

ESL

A one-act drama by
Tom Smith

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

TREY, 16, Caucasian.

JACKIE, 16, Caucasian.

OFELIA, 16, Latina.

JESÚS, 16, Latino.

TIME/PLACE

The Present. An American high school.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Please try to keep things as fluid as possible. Music may help clarify progressions or regressions of time.

POST-PLAY DISCUSSION

Depending on the specific circumstances, I feel it would be very appropriate to conduct some kind of post-play discussion about the issues raised in *ESL*.

Although you may choose to handle this in whatever way you feel best, I suggest having the actors ask specific questions and garner feedback from the audience. It might also be appropriate to have the audience ask the actors questions, assuming they can be instructed to focus on the content/issues of the piece instead of the "how did you learn all those lines"-type questions.

It's been my experience that these kind of talkbacks work well in a longer format (20-30 minutes) if there's a smaller group.

However, for large audiences (more than 30), I suggest keeping it shorter: more in the range of 10 minutes.

I'm including some questions below I feel would be good points of discussion. Feel free to add your own, or modify these to fit your needs. It's all up to you...

SUGGESTED TALKBACK QUESTIONS

- 1) Why do you feel the playwright chose the title *ESL*? What does English as a Second Language have to do with the play?
- 2) Who is the protagonist of this play? Ofelia? Trey? Jesús? Who is the antagonist?
- 3) Was it ok for Jesús to wear his "Brown Pride" shirt? Why or why not? Is it ok to wear a "White Pride" shirt? What's the difference?
- 4) Was Trey justified in his belief that everyone who moves to this country should speak English? If not, does that mean that things like newspapers and street signs should be written in every language someone might speak?
- 5) Was the vandalism of Jesús' locker an act of violence, like Ofelia proposes?
- 6) Why did Jesús spray paint his own locker? What might his reasons have been?
- 7) Ofelia says that everyone is a racist sometimes. Do you agree or disagree with her comment?
- 8) Did Ofelia have a double standard? Was she justified in having one?

9) Would the events of this play have been different if it didn't happen at a high school populated by wealthy Caucasian students? How so?

10) Is it important to learn a second language? Why or why not?

SCENE 1

(A high school. JESÚS and OFELIA are working their way through other [unseen] students on their way to class. TREY and JACKIE, on cell phones, are doing the same.)

JESÚS: ¡Quisiera no estar aquí! [I don't want to be here!]

OFELIA: Give it a chance. You've only been here for a few days.

JESÚS: No conozco a nadie. [I don't know anyone.]

JACKIE: Where are you?

TREY: Walking past the guys' bathroom in East hall. Where are you?

JACKIE: I just got out of Chem. *(Walks past Ofelia and Jesús, who bumps her slightly:)* Excuse you! *(Muttering under her breath:)* Stupid ESL...

JESÚS: ¿Qué dijo? [What she'd say?]

TREY: Why weren't you at my locker this morning?

JACKIE: I got to school late.

TREY: Jackie, they're gonna give you detention.

JACKIE: No, they won't. Mr. Hollenbeck is a pushover. I've been late, like, ten times already this semester and he just rolls his eyes and lets me in. He's like that for all the girls.

TREY: Lucky.

JACKIE: *(Calling out to other person:)* Shay, I like your hair. Did you cut it? *(Beat.)* No, it's cute! *(Beat.)* Call me during lunch.

TREY: I hate when you do that!

JACKIE: What?

TREY: Talk to other people when you're on the phone with me.

JACKIE: Get over it.

TREY: I'm serious. It's disrespectful!

JACKIE: It's no big deal. Anyway, where are we going for lunch?

TREY: Nowhere. I'm meeting my tutor today.

JACKIE: Are you serious?

TREY: I have to. I got a "D" last semester. And I flunked the first test this semester. My dad freaked out on me last weekend.

JACKIE: He is so uptight. *(Calling to someone else:)* Felisa! *(Back to Trey:)* Wait a minute. *(Calling offstage:)* Felisa, Joby's been telling everyone that you hooked up with Mike at your party.

TREY: Jackie!

JACKIE: *(Ignoring him:)* Well, you'd better go talk to her because she's telling everyone.

