! OK, calm down. OK, I understand, I deeply remember! That’s embarrassing. Thank you for telling me, otherwise I would have thought you broke your leg. Thank you. (personal communication 2023)

Qi Chen is a highly intelligent and talented Chinese woman studying acting at the postgraduate level. She moved to London to pursue an acting career in the English-speaking world after an impressive career across media in China. Her last email resonated with me because, as a second language user myself, I have also felt embarrassed by similar miscommunications, which I experienced as anxiety and panic: I held my breath; a burning sensation started from my legs and rose to my cheeks; I became unusually aware of the silence around me that it felt deafening; I burst into laughter as a way to give myself time to explore what my interlocutor thought about my flop. Being on the other side of this communication, and as a supportive teacher, it crossed my mind that I shouldn’t clarify the misunderstanding to save Qi Chen the stress. But, drawing from my experience, Qi Chen would face the same phrase again and realise the mistake. Then the stress might have been worse because not only did she flop in front of another person, but she would retrospectively realise the mistake in our communication above, and even worry about

all the potential times that she misunderstood and people didn't clarify but only formed opinions without giving her the chance to, at least, laugh her frustration off.

Incidents like the above have been the tip of the iceberg of the anxiety I experienced as a second language user in training and later in my search for acting jobs. I studied and mastered theatre jargon and matched the knowledge of the average native speaker of English around me. But there have been other issues more persistent, such as improvisation, my body language and how it connected with my speech. The worst has been my accent, which despite study and persistent efforts and fifteen years of living in England, hasn't matched the competence of the average native speaker around me. It has changed and evolved but hasn't been mastered.

That mastery of the language expected in English-speaking roles hinders the acting process, a shared experience among second-language users. In the words of Penelope Cruz:

When I work in a different language, I feel the extra tension - of working with facial muscles that are not used to making those sounds in English or other languages, and of having your teacher next to you – it's very much like a torture sometimes, the process of trying to get rid of an accent. So you get that tension from the preparation, and tension is not a friend of acting. So, of course I feel very relieved working in my language, of not having that obstacle there that can often close off the emotions. So this is what I'm doing, working on it so that I can work on an English-language set with more freedom, without thinking about the dialogue so much. (Delgado 2006)

Among multiple accolades, Cruz won an Oscar and a BAFTA for Best Supporting Actress in 2009 for her performance in Woody Allen's film *Vicky, Cristina, Barcelona* (2008). She mostly performed the screenplay in English, but during emotional scenes, she improvised in Spanish lines that Allen only 'half-understood' (Perriam 2019, 184). This combination reinforced her 'powerful presence in English-language cinema' but with the choices in her physical score considered as 'attractive oddities' (Perriam 2019, 192), and therefore 'othered' among outstanding performances. Even when praised, she is 'othered' which perpetuates the anxiety cycle that is illustrated in her testimony that reports 'extra tension', which implies extra emotional labour for the ESL actor; 'having your teacher next to you', which implies interdependence and the voice coaching as policing and censorship; 'a torture sometimes, the process of trying to get rid of an accent', which illustrates how harming accent coaching can be for the ESL actor; 'you get that tension from the preparation, and tension is not a friend of acting', which illustrates the persistent emotional labour for the ESL user who sees the usual joy of acting taken away from them; 'that obstacle there that can often close off the emotions', which suggests that the ESL actor needs to find other ways to access their emotions than the ones mastered in their native language; and, 'thinking about the dialogue so much', which suggests hyperconsciousness. Cruz's desire

for ‘an English-language set with more freedom’, reflects the experience of many ESL actors, highlighting that the English-language set is particularly stressful and discriminates against ESL users.

### Language as a both social and performative sign

Because anxiety and stress disorders are often associated with discrimination and unfair treatment, and the ESL student actor experiences both anxiety and unfair treatment, I chose Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social power to illuminate the matter. Bourdieu’s theory of language as an instrument of power (Bourdieu and Thompson 2009) helps us recognise that ESL student actors are in a disadvantaged position in the English-speaking acting industry, and in English-speaking actor training which is projected to the industry most of the time. Bourdieu discusses that language has *symbolic power* (Bourdieu and Thompson 2009), rather than real power and therefore is a social sign. At the same time, it plays a crucial role as a performative sign for the actor, affecting their ability to get acting jobs and therefore both the actor’s physical and emotional well-being. This highlights the importance of addressing the needs of all ESL students who enrol themselves on English-language actor training courses.

