

Voices of Language Learners in Improvisations

教室におけるインプロヴィゼーション考察

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to describe how three improvisations developed by theater practitioners can be suitable for English language learners. Improvisation, which is considered a tool for actor's training, is a live performance without preparation. As Maley and Duff (2005, p. 1) stated "drama integrates language in a natural way," I posit that incorporating improvisation activities in an ELF class can encourage language learners to naturally express themselves by training them to respond to situations or scenes spontaneously. As this is a pilot study, a theater workshop introducing the improvisations was implemented both as part of my teaching method and research design. Survey results show that the three improvisations had significance in creating a communicative and collaborative ELF class. Students' response also conveyed how language learner's motivation is nurtured and sustained particularly in classroom dynamics where the teacher's role is transferred to the student. At the same time, the learners' creativity, listening, and speaking skills are enhanced in the process of improvisation that is an engaging way to practice fluency.

KEYWORDS: Improvisation, Drama, Language learning, Theater

1. INTRODUCTION

Overcoming shyness and increasing motivation among Japanese students are some of the challenges that English teachers have to deal with. Various pair and group activities such as interviews, presentations, and role-plays are considered to be incorporated in class activities that might help address these issues. English teachers with many years of teaching experience in Japan can already notice Japanese students' behavior patterns in their passive learning. As Fred Anderson (1993) observed in his research on Western language teachers in Japan, students rarely asked for clarification, seldom initiated discussion, avoided bringing up new topics and avoided challenging the instructor. These behavior patterns manifested Japanese students' shyness (Doyon, 2000) that troubled most English teachers. However, active learning exercises (Bonwell & Eison, 1991) that involve collaboration such as role-playing could be an

approach to overcome this shyness.

Role-playing is related to improvisation that was developed by Viola Spolin, the inventor of Theater Games. Using the concept of play to tap into individual creativity and self-expression, Viola Spolin conceptualized theater games which focused on stimulating creativity (Spolin, 2017; Wilson, 2016). Her work greatly contributed to the popularity of improvisation as a tool for theater training in the US in the late 1950s. Then in the 1970s, the influence of theater improvisations and drama techniques was strongly practiced in language teaching.

Maley and Duff (2005) introduced drama techniques as communication activities for language teachers. Some of their reasons for using drama in language teaching were (1) to draw upon cognitive and affective domains, thus restoring the importance of thinking as well as feeling; (2) to bring the classroom to life through focus on meaning by contextualising the language; and (3) to foster self-awareness (and awareness of others), self-esteem, and confidence through which motivation thrives. Thus, they seem to believe that drama techniques and theater improvisations may be effective to overcome shyness and increase motivation even among low-level language learners.

In Abigail Paul's (2015) interactive workshop on performative techniques in the language classroom, she outlined exercises that promote learners of non-native languages to be experimental in creating an opportunity for authentic dialogue, regardless of language level. The activities in the workshop give emphasis on group learning experience, rather than the individual to foster mindfulness and awareness of others. She affirms that collaboration, spontaneity, and humour are necessary to provide a comfortable space where language learners are encouraged to take risks and less likely to suffer if they fail in the exercises.

Theater improvisation supports a learning style where creativity and self-expression are initiated and expanded upon. This in a way, "promotes risk-taking, which is an essential element in effective language learning" (Maley & Duff, 2005, p. 2). Connecting improvisations to English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) does not limit the users to conform to the conventions of English as a Native Language (ENL) grammar and usage, but rather makes use of the actual English they are already aware of. As Seidlhofer posits:

the creativity lies in the manner in which they draw on the abstract
virtual rules underlying these actualizations to regulate their
performance in real time, actualizations that often go well beyond what
they have been presented with as the English that they should emulate.

(2015, p. 120)

The positive effect of drama techniques also seem to be effective among ELF students in Japan. Yasuko Shiozawa (2017) of Bunkyo University reported on an experimental class entitled “English and Media” where she utilized a variety of drama techniques to explore social issues. Based on responses to pre-and-post surveys given to participants, she reported that drama techniques are not only encouraging her students to exhibit creativity but also helping them to express insights regarding social issues. A similar study was also conducted by Michael I. Dailey, an English educator with an experience working as a professional theater actor, who held a semester of drama class for English language learners. Despite the small-scale survey results of his thirteen students, it revealed a unanimous positive impact of drama activities as “emphasizing meaningful language, interactive communication, and cooperation that stimulate participation and speaking practice” (2009, p.11).

