

A Killer Course: Building Confidence and Communication Skills Through Performance-Assisted Learning

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Abstract

This paper discusses a university course designed to develop students' expressive communication skills through Performance-Assisted Learning (PAL), culminating in a collaborative filmmaking project. The course, *Performance*, targeted students who are often less engaged in traditional lecture-based classes, particularly student athletes, and was designed to create a student-centered, active learning environment. Building on prior experience using PAL in required English communication courses, I introduced filmmaking as a performance project to examine its impact on student engagement and expressive communication. Students completed activities such as scripted conversations and reader's theater in English, and produced a short film in Japanese based on Ernest Hemingway's "The Killers." Classroom observations and student feedback indicated increased student motivation, participation, and confidence. The findings suggest that integrating PAL activities, including collaborative filmmaking, into university courses can promote expressive communication skills, confidence, and motivation among less engaged students.

本研究は、Performance-Assisted Learning (PAL) を活用し、学生の表現的コミュニケーション能力の向上を目的とした大学授業について考察するものであり、その集大成として協働的な映像制作プロジェクトを実施したものである。本授業「Performance」は、従来の講義中心型授業では参加意欲が低くなりがちな学生、特に学生アスリートを主な対象とし、学生主体のアクティブ・ラーニング環境の構築を目指して設計された。本研究では、必修の英語コミュニケーション科目における PAL の実践経験を基盤として、パフォーマンス活動の一環として映像制作を導入し、それが学生の参加度および表現的コミュニケーションに与える影響を検討した。学生は英語によるスクリプト会話や

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リーダーズ・シアターといった活動に取り組むとともに、アーネスト・ヘミングウェイの『The Killers』を基にした短編映画を日本語で制作した。授業観察および学生アンケートの結果から、学習意欲、授業参加度、自信の向上が確認された。これらの結果は、協働的な映像制作を含む PAL 活動を大学授業に取り入れることで、従来型授業では関与が低くなりがちな学生に対しても、表現的コミュニケーション能力、自信、学習意欲の向上を促進できる可能性を示唆している。

In many university courses, students are expected to communicate with their peers and instructors, participate in whole-class and small-group discussions, and present their ideas effectively in front of others. However, many students struggle with expressive communication, particularly when required to speak or perform in front of their peers. Students may lack confidence, have little experience speaking in front of an audience, or feel anxious about making mistakes in front of others. As a result, some students become reluctant to participate in class activities that require speaking or presenting.

Despite these expectations, many Japanese university classes are still conducted in a teacher-centered format in which the instructor delivers content while students listen, take notes, and work individually. While this format may be effective for transmitting information, it often provides limited opportunities for students to actively participate or develop expressive communication skills. In lecture-based classes, some students may choose to remain passive and avoid participation, while others may be reluctant to speak due to lack of confidence or anxiety about speaking in front of their peers. In both cases, students may have few opportunities to practice communication or develop presentation abilities. Therefore, there is a need for more learner-centered teaching approaches that encourage active engagement and provide students with opportunities to develop expressive communication in a supportive classroom environment (King, 2014).

One approach that may address these issues is Performance-Assisted Learning (PAL). PAL is an approach in which performance activities are used to teach, practice, reinforce, and evaluate course content (Head et al., 2018). Through performance activities such as role-plays, skits, presentations, debates, radio drama, reader's theater, storytelling, and film projects, students use not only words, but also voice, gesture, facial expression, and movement to communicate meaning. Because these activities are interactive, collaborative, and require active participation, PAL can help create a supportive and non-threatening classroom environment that encourages students to participate more actively in the learning process. I have been researching and implementing PAL in university courses for several years, particularly in required English communication courses

where many students are initially reluctant to participate in speaking activities. I am also a member of the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) Performance in Education (PIE) Special Interest Group (SIG), which promotes the use of performance activities in education. Based on this experience, this study explores how PAL can be used to develop expressive communication skills in a university performance course.