Bourdieu argues that language is not autonomous, as it is considered in modern linguistics, but heteronomous: it is structured by and structures multiple anthropological, political and geographical parameters (Bourdieu and Thompson 2009, 33). Bourdieu summarises his core argument as follows:

Although it is legitimate to treat social relations – even relations of domination – as symbolic interactions, that is, as relations of communication implying cognition and recognition, one must not forget that the relations of communication *par excellence* – linguistic exchanges – are also relations of symbolic power in which the power relations between speakers or their respective groups are actualized. (Bourdieu and Thompson 2009, 37)

If all language is a means of conveying social power between groups that have similarities, then the competence to speak in English during acting and actor training interactions conveys power between native speakers of English and ESL users. English-language actor training is projected to the English-speaking industry, where ESL student actors have lower chances of being directly employed after graduation. This means that the linguistic competence of any ESL student in the actor training studio automatically classifies them according to their prospects of working in the English-speaking acting industry, which affects all their interactions during their studies and beyond.

The social significance of ESL competence in the acting studio can be highlighted through Bourdieu’s concepts of the *linguistic habitus* and the *linguistic market*. Bourdieu suggests that:

linguistic utterances or expressions are forms of practice and, as such, can be understood as the product of the relation between a linguistic habitus and a linguistic market. The linguistic habitus is a sub-set of the dispositions which comprise the habitus: it is that sub-set of dispositions acquired in the course of learning to speak in particular contexts (the family, the peer group, the school, etc.). These dispositions govern both the subsequent linguistic practices of an agent and the anticipation of the value that linguistic products will receive in other fields or markets—in the labour market, for example, or in the institutions of secondary or tertiary education. The linguistic habitus is also inscribed in the body and forms a dimension of the bodily hexis. (Bourdieu and Thompson 2009, 17)

In the actor training studio, each participant brings their own *linguistic habitus*, or dispositions about the use of the English language, depending on their upbringing, schooling and life experience beyond schooling. This suggests that trainers and trainees with backgrounds with similar linguistic conditions, for example, whether coming from an English-speaking family/schooling, a bilingual family/schooling or an ESL family/schooling, will have *linguistic habitus* with some similarities but also substantial differences. However, all participants confront the same linguistic market in the English-language actor training institution which adheres to certain traditional expectations, such as the switching among English accents to show versatility. Such key biases of the English-language linguistic market discriminate against ESL student actors.

ESL applicants to English-language actor training courses that come from around the world and speak any native language other than English are often oblivious to the *linguistic habitus* of the native speakers that teach on such courses. At the same time, having absorbed the expectations of the *linguistic market*, native speakers who train actors often unconsciously expect ESL student actors to obey the standards expected by the English-language acting curriculum and industry. In Bourdieu's words:

systematic discrepancies may arise between linguistic markets and the forms of censorship associated with them, on the one hand, and the capacities of individuals from differing social backgrounds are able to relate to linguistic markets, as well as to themselves as producers for these markets, in differing ways. (Bourdieu and Thompson 2009, 21)

For example, in my experience as an External Examiner of a BA (Hons) in Acting in London, I noticed that a second-year student and native speaker of a Slavic language who consistently achieved first-class marks during his first and second years of study (above 70/100) performed significantly worse in a voice class assessment (54/100) that required performing in a Scottish accent. In the feedback the student got, it was clear that the tutor understood that the student was at a disadvantage compared to his Anglo-Saxon peers but thought that the assessment was appropriate because this is what, in the words of the tutor, 'the industry expects'. Following discussions with the course team, even

though the teaching of the Scottish accent remained as part of the curriculum, at least it was not formally assessed so ESL students were not disadvantaged. Echoing Bourdieu's above quote, the incident suggests that the ESL actors training on English-language courses can also shape the current *linguistic market* of English-language actor training through their *linguistic habitus* and *capital*. Giving the agency to ESL students to shape English-language actor training creates standards for what might be inclusive actor training for ESL student actors.