TREY: I'm hanging up.

JACKIE: *(To Trey:)* Just wait. *(To her friend:)* Like she would remember anything. She's the one who got so—*(A school bell rings. Jesús and Ofelia walk by Trey. Jesús points at him and continues walking:)*—call me later, Felisa. *(To Trey:)* Blow off your tutor and go to lunch with me!

TREY: Oh, are you talking to me now?

JACKIE: Hurry up before second bell rings. Lunch, or no?

TREY: I can't.

JACKIE: Fine. Whatever.

TREY: Don't be mad! We can do something after school.

JACKIE: I might be busy.

TREY: Doing what?

JACKIE: I don't know. I have other friends, you know.

TREY: Just call me later.

JACKIE: (*Entering classroom:*) Whatever. I'm in class now; I've got to go. Final bell's going to ring.

TREY: Don't be—

JACKIE: Hang up already and get to class! You'll get after-school detention if you're late.

TREY: I'll hang up as soon as you tell me you're not mad.

JACKIE: I'm not mad. Just go.

TREY: Ok. I'll call you la— (*Final bell rings:*) Oh, man!

SCENE 2

(Same part of the school, same time as the last scene.)

JESÚS: ¡Quisiera no estar aquí! [I don't want to be here!]

OFELIA: Give it a chance. You've only been here for a few days.

JESÚS: No conozco a nadie. [I don't know anyone.]

JACKIE: Where are you?

TREY: Walking past the guys' bathroom in East hall. Where are you?

JACKIE: I just got out of Chem. *(Walks past Ofelia and Jesús, who bumps her slightly:)* Excuse you! *(Muttering under her breath:)* Stupid ESL...

JESÚS: ¿Qué dijo? [What she'd say?]

OFELIA: Nothing. How'd your first class go this morning?

JESÚS: ¡Ya deja de hablar inglés! [Stop speaking English!]

OFELIA: Why? It's what I speak.

JESÚS: Hablas demasiado rápido. No te entiendo cuando hablas así. [You talk too fast. I don't understand you when you talk like that.]

OFELIA: You're supposed to speak English whenever you're at school. You promised my mom.

JESÚS: ¡No te entiendo nada! [I can't understand you!]

OFELIA: *(Exaggeratedly slow:)* Speak English!

JESÚS: Está bien, voy a hablar inglés: no! [Fine, I'll speak English: "no!"] *(Looking around:)* En esta escuela hay puros fresas. [This school has nothing but rich kids.]

OFELIA: They're not all rich kids.

JESÚS: Usan puras marcas, todos traen celular... Esta mugre escuela junto con los niños fresas me caen en los— [Name brands on everything. Everyone's got a cell phone. I hate it here. Everyone's so—]

OFELIA: It's only your first week. You'll get used to everything. Besides, it's not so different than Juárez.

JESÚS: ¡Sí, como no! [Yeah, right!]

OFELIA: Are you still mad at your mom? For sending you to live with us?

JESÚS: ¿Por qué todo el mundo hace tanto pedo con este país? ¡Como si fuera la gran cosa! Yo estaba bien en Juárez; ahí tenía amigos, una moto y a mi novia. Aquí no tengo nada. [Why does everyone think America is such a big deal? I was fine in Juárez. I had friends and a motorcycle and a girlfriend. Now I have nothing.]

OFELIA: She just thought you should live with us since you kept getting in trouble down there.

JESÚS: ¡Yo no hice nada! [I didn't do anything!]

OFELIA: Yeah, yeah, I know. You were completely innocent. Get over yourself, Jesús.

JESÚS: ¿A qué hora vamos a comer? Me estoy muriendo de hambre. [When's lunch? I'm starving.]

OFELIA: Lunch is right after next period. But I'm not going today.

JESÚS: ¿Por qué no? [Why not?]

OFELIA: I'm tutoring someone. (*He looks confused.*) ¿Tutoría? [Tutoring?]

JESÚS: ¿Y eso pá qué? [What for?]

OFELIA: I need the money. I'm going to be tutoring him in Spanish every Tuesday during lunch.

JESÚS: ¿Y yo qué voy a hacer? ¡Yo no quiero comer solo! [What am I going to do? I'm not going to eat lunch by myself!]