This paper describes the design and implementation of a university course titled *Performance* (文化表現論), which I was asked to take over from a previous instructor and was given the opportunity to redesign the syllabus. The course was intended for students who are often reluctant to participate in traditional lecture-based classes, particularly student athletes, and was therefore structured to create a student-centered, active-learning environment. The course included performance activities conducted in both English and Japanese, including scripted conversations, reader's theater, and a collaborative filmmaking project based on "The Killers" (Hemingway, 1927). This paper describes the course structure and implementation, examines student feedback, and argues that integrating PAL activities, such as collaborative filmmaking, provides a student-centered, active-learning approach that fosters the development of expressive communication skills, confidence, and motivation among less engaged students.

Literature Review

Performance-Assisted Learning

Performance-Assisted Learning (PAL) is an instructional approach that uses performance activities to assist in the learning, consolidation, and assessment of course content (Head et al., 2018; Kluge, 2018). PAL includes activities such as role-plays, presentations, debates, reader's theater, storytelling, radio drama, and film production, in which students use voice, gesture, facial expression, and movement in addition to spoken language to communicate meaning. Because these activities require students to actively participate and communicate with others, PAL emphasizes expressive communication and active learning.

PAL is distinct from Performance-Based Learning (PBL) in which performance, such as rehearsing and performing a full play, is the central component of a drama course. In contrast, PAL incorporates performance as a task within a broader curriculum or syllabus (Kluge, 2018). In this sense, PAL can be understood as a form of Task-Based Learning (TBL), as students complete performance tasks that focus on communicating meaning and producing a clear outcome. TBL teaching emphasizes meaning-focused communication and the completion of purposeful tasks that reflect real-world language use (Ellis, 2003).

Another important aspect of PAL is that performance tasks can be used not only for practice but also for assessment. Through rehearsal and performance, students have multiple opportunities to practice and refine their communication skills while allowing instructors to observe and evaluate their performance. A growing body of research suggests that performance-based activities can enhance student motivation, participation, and confidence, particularly among learners who may be less actively involved in traditional classroom settings (Boudreault, 2010; Charles & Kusanagi, 2007; Head et al., 2018; Kluge, 2018). Consequently, PAL has been applied in a variety of educational contexts to promote active learning and develop communication skills.

Student-Centered Learning and Active Learning

Student-centered learning is an approach in which students take an active role in the learning process rather than passively receiving information from the instructor. In learner-centered classrooms, students are expected to participate in discussions, collaborate with their peers, and take responsibility for their own learning. This approach contrasts with traditional teacher-centered instruction, in which the instructor delivers content while students listen, take notes, and complete assignments individually. In many lecture-based classes, students may have limited opportunities to actively participate or communicate, which can lead to passive learning and low levels of engagement.

Active learning is closely related to student-centered learning and refers to instructional methods that require students to actively engage in the learning process through discussion, collaboration, problem-solving, and creative tasks. Research suggests that students learn more effectively when they are actively involved in the learning process rather than passively listening to lectures (Jacobs & Farrell, 2001; Prince, 2004; Savignon, 2002). Fleming (2006) notes that drama activities are inherently learner-centered because they require active cooperation and social interaction among students, making learning a shared and participatory experience rather than an individual one.

Furthermore, performance activities such as drama and reader's theater can be considered active learning experiences because students do not simply study language or communication skills, but instead practice and apply them in meaningful contexts. As students work together to prepare and perform, they become active participants in the learning process rather than passive learners (Rees, 2018). For these reasons, student-centered and active learning approaches are closely connected to PAL, which emphasizes learning through participation, collaboration, and performance.

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Another theoretical perspective that supports student-centered and active learning is constructivism, which suggests that students gain knowledge by actively constructing it through experience and interaction rather than through memorization alone (Fosnot & Perry, 2005, as cited in Head et al., 2018). PAL aligns with this perspective because students do not simply study content, but instead interpret, practice, and present what they have learned through performance activities. Newmann and Wehlage (1995, as cited in Head et al., 2018) argue that academic achievement should involve students expressing what they have learned through performances, presentations, or other forms of meaningful communication. As an instructional approach that requires students to create and perform for an audience, PAL can be considered a form of authentic pedagogy that promotes deep engagement and active learning (Head et al., 2018).