Bourdieu's analysis of language as symbolic power focused on class. He wrote:

Individuals from upper-class backgrounds are endowed with a linguistic habitus which enables them to respond with relative ease to the demands of most formal or official occasions. There is a concordance of congruence between their linguistic habitus and the demands of formal markets. (Bourdieu and Thompson 2009, 21)

Even though ESL student actors come from various linguistic backgrounds and enter training at different points in their ESL competence development, their difficulties in responding to the demands of the English-language training and industry, when compared to native speakers, ranks them as what can be described as 'second-class' student actors. The existence of acting courses at established conservatoires titled 'International' to accommodate ESL users differently from native speakers, reinforces the distinction. Bourdieu describes non-upper-class individuals as '[l]ess well endowed with linguistic capital' (Bourdieu and Thompson 2009), which brings forward a contradiction in actor training, at least in the UK. Because usually, ESL student actors are international students, they pay higher fees than home students, as if they compensate for their lack of *linguistic capital*. Ironically, even though they pay more for the same service, they receive training that is not tailored to their linguistic needs and is less likely to get them jobs in the English-speaking industry compared to their peers who are native speakers of English.

### **Putting the ESL student actors at the centre**

In the context of training actors in HE, and especially in my current role as course leader of the MA/MFA in Acting for Stage & Screen at the University of East London which recruits many second-language users, I draw on my phenomenological understanding of the linguistic barriers for second language users in acting to find ways to support ESL student actors thrive in English-language acting environments. Drawing on how I have previously used participatory action research to centre the needs of the students (Stamatiou 2023, 2024), I invited the seven ESL students of the 2022-2023 cohort to help me improve how I train ESL users. The cohort included native speakers of Greek (1 student), Italian (1), Mandarin (4) and Urdu (1). The seven students responded to the following questions: 1. What are the challenges of acting in ESL? 2. What can help the student when acting in ESL? and 3. How do students individualise



processes of acting in ESL? I identified two key concerns on the matter of training and acting in a second language: accent, and emotional connection to English words. I address the students' concerns in the below sections to extrapolate learning and improve my acting class for second language users in the future. I share actionable advice for developing inclusive actor training environments for second-language users, including the icebreaker exercise 'Call Me by My Name'.

### **Stressing over English accents**

One of the main barriers for the ESL actor who aspires to find employment in the English-speaking industry is the underrepresentation or stereotypical representation of ESL users among roles (Espinosa and Ocampo-Guzman 2010; Coronel 2023), a reality which becomes clear to our ESL students when liaising with industry stakeholders such as agents. The agents usually ask the students whether they can do any other accents apart from what reflects their native language, and, ideally, a native English accent such as British or American. However, second-language acquisition research suggests that second-language users might not achieve an authentic native accent, depending on the age they learnt the second language (Cook 2013, 148). Consequently, many trainees who speak English as a second language are unlikely to acquire English accents that sound like that of a native.

Trainees do not want their accents to cause them to miss out on opportunities, so they collaborate with voice coaches in what echoes Bourdieu's description as 'the destruction of their instruments of expression' (Bourdieu and Thompson 2009, 49). Bourdieu referred to the elimination of local French dialects in favour of a formal French language. But also, ESL trainees who speak in foreign accents contribute to shaping their linguistic means against native speaker language standards. Language is linked to the trainee's national and ethnic identity, and the effort of ESL users to eliminate their accents resonates with Bourdieu's concept of *symbolic violence*. The concept does not imply real violence but highlights the surreptitious ways in which the ESL students have obeyed the domination of the English language in Anglophone actor training through unwritten rules. Before addressing the linguistic barriers of trainees in the studio, actor trainers need to invite the students to an awareness of the associated biases.

This has been quite perplexing for me because even though in my class I invite all students to focus on how their natural means of expression can become their acting strengths, they seem fixated on resolving the accent problem. In response to my question 'What are the challenges that you face as a second language user who trains in acting?' all students mentioned the accent in two ways: shifting their individualised accent to a 'clearer' version recognisable to English-speaking audiences as Italian, Chinese and so on, and shifting from their individualised accent to a native accent.