OFELIA: Eating by yourself will give you a chance to meet other people. Make new friends.

(A school bell rings.)

JESÚS: *(Pointing at Trey as he passes him:)* ¡Ni ma! Yo no quiero ser amigo de ninguno de estos gringos fresas. Yo voy contigo a tu tutoría. [No way! I don't want to be friends with one of these rich white kids. I'll go with you to your tutoring.]

OFELIA: You can't go with me!

JESÚS: ¿Por qué no? [Why not?]

OFELIA: What are you going to do there?

JESÚS: ¡Burlarme de un gringo menso tratando de hablar español! [Make fun of some dumb white kid trying to speak Spanish!]

OFELIA: You're not going to make fun of him! Look, if you're too chicken to eat lunch by yourself –

JESÚS: ¿A qué le voy a tener miedo? [What would I be scared of?]

OFELIA: –then fine! But don't mess this up for me. I need this money for college.

JESÚS: ¡Yaaaaa mijaaaa! ¡Pá eso todavía faltan como dos años! [Yeah, whatever! You have about two years till then!]

OFELIA: I mean it! *(Looks at her watch:)* Second bell's gonna ring. You better get to class. What do you have now? English as a Second Language? *(He looks confused:)* ESL?

JESÚS: Si. ¡Mugre clase apestosa! Nos tratan como si fuéramos idiotas. [Yes. Stupid class! They treat us like we're idiots.]

OFELIA: I'll meet you here after class. I'm supposed to meet this guy in the library.

JESÚS: Te apuesto diez dólares a que el guey va a traer una camiseta con el nombre de una marca enfrente. [Ten bucks says he's wearing a shirt with a name brand on the front.]

OFELIA: You're gonna be late!

(She rushes into class. Jesús runs off. A moment later the second bell rings.)

SCENE 3

(Library. Lunchtime. Jesús is staring at Trey.)

TREY: No, I understand the words and everything. The vocabulary. I just don't get how to sound like that. Like, how do you say this word?

OFELIA: "Periódico." [Newspaper.]

TREY: "Peer-ree-oh-dee-co?"

OFELIA: No, "Periódico."

TREY: See, I can't do that. My mouth doesn't work like that.

OFELIA: It's easy. It's like "perry-oh" and "dee-co" together. "Periódico."

TREY: Um, does your boyfriend have to keep staring at me? I mean, he's not making this any easier.

OFELIA: He's not my boyfriend! That's my cousin, Jesús!

JESÚS: ¿Qué te da tanta risa? [What's so funny?]

OFELIA: ¡El pensó que eras mi novio! [He thought you were my boyfriend!]

JESÚS: ¡Gringo baboso! [Stupid white boy.]

OFELIA: No seas así, Jesús. [Don't be like that, Jesús.]

TREY: See, I can't do that. I mean, I get the verb tenses and stuff. But I can't make the same sounds you do.

OFELIA: You will. You just need to keep practicing.

JESÚS: Ese gringo baboso nunca va a aprender español. [That dumb white boy is never gonna learn Spanish.]

OFELIA: Let's look at your last test and see if we can figure out what you did wrong.

JESÚS: Ofelia, ¡ya me aburrí! ¡Ya vámonos! [Ofelia, I'm bored! Let's go.]

OFELIA: No!

JESÚS: ¡Ya me aburrí! [I'm bored!]

OFELIA: Pues entonces vete. Nadie te obliga a quedarte. [Just go then. No one is making you stay.]

JESÚS: ¿Qué piensas? ¿Que te voy a dejar sola con este guey? ¡Tás loca! [You think I'm going to leave you alone with him. Forget it!]

TREY: What's wrong?

OFELIA: Nothing. He's bored.

TREY: Oh. Should we do this another time?

OFELIA: No. Jesús is just being a baby.

TREY: (*Pulling a graded test out of his bag:*) Ok. Here's the last test I failed. I kept spelling everything wrong.

OFELIA: Maybe because you're pronouncing things wrong. Like, how do you say the word for "Wednesday"? (*Pointing to his test:*) This word.

TREY: Meer-co-laze.