Although there have been numerous studies on the effectiveness of drama techniques in language learning, research on improvisations particularly in ELF is scarce. This led me to my research question: how effective and suitable improvisations are as supplementary activities for ELF learners. In this paper, I will introduce three improvisation activities adapted from, developed by Ana Lim (2009) and Spolin (2017), but more importantly, modified based on my experience as a theater practitioner and ELF teacher to suit a class of low-level learners of ELF.

2. METHODOLOGY

Before the workshop commenced, I asked my students if they had heard of or were familiar with theater improvisation in language learning. Since most participants were first-year students and have never been involved in theater, they did not seem to have an idea of improvisation. I, therefore, explained an overview of drama techniques and demonstrated how theater improvisation could be effective for language learners of English.

The main component of the study was a workshop of a 100-minute class or two sessions of a 50-minute class. The participants were ELF 201/202 students majoring in Agriculture and Media Design who have TOEIC scores that range from 341 to 449. They were randomly divided into groups and performed three improvisations with the same group. The goal was not only to learn English but also to emphasise creativity and collaboration in producing authentic language via drama techniques.

My colleague, who is a professional Philippine theater director, was invited to facilitate the workshops for two consecutive years in 2015 and 2016. It was also an opportunity for the students to interact with the director to use and experience ELF. Moreover, having a guest or an unfamiliar person facilitating the workshop appeared to break the class routine and create a refreshing atmosphere. While I assisted the director, I did participant-observation to examine how the students responded to the activities. The purpose of this observation was to supplement data in the survey conducted after the workshop.

Survey responses were collected from sixty-one Agriculture major students and seven Media Design students. The last part of the survey was an open question

to let the students freely write their comments and suggestions. After the workshop and collection of surveys, I initiated an open discussion to reflect on and confirm what they answered in the survey. The survey and discussion were used in measuring the opinions and attitudes of the students towards their participation in the workshop.

3. THE IMPROVISATIONS

The following improvisation games and activities were learned, passed on, and customized for this research study. I had participated in or facilitated these activities as an actor and drama teacher, but not as a language learner. As I am aware of the effectiveness of improvisation in promoting the production of natural speech, this has led me to initiate these exercises as supplementary activities for my ELF students to break the daily teaching routine, to let them overcome their shyness, and to increase their motivation.

Little preparation is necessary and no special equipment required. It is only important to have sufficient space for students to move and form in small groups. The three improvisations are all group activities that provide opportunities for English language use already learned. Participants are allowed limited use of Japanese but are strongly encouraged to use more English.

Although a professional theater director held the workshop in this study, teachers do not necessarily need to have a theater background to teach improvisations but to exude confidence in a firm yet friendly tone is an advantage. Teachers are encouraged to give helpful feedback and should not stop the students when they make mistakes so as to sustain an open and relaxed atmosphere for the participants to experience the ‘flow’ of theater improvisation (Maley & Duff, 2005, p. 4).

3.1 This is a/an (object)

Listening, concentration, and accuracy are the key features of this activity. Students should have any small object and make sure that no objects are the same in the group. They form a circle. If the number of students is too big, it can be divided into groups of six.

All the chants and movements are done simultaneously. First, all students hold their objects in both hands. They face the person on their left and say, “this is a (name of the object),” as they pass their objects to the next person on the left. Next, they respond, “Uh what?” to the person on their right. This chant is done twice. After which, they get the objects being passed to them and say, “oh, a/an (name of the object)!” The chant goes on until they get their object.