The domination of ESL student actors in English-language actor training has been perpetuated through fixed notions about perfect speech

delivery, which has never been a problem for the other two key actor training components, acting and movement. Immaculate, instead of individualised, speech delivery is key for the industry, but it is also integral to how actor training has traditionally grown to become commercialised. The UK is a key destination for international students because of its actor training history, which has reached mythic proportions. Most UK actor training providers associate themselves with what has been described as 'the paternalistic model' of actor training, which started in the UK and has influenced anglophone countries and beyond (Zazzali 2021). Bourdieu's concept of the *symbolic capital* has explained how the greatness of UK actor training practices is not real but mythic, so all associated with it is difficult to challenge (Zazzali 2021). Considering that actor training in the UK emerged from elocution classes, voice training for the actor in text-based work seems paramount, even more than acting, by which I mean the embodiment of characters. Even movement can be more individualised. For example, an acting coach or director usually assesses the overall physical score of the actor and, even though they might interrogate a specific acting choice, it would be widely unacceptable if they implied that a student actor made a 'wrong' acting or movement choice. On the contrary, a voice coach expects every word uttered to be clearly communicated, often repeating the word in their own Anglo-Saxon accent to help the ESL actor improve their speech delivery as if there is something 'wrong' with it.

Such expectation relates to the UK being the capital of theatre training which puts high requirements on the actor to be clearly understood. Stage acting demands 'a well-trained physical and vocal instrument, especially when performing poetic drama in which mastering the language requires no less skill than does an aria of an opera diva' (Zazzali 2016, 45). However, such speech precision is not required for the screen actor. The standards should shift today, especially because the screen industries are a more possible and better employer for the actor. The screen can accommodate the vocal abilities of any actor, and even when an audience member can't understand clearly, they can use the subtitle feature on their screen. Such flexibility celebrates the accents of ESL actors, which is a prerequisite for inclusive actor training environments for ESL students.

When the opposite happens and actor training environments tackle ESL students' accents, such domination undermines their wellbeing. Even Bourdieu drew links between linguistic power and anxiety. In his words:

Individuals from petit-bourgeois backgrounds must generally make an effort to adapt their linguistic expressions to the demands of formal markets. The result is that their speech is often accompanied by tension and anxiety, and by a tendency to rectify or correct expressions so that they concur with dominant norms. This hyper-correction of petit-bourgeois speech is the sign of a class divided against itself, whose members are seeking, at the cost of constant anxiety, to produce linguistic expressions which bear the mark of a habitus other than their own. (Bourdieu and Thompson 2009, 21)

The testimonies of my student actors echo the above quote for actor training. When asked 'What are the challenges of acting in English as your second language?', all seven students mentioned their speech delivery. Some identified 'standard pronunciation' as the biggest challenge (Lingling 2023; Qi Chen 2023; Stella 2023) and others articulation and the tone of English (Sam 2023; Sophia 2023). My Italian student mentioned struggling with 'pronunciation' and 'enunciation' and testified that '[h]aving an accent may be used against me' (Camilla 2023; I use the student's real name upon their request). Sam expanded more that '[t]he accent and pronunciation are the challenges for me. And I also noticed that my English tone is different from native speakers, which makes me afraid that my acting would be affected' (2003). In individualised and different ways, the learning experience of all ESL student actors is undermined by constantly measuring themselves against native speaker competency.

Even though this has never been an expectation in my class, the students are persistent in tackling the accent problems. When asked 'What can help you when acting in a second language?', the students responded: 'Correct pronunciation' (Qi Chen 2023); 'working on articulation and speaking is also the must-do work' Lingling 2023; 'have formal accent and lines lessons in school to enhance my disability' Sam 2023; 'assistance from an accent coach' and watching British drama (Stella 2023). Like the *petit bourgeois* of actor training, ESL student actors systematically shape their expressive means to resemble native speakers. Choosing to do so does not mean that they are not suppressed by this shaping. Instead, it illustrates that the process of shaping part of their outer acting instrument, their vocal delivery, and the suppression and stress associated with it, is central to their acting process.