OFELIA: It actually has four syllables, not three. "Miércoles." Do you hear the difference?

TREY: "Mee-air-co-lace."

OFELIA: "Miércoles."

TREY: "Miércoles."

OFELIA: That's it.

JESÚS: Me voy a dar una vuelta. [I'm going to go look around.]

OFELIA: Fine. (*Jesús gets up and leaves:*) So, now try to spell it.

TREY: (*Sounding and spelling it out:*) "Mi":m-i..."ér":e-r..

OFELIA: Accented "e."

TREY: ..."co": c-o..."les":l-e-s.

OFELIA: Right! See, I think what you were trying to do was spell things the way they sounded. But you can't do that if you sound them out wrong.

TREY: Man, Spanish is so hard!

OFELIA: Are you kidding me? English is hard.

TREY: It's totally easy!

OFELIA: "Wednesday"? Try spelling that like it sounds: "W-e-n-z-d-a."

TREY: Yeah, well what about "Chihuahua"?

OFELIA: How about "sure"? And when you say "hot," do you mean temperature or spicy? At least in Spanish there are separate words.

TREY: It doesn't seem like you had any problems learning English. I mean, you speak better English than I do.

OFELIA: That's just because in school they taught us proper English.

TREY: I still say Spanish is harder than English. Obviously, since I need a tutor...

OFELIA: Yeah, your dad said he wasn't so happy about your Spanish grade last semester.

TREY: He flipped out. Now he says he won't let me go out for soccer if my grades are below a 2.5.

OFELIA: You play soccer? I'm on the volleyball team. You guys had a good season last year.

TREY: Not as good as you did. Regional champs.

OFELIA: Yeah, well...

TREY: So, how'd you get stuck with this? I mean, how'd my dad-?

OFELIA: He called the school looking for a tutor. I've got Señor Jimenez for fifth period and he asked me if I wanted to do it.

TREY: You're taking Spanish?

OFELIA: Yeah.

TREY: That doesn't seem very fair. I mean, you grew up speaking it.

OFELIA: You take English, don't you?

TREY: Oh. Yeah.

OFELIA: Same thing.

TREY: How much is my dad paying you? If you don't mind me asking?

OFELIA: Pretty good, actually.

TREY: How much? Five bucks an hour? *(She says nothing:)* Six? *(She says nothing:)* Seven?

OFELIA: Twenty dollars a session.

TREY: Are you kidding me? Twenty bucks for 45 minutes?

OFELIA: Yeah, it's really good money.

TREY: Yeah, it is! *(Making a joke:)* If we ever go on a date, you're picking up the bill!

OFELIA: We should probably get back to work now. Your dad's going to want to make sure he gets his money's worth. Let's go over the names of family members again...

TREY: What's the deal with your cousin?

OFELIA: What do you mean?

TREY: I mean, no offense, but he's kinda creepy. He hardly says anything.

OFELIA: He doesn't speak much English. He understands it, but he doesn't like to speak it.

TREY: How come?

OFELIA: I don't know. He just doesn't.

TREY: How's he get by in his classes without speaking English?

OFELIA: This is his first week. He just moved here from Juárez. He's living with my family for a while.

TREY: Ah, got it. Why'd he leave Mexico? *(She looks uncomfortable:)* Sorry. None of my business. Forget I asked.

OFELIA: Don't worry about it. Now show me what you did on—

(Trey's cell phone rings.)

TREY: Sorry. *(He looks at the number and decides not to answer it. Hits a button and the phone stops ringing:)* You know, they're trying to get these banned here at school. The teachers are working to make it school policy or whatever. Hey, how do you say "cell phone" in Spanish?

OFELIA: "Celular."

TREY: "Celular." That's pretty easy! Do you have your "celular" with you?

OFELIA: I don't own one, actually.

TREY: Really? I thought everyone had one by now.

OFELIA: Everyone but me.

TREY: That's too bad. I thought maybe we could trade numbers and I could –

(A school bell rings.)

OFELIA: Well, I guess I'll see you again next week.

TREY: What? Oh, yeah...sure.

OFELIA: Um...you should go to the listening library or something so you can hear more Spanish. I think that's what's causing you to have a hard time with everything.