Student 1: This is a/an (object). (*Look at the student on the left as she/he passes the object.*)

Student 2: Uh what? (*Look at the student on the right as she/he passes the object.*)

Student 1: A/an (object). (*Look at the student on the left as she/he passes the object.*)

Student 2: Uh what? (*Look at the student on the right as she/he passes the object.*)

Student 1: A/an (object). (*Look at the student on the left as she/he passes the object.*)

Student 2: Oh a/an (object)! (*Look at the student on the right as she/he passes the object.*)

3.2 One Brain

Listening, fluency, timing, precision, and cooperation are necessary to implement this activity successfully. A group of students answers simultaneously and spontaneously when asked a question by other students in the audience. Six is the maximum number of students in the group. No one can lead the group so they have to listen carefully to what kind of sounds are being produced by everyone to be able to answer in full sentences as a group. They respond as if they are embodied as one personal identity. As the group provides information about “herself or himself,” the individual’s personality is gradually being revealed.

Student audience member: One brain, what is your name?

One brain: My name is Hiromi.

Student audience member: How old are you?

One brain: I am 19 years old.

3.3 One-word Story

Listening, fluency, creativity, and critical thinking skills are honed in this collaborative activity. A group of eight to ten members is formed. Each student provides a word to create a story that has a beginning, middle, and an end. The story can be any theme as long as it has coherence and grammar is in use. This activity was also recommended by Bob Kuhlan (2017) for implementing improvisation in business.

Student 1: One

Student 2: night

Student 3: a

Student 4: woman

Student 5: named...

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A questionnaire of nine likert-style items was given to the participants to measure their understanding of theater improvisation in language learning, to evaluate the effectiveness of the facilitator’s instructions, and to gauge their impressions of the workshop and its efficacy in learning English. Moreover, the questions were written both in Japanese and English. The five-point Likert items were categorised into five categories: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree. The Likert-item survey seemed suitable to collect data because it provided the respondents more time to reflect and answer the questions.

In analyzing the results of the Likert-item survey, it is suggested that we should not rely too heavily on interpreting single items because single items are relatively unreliable (Brown 2011, p. 13). Instead the findings should be interpreted as a whole to answer the main question: how effective and suitable are the three improvisation activities as supplementary activities for an ELF class?

Table 1
Actual student response to items on theater improvisation workshop (n=68)

Item	SD	D	N	A	SA
1. I know what “Theater Improvisation in Language Learning” is.	6	11	19	22	10
2. I think the workshop activities using theatre improvisation are effective in learning English.	1	2	11	23	31
3. I understood the facilitator’s instructions.	0	1	9	36	22
4. I think the workshop activities can help improve my English language skills in a natural way.	0	6	15	35	12
5. I feel more confident in using English after the workshop.	1	5	2	25	9
6. I want to do more of theater improvisations to learn English.	0	4	14	23	27
7. I think today’s workshop activities were difficult.	2	14	26	19	7
8. I think today’s workshop was interesting.	0	2	4	27	35

Note: SD=Strongly Disagree, D=Disagree, N=Neither Disagree nor Agree, A= Agree, SA= Strongly Agree.

Survey results in Table 1 summarize the impressions of participants as English language learners in the workshop. More than half of the participants did not understand or were unsure of theater improvisation in language learning even though the workshop facilitator provided an overview before the workshop. Theater improvisation should be explained further so the participants can fully grasp the purpose of the activities. Although some participants did not fully comprehend the

aim of the workshop, interestingly, almost eighty percent responded that they thought the workshop activities were effective ways to develop their English language (item 2). In addition, almost all respondents agreed that the workshop activities could help improve their English language skills in a natural way (item 4). In this way, half of participants were led to believe that they gained more confidence (item 5), although twenty-eight (41%) responded neutrally to this question. This suggests that confidence cannot be easily built after participating in theater improvisations activities done only once, but confidence can perhaps be gradually gained through frequent use of such activities. Students generally thought theater improvisations were difficult but nearly all yearned to be engaged in such activities because they found them interesting to learn English.

A majority of the participants understood the workshop facilitators' instructions. Inviting a professional theater artist whose first language is not English but speaks English as an official language in his home country provided an ELF atmosphere during the workshop. Students were shy at the beginning of the workshop, but later on appeared to have gained motivation and engaged with the activities in a visibly enthusiastic manner.

Table 2

Student evaluation of the enjoyment of individual activities (n=68)

Theater improvisation activities	Total student response
One-word Story	25
One Brain	23
Other Activities*	18
This is a...	2

*Note: Other activities are improvisations that are not discussed in this paper.