### **Stressing over unfamiliar words**

If we remove this hyperconsciousness about the accent, one sees different struggles that have to do with the text written in a language that has little emotional connotations for the ESL student actor, by which I mean that English words are not associated with the living experience of the student. The effort to find a personal connection to the English dialogue is a major challenge for ESL student actors who struggle with the extra emotional and cognitive labour involved.

When asked 'What is your individualised process of acting in a second language?', all ESL students report practices that imply extra work in approaching a text. Testimonies include: 'I will memorise the lines first, then memorise the lines of the opponent, fully understand the script. If necessary, look up some information on cultural differences on Google' (Qi Chen 2023); 'I can only remember the general meaning of the lines', and 'I don't know where to pause' (Lingling 2023); 'I would say listening, and trust instinct. Do not have to worry about language cause if putting attention on worrying about language, it will lose the spontaneity, which is more important than language' (Sam 2023); 'In addition to my previous points, I have found that being off book, even if I don't fully understand

the meaning behind each word initially, is extremely helpful. By practising the lines repeatedly, the meaning gradually comes to me naturally. This approach allows me to focus on the emotions and intentions of the character without being overly preoccupied with individual word translations' (Camilla 2023); 'I try to translate the text into my native language before performing it. Sometimes the literal meaning of the text is not what the script means so I sought help from my co actors' (Zuber 2023).

The above quotes illustrate the anxieties of ESL student actors concerning the cultural specificity in the words of the English texts that they are invited to perform. Zuber articulates clearly that he asks for help from someone with better competence in English, which echoes Richard Schechner's thinking about intercultural processes. Schechner writes:

To perform someone else's culture takes a knowledge, a 'translation' that is different, more viscerally experiential, than translating a book. Intercultural exchange takes a teacher: someone who knows the body of performance of the culture being translated. The translator of the culture is not a mere agent, as a translator of words might be, but an actual culture-bearer. (Schechner 1989, 4)

The difficulty in understanding the texts independently problematises the agency and confidence of the ESL student actor. The culture-bearing capacity of the various agents in the actor training studio implies a social ranking based on English-language competency and therefore advantages native speakers.

To tackle such distinction in actor training, the non-English cultural competence of the ESL student actors needs to be utilised as their unique strength and selling point. Henry Giroux, a theorist in critical pedagogy, argues:

you can't deny that students have experiences and you can't deny that these experiences are relevant to the learning process even though you might say these experiences are limited, raw, unfruitful or whatever. Students have memories, families, religions, feelings, languages, and cultures that give them a distinctive voice. We can critically engage that experience and we can move beyond it. But we can't deny it. (Giroux 1988, 23)

The above quote illuminates that the learning of all ESL students involves a simultaneous processing of culture as they juxtapose their *linguistic habitus* and *capital* to that of the learning materials, ultimately enriching it. In actor training, this is even more perplexing. Acting is a complex human process, especially when the actor portrays, represents or lives the life of a character, and the words 'portrays', 'represents' or 'lives' reflect different psychological perspectives of the actor's work. Part of the distinct process of the ESL student actor is the merging or association of the character's life that is in English to their own life that is in a different language and culture associated with it, and finding a way to balance, match and consider both in their characterisation process.

Using these insights as a mandate from my students to improve the training of ESL users, the below section offers actionable suggestions for a more inclusive actor training class.

### **Embracing the full self of the ESL student actor**

Echoing current training efforts to invite the student's 'unique identity' and 'whole self into the room' (Landon Smith in Hingorani and Landon-Smith 2023, 123) I adapted my actor training practice and materials to welcome the unique identity and whole self of my ESL students. Even during the recruitment process, I welcome languages other than English. When inviting two self-tapes as part of a typical way to show certain versatility or acting range at the audition stage or recruitment, I welcome the performance in a language other than English, native or second. By extending this invite to include British and American applicants, I create a precedent that the *linguistic capital* of ESL users is valued on the programme. Many applicants who are ESL users submit self-tapes in their native languages, so I often assess performances that I do not understand fully or even at all.