TREY: We have a listening library?

OFELIA: Yeah. Right behind the computer lab. They've got these tapes and CDs. I work there after school. You should...come by.

TREY: Cool. Ok. Well, adios!

(He exits as Jesús enters, upset and angry.)

JESÚS: ¡Odio este lugar! [I hate this stupid place!]

OFELIA: What's wrong?

JESÚS: Nada. [Nothing.]

OFELIA: Jesús, ¿qué tienes? [Jesús, what is it?]

JESÚS: Los gringos, me caen gordos. [The white boys, I don't like them.]

OFELIA: Quit talking like that!

JESÚS: ¿Cómo? [Like what?]

OFELIA: "White boys" this and "white boys" that. And speak English.

JESÚS: Uta!!! ¿Tú también? [You too!?!]

OFELIA: Me too what?

JESÚS: Mas vale que salgas al sol Ofelia; te noto demasiado blanca. [You'd better get some sun, Ofelia, and soon. You're looking too white.]

(He storms out. She looks confused.)

SCENE 4

(Midway through the last library scene.)

OFELIA: "Miércoles."

TREY: "Miércoles."

OFELIA: That's it.

JESÚS: Me voy a dar una vuelta. [I'm going to go look around.]

OFELIA: Fine.

(Jesús gets up and leaves. He walks into the hallway and looks around for a moment. He tries to look cool, but it's obvious he's a little nervous. He re-poses, and looks around. He gets a drink from the water fountain and stands in front of it. Just then, Jackie walks by.)

JACKIE: 'Scuse me. *(Jesús looks at her, unsure:)* I said, 'scuse me. Hey, other people need to use the water fountain, you know. *(It is obvious Jesús is trying to understand her but she's speaking too fast:)* Move it already. I need to get some water. *(Jesús doesn't move:)* What's with you? Move it! *(Jesús doesn't move:)* I said move!

(Jackie gets frustrated and pushes him out of the way.)

JESÚS: ¡Gringa mensa! [Stupid white girl!]

JACKIE: What did you say?

JESÚS: ¿Oye, qué piensas? ¿Por qué me empujas? [Hey! What gives? Why do you push me?]

JACKIE: Speak English!

JESÚS: ¿A ti qué te importa? [So? What do you care?]

JACKIE: Stupid ESL.

(She gets on her cell phone and dials as she starts to walk away.)

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JESÚS: ¿Estúpido? ¿A quién le dices estúpido? [Stupid? Who are you calling stupid?] (*Calling after her:*) ¡Hey!

JACKIE: Shay, it's Jackie. What's going on?

JESÚS: ¡Hey, te estoy hablando! [Hey, I'm talking to you!]

(He gets in front of Jackie, blocking her.)

JACKIE: Just a second, Shay. (*To Jesús:*) What? What do you want?

JESÚS: ¿Por qué me empujas? [Why did you push me?]

JACKIE: What are you saying? I can't understand you! You're in America, now. Speak English. (*Jesús looks confused. She pushes past him and continues talking on her cell:*) Stupid ESL freaking out about something. Anyway...

(Jesús rushes over and grabs Jackie's cell phone out of her hand.)

JESÚS: ¡Te estoy hablando! ¿Quién te crees que eres? Nomás porque eres una mocosa fresca hija de papi no te da derecho a tratarme así. No hablo ingles pero si sé lo que estas diciendo. [I'm talking to you! Who do you think you are? Just because you're a rich, snobby brat doesn't give you the right to treat me like that! I don't speak English but I know what you mean.]

(Jesús notices people staring at him. He drops the cell phone and rushes off. Jackie picks up her cell phone. She hangs up and dials Trey. She is upset, and near tears: more because of the embarrassment than anything else. She waits nervously. She gets his voicemail.)

JACKIE: Hey, I just thought you should know that some ESL tried to beat me up! Not that you really care or anything. I mean, God forbid you should answer your cell when I really need you. But you're too busy with your stupid tutor. Whatever! Maybe I need to find someone who cares that I was almost killed! Call me. Or don't. I don't care anymore. Whatever.

(She hangs up.)