Table 2 shows that One-word Story and One Brain appeared to be the most enjoyable activities. Both listening and fluency activities entail collaboration to achieve a positive outcome. A couple of students commented particularly on One Brain as a difficult activity because participants have different response to the questions they are supposed to answer simultaneously as a group. However, they added that it was interesting and that they would be willing to repeat the activity.

The last part of the survey was an open question for comments or suggestions. Forty-nine students generally wrote that they enjoyed and were interested in the activities. Furthermore, some students revealed that the workshop was difficult but that it was an effective way to learn speaking English naturally and that the cooperativeness in such activities made them appropriate to an ELF learning environment. Below are samples of the students' comments in details that express their positive feedback. However, one student wrote that he or she thought theater improvisations had a connection with English learning but later on realized there was no meaning to it. Perhaps, if the facilitator had explained more clearly the purpose of

each activity, the student would find more meaning in executing the activities more effectively.

It was very difficult. My head gets caught up, but as soon as I repeat it, I will have the power to think (in) English instantly.

----Student 1

I realized that (I) was talking in my English in my own words.

----Student 2

It was fun speaking English naturally.

----Student 3

It was very difficult to match the words that we wanted to say but it was a lot of fun to cooperate.

----Student 4

Based on the learners' comments on the questionnaire, it appears that their insights can be summarized and interpreted into three main points. The first notable point is the requirement for spontaneous verbal expression that is fundamental to most of the activities, so that careful listening is a distinctive attribute to improvisation activities. This sentiment is found in Maley and Duff's (2005) commentary on drama in the language classroom. Moreover, self-expression reveals a part of their personality in each activity. Even though shy and quiet students are not actively involved, they can still benefit just by enjoying what they see or hear. The second notable point discovered in participant's responses is that they are prompted to respond immediately because improvisational theater requires a collaborative effort which makes them thrive on the responsibility of what happens during the activities. The teachers or facilitators, therefore, do not always have to lead and give instructions (Wilson, 2016). The third notable point is that overcoming the challenge of the activities becomes the fun of the activity, so motivation is imbibed in the learning process.

Based on my observation, the students, at first, were shy when the theater director started giving instructions. They appeared to listen carefully as they tried to be familiar with his way of speaking and to reply only in English as they knew that the director could not understand any Japanese word. That moment was an ELF experience for them. Laughter between the audience and performers common in all the activities created a relaxed atmosphere during the workshop. And, whenever a student made a mistake or struggled with words, the other group members voluntarily showed encouragement and support.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

By introducing three improvisation activities and analyzing the survey results, it is evident that ELF students benefit from theater improvisations because of the following reasons: (1) they feel that the activities have improved their confidence and fluency; (2) improvisations are suitable for ELF because they do not limit the users to conform to the ENL conventions of grammar and usage but rather make use of the actual English they are aware of; (3) theater improvisations increase their motivation since they find the activities enjoyable and interesting; (4) the collaborative activities encourage the learner to say something to someone, then she or he has to accept the situation and add to it.

Teachers can adapt and use theater improvisations as extra English activities in an ELF class. The improvisations that can be customized to the learners' proficiency level can be designed so as not to make the the students feel their lack of communicative ability. Furthermore, the activities reveal the participants' creativity and English proficiency through their spontaneous expressions of feelings and opinions. Constructive feedback from teachers and students is necessary to foster creativity and develop self-awareness and awareness of others in language use.

Since this is a pilot study, the data gathering method can be made more accurate, particularly the survey. In future iterations, perhaps neutrality should not be allowed in the Likert scale so respondents have to choose either a positive or a negative answer. Survey results have been shown to be more accurate if an even number of choices are provided such as strongly agree, agree, slightly agree, slightly disagree, disagree and strongly disagree (Brown, 2011). Furthermore, in order to provide a richer and more diverse data set for analysis, focus group discussions can be conducted on the nature of drama activities with English learners of a high proficiency level. Only three improvisations as supplementary activities prove to be effective and suitable for ELF learners in this study but introducing more activities could be explored for future research.

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