This experience reminds me that ESL student actors might also find themselves at times missing what has been said or asked of them because a word might not be in their vocabulary yet, or because they are not familiar with the English accents around them. To prevent such misunderstandings, the tutor can: ensure that structured and detailed schemes of work are circulated in writing at the beginning of each semester for all modules; send scripts and other materials to students at least a week before the class in which they will be used, leaving enough time for the extra labour required by ELS users; welcome the recording of all classes by students using their phones or similar devices; send follow-up emails after every class reminding of key tasks for the coming week; check in more often about whether students fully understand the teaching content and if they have questions; and welcome all ways of translating communications to their native language, for example with the help of peers or machine translation services such as Google Translate. Such interventions prevent misunderstandings, facilitate communications and, most importantly, embrace the linguistic struggle of the ESL student actor, all of which foster the management of accent and text anxieties.

To acknowledge the inevitable accent and text anxieties and encourage ESL students to bring their whole selves into the programme, I developed the exercise 'Call Me by Name' which centres the name of each student with particular care for its right pronunciation. As someone with a non-Anglo-Saxon name living in England, I am used to people mispronouncing my name. This exaggerates my foreignness and prompts a feeling of shame as if I am responsible for burdening my interlocutor with a word that will add little to no value to their *linguistic capital* and *habitus*. Recent research stresses correct name pronunciation as key for an inclusive learning environment in Higher Education (Najjar, Noone, and Reifenstein 2023; Phelps-Ward and Kim 2023; Shanmugaraj 2023). As a tutor, to avoid mispronouncing student names I have often invited students to

teach me how to pronounce their names, which involves extra labour on their behalf and can feel uncomfortable as if they are put on the spot. The exercise 'Call Me by My Name' is a playful way to learn the correct pronunciation of each other's names as part of an icebreaker exercise for acting classes.

Echoing Black acting methods' techniques of circle formation and check-ins (Dunn 2019: 77), 'Call Me by My Name' originates from an icebreaker exercise that was introduced to me in 2010 by Complicité's Lilo Baur during my participation in a weekly physical theatre workshop. In a circle formation, the tutor says their name accompanied by a gesture and invites the whole group to repeat the tutor's name and mimic their gesture. Then each student around the circle says their name with a matching gesture, followed by the whole group repeating their performance. The same sequence is repeated at double tempo and triple tempo. As previously discussed (Stamatiou 2024), I found this name/gesture exercise an ideal vehicle for checking in because a person's name is central to their identity. This exercise opens most of my acting classes, and in every consecutive session, I might invite different aspects of identity such as pronouns, feelings, and likes/dislikes.

Inspired by a colleague's email signature that read 'Naida (her name) rhymes with (emoji of a spider)', 'Call Me by My Name' adapts Complicité's icebreaker exercise to centre the correct pronunciation of each student's name. The group gets into a circle. The facilitator describes that the activity will invite each participant to say their NAME and a WORD that rhymes with their name within the sentence 'NAME rhymes with WORD', accompanied by a gesture that illustrates the WORD. The whole group mimics their performance. This is continued around the circle until all participants have performed their names with rhyming words and matching gestures. The same sequence is repeated at double tempo and triple tempo. You can see the exercise in action, here: <https://youtu.be/B0KZsls3gX4>

The exercise was used consistently at the beginning of my weekly acting class during the first semester of the academic year 2023-2024. The obvious benefit that I witnessed was increased confidence to call each other's names and pronounce them properly. The exercise also prompted a better understanding of the ESL students because their peers who were native speakers of English also experienced anxiety when speaking unfamiliar names and accents. Most importantly, the awareness of speaking names in multiple languages highlighted the actor training studio as a global space. The exercise fostered a playful and safe environment where each participant's accent and vocabulary were highlighted as a work in progress, preparing the ESL group to confront the forthcoming anxieties with English accents and unfamiliar English words.

Writing from the tutor's perspective, the exercise highlighted that there might not be a single recipe for how to train ESL student actors because they come in with different native languages and with different competencies in English. Actor training might want to support them to develop their own individualised approaches and keep working on such approaches even after graduation.