SCENE 5

(A few weeks later. Outside Trey's locker. Jackie and Trey are mid-fight. Throughout the following, we also see Ofelia, in the library, looking at her watch and waiting.)

JACKIE: That's what you always say!

TREY: Well, what do you want me to do? Fail? I've got to pass this class, Jackie, or I won't graduate.

JACKIE: I know that! I'm not stupid. I'm just saying that you don't need to be tutored by her.

TREY: What, are you jealous?

JACKIE: You hate Spanish. But every Tuesday when tutoring time comes around, you're all, "I really need to go study, Jackie! I need this class to graduate!"

TREY: You're being ridiculous! I've got to go!

JACKIE: You didn't even care when I almost got beat up by that ESL a couple weeks ago! If you want to stay together, Trey, you're going to have to pay a little more attention to me.

TREY: Why do you always have to be the center of everyone's attention? All the time? Look, I've already kept her waiting for 30 minutes. We'll talk after school.

JACKIE: I can't believe you're walking away from me like this!

TREY: You're being a diva, Jackie! I'll talk to you later!

(He storms off.)

JACKIE: *(Dialing her cell phone:)* Give me one good reason not to dump him, Joby. Just one!

SCENE 6

(The same as Scene Five. The library. Throughout the following, we also see Jackie, in the hallway, talking on her cell phone. At some point, she'll storm off.)

TREY: Sorry I'm late.

OFELIA: It's almost the end of lunch!

TREY: Jackie and I just got in a huge fight. God, she can be so—

OFELIA: I almost left.

TREY: You don't have a cell phone, so I didn't know how to get a hold of you.

OFELIA: Oh.

TREY: Don't worry, you'll still get paid.

OFELIA: It's not that. It's just that I've been sitting here for 30 minutes waiting, and...

TREY: Look, Ofelia, it's not like I planned this, ok? I didn't know she was going to flip out on me!

OFELIA: I know. It's just—Look, never mind. Let's just get started.

TREY: *(Calming down:)* I'm sorry.

OFELIA: Did you bring your assignment?

TREY: Ofelia, wait. I'm sorry. I am. It's just... Jackie and I have been fighting all the time lately. I mean, we should probably just break up. But neither one of us is—Anyway, I didn't mean to take it out on you. I'm sorry.

OFELIA: That's ok. I mean, don't make it a habit or anything, but I understand.

TREY: Where's Jesús?

OFELIA: He's looking through the books. I told him he couldn't hang out here anymore. He's too distracting.

TREY: It's kinda weird not having him here. I sorta got used to him. Glaring at me! Making fun of me.

OFELIA: He never—I mean, he didn't—

TREY: I understand some Spanish, Ofelia.

OFELIA: Oh.

TREY: I don't care. It must have been boring for him. Has he, you know, gotten used to this place yet?

OFELIA: Not really. I mean, I guess if there were more Mexicans here he'd feel better. It's a pretty white school.

TREY: I couldn't imagine just packing up and moving to a foreign country. I'd freak out if I had to move down to Mexico or something, especially with my Spanish as bad as it is. How long have you lived here?

OFELIA: In the U.S.? About four years. We moved here when I was in seventh grade.

TREY: Was it hard?

OFELIA: At first. I mean, the language wasn't the worst part, believe it or not. There's a whole cultural thing that's different. That's what was so weird.

TREY: Yeah? Like what?

OFELIA: Well, when I first moved here I couldn't believe how many clothes people owned. I mean, everyone had a closet just crammed full of stuff. We had to wear uniforms to school, so we only needed clothes for the weekend.

TREY: Weird!

OFELIA: Kinda. But in some ways it's cool because no one looks down on you because of what you're wearing. There's a

bunch of things that are different in Mexico. Like, in the afternoons everyone is outside playing, or watering their lawns, or whatever so you say "hi" and catch up on things. Here, everyone goes home and stays inside all day. And when I say "family," I mean all my aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents; here, people just mean their immediate family. It's just all a little...different.

TREY: Better?

OFELIA: Different.

TREY: Mexico sounds kinda cool.

OFELIA: It is.

TREY: You're pretty cool, too.

(There is a tense moment where it looks like they may kiss.)

OFELIA: We should get to work.

TREY: You're right.

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