My most important directive from this project is to be ambitious about what my ESL students can achieve in the English-speaking industry. In the words of Camilla:

just because we come from another country it does not mean we should go back to it. Acting is already a competitive field, but institutions should help their students feel like they can achieve everything they want after they have left the building. So yeah, asking each student how to help is the only way to go in my opinion. No student left behind. (Camilla 2023)

One idea that can be taken forward involves accepting accent development as a process and embracing the linguistic means of all actors. We don't expect perfect articulation from ESL users in real life because it would be unfair and rude, and the same should be true for training. In practice, no aspect of speech should be formally assessed in acting programs.

Also, to limit the problems associated with the language, actor training needs to offer multiple opportunities across media. For example, screen acting methodologies might be more suitable because they embrace the individualised means of expression of the actor. Typical acting processes used for screen acting, such as Sanford Meisner's and Lee Strasberg's, prioritise the actor's emotional connection with the character which is more captivating when the actor does not speak, so the actor is freer from speech. Acting is not communicated through words but through the actor's eye line, minimising the anxieties linked to English accents and English words. In practice, I have traditionally invited the institutions where I work to invest more time and resources towards screen acting instead of stage acting, and even side-line aspects that involve poetic drama. Inclusive actor training environments for ESL users require practices that offer equal opportunities for all language abilities to thrive inside and outside of the classroom.

With actor employability in mind, and as discussed in another essay (Stamatiou 2024), actors should be invited to select the materials for showcasing their acting skills, performing roles that move and represent them as they wish. To encourage ESL users to include languages beyond English as part of their showcasing materials, I added to the syllabus the series *Beef* which has scenes in both English and Korean. I also added among case studies the screen acting performance of the Chinese actress Zang Ziyi, alongside Helen Mirren's and Viola Davis's. As part of class materials, the students watched the film *2046*, most of which is in Cantonese, and an interview of Ziyi in Mandarin about her role in the film. The exposure to foreign languages and subtitled videos only temporarily removed the English language from the centre of actor training. However, it prompted an acknowledgement and appreciation for the ESL's extra labour to learn English. The extra labour involved in the ESL student actors' process is not only a prerequisite for participating in anglophone actor training. It is also an opportunity to shape our acting studios as global spaces and global communities. We can show our gratitude by aiming for inclusivity and wellbeing for ESL users.



## **Conclusion: developing individualised approaches to acting in English as a second language**

This essay brought together my experience as an ESL actor and actor trainer, the testimonies of seven ESL student actors, and Bourdieu's theory of language as symbolic power to explore ways of creating inclusive actor training environments for ESL users. A phenomenological assessment of what it means to act and train in English as an ESL user highlighted feelings of shame and heightened anxiety. The Bourdieusian analysis of the anxieties associated with English accents and the meaning of English words, invited an awareness of associated biases about what is possible for ESL student actors and the stresses involved. In individualised and different ways, the learning experience of all ESL students is undermined by constantly measuring themselves against native speaker competence. The process of shaping part of their outer acting instrument, their vocal delivery, and the suppression and stress associated with it, is central to their acting process. Similarly, their inner acting process that concerns characterisation involves the extra labour of merging or associating the cultural specificity of the actor to that of the character. These anxieties inarguably challenge the well-being of the ESL student actor.

To develop inclusive environments for ESL student actors that choose to train in English, it is important to support them manage the anxieties associated with such endeavour. A supportive tutor would aim for high levels of organisation and persistent follow-ups concerning communications and expectations; would invite choice at all aspects of the training and welcome individualised needs and recommendations; would create environments that appreciate foreign languages and even centre them at selected moments in the English-speaking actor training studio; would side-line actor training practices that over-rely on English language competence in favour of practices that embrace any language competence.

This essay illustrated that ESL student actors are concerned with the matter of training in a second language. They invite the field to take seriously that all ESL users experience heightened levels of anxiety in actor training. They call for more nuanced and extended considerations of how their multiple and intersectional needs can be addressed in actor training studios and processes. In return, they train the English-speaking actor training field in cultural competence, the ability to connect with people from various cultural backgrounds in meaningful ways. In other words, ESL student actors shape the development of the global actor of the future for the global audiences of the future.

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