Performance and the Non-Threatening Environment

Performance and drama-based activities have long been used in education to encourage student participation and develop communication skills. One reason these activities are effective is that they help create a supportive and non-threatening classroom environment. In traditional classrooms, many students feel anxious about speaking in front of others and may fear making mistakes or being judged by their peers. However, performing as a character or as part of a group can shift the focus away from the individual, helping to reduce anxiety and make participation easier. This effect has also been observed in more recent studies of PBL, which highlight how supportive, low-stress environments can increase student confidence and participation (see Rees, 2025 for these citations). Similar findings have been reported in research on drama-based instruction, which suggests that non-threatening classroom environments can positively influence student attitudes, motivation, and self-confidence (Charles & Kusanagi, 2007).

Performance-based tasks are also inherently collaborative and require students to work together toward a shared goal. Fleming (2006) notes that drama is learner-centered because it depends on active cooperation and social interaction. Similarly, activities such as reader's theater and radio drama promote teamwork and help build a sense of group cohesion (Maiullo, 2018). This collaborative dimension is particularly important in contexts where students may be hesitant to participate individually, as working within a group can increase confidence and willingness to contribute. Social learning theory further suggests that students learn more effectively through interaction and shared experiences, as collaboration enhances engagement and supports the development of communication skills (Rees, 2025).

In addition to fostering collaboration, performance activities provide students with opportunities to practice expressive communication skills such as voice projection, intonation,

gesture, and facial expression, all of which are essential for effective presentations and public speaking (Rees, 2018). Through rehearsal and performance, students refine these skills in meaningful contexts rather than practicing them in isolation. Moreover, engaging in creative and interactive tasks has been shown to increase motivation and enjoyment, while also supporting confidence development and reducing anxiety (Rees, 2025). As a result, performance-based approaches are often described as both motivating and confidence-building, particularly for students who are less engaged or hesitant to participate in traditional lecture-based classes.

Filmmaking, Project-Based Learning, and Collaborative Performance

Collaborative performance projects such as radio drama and filmmaking can be viewed as extensions of PAL, which incorporate elements of project-based and experiential learning. These activities require students to work together over an extended period of time to create a final product, combining multiple communication skills in a meaningful and authentic context. Unlike shorter performance tasks, project-based activities involve planning, rehearsal, revision, and production, which can deepen student engagement and promote a greater sense of ownership over the learning process.

In radio drama, students collaborate to produce scripted audio performances, focusing primarily on vocal expression, timing, and coordination. While this format supports the development of expressive speaking skills, it may still require a relatively high level of comprehension of the source material. In contrast, filmmaking allows students to physically enact scenes through movement, gesture, and spatial interaction, which can support a deeper understanding of narrative, character relationships, and emotional context. By acting out scenes, students must interpret meaning and make decisions about how to represent it, thereby engaging more fully with the content.

The embodied and multimodal nature of performance has been shown in my previous work to support both comprehension and expressive communication. In a study involving the re-creation of a film scene, students were asked to act out and perform a selected scene in order to deepen their understanding of course content while developing skills such as voice inflection, gesture, and facial expression (Rees, 2017). Students initially showed hesitation, but gradually became more engaged and collaborative as they worked together to perform the short scene. The activity also reduced cognitive burden by using a manageable script, allowing students to focus on expression and meaning. In the performance, students recreated a scene from the film *42* (Helgeland, 2013), depicting racial discrimination experienced by Jackie Robinson in a major league baseball game. Through physically enacting the scene, students were able to engage more deeply with the

emotional and social context, suggesting that performance can support not only linguistic development but also a deeper understanding of cultural and historical content.

A similar effect can be observed in filmmaking projects based on literary texts. In the present study, students produced a short film adaptation of Ernest Hemingway's "The Killers", which is set in 1920s America during the Prohibition era, a period in which the sale and production of alcohol were legally banned in the United States (1920–1933). The ban led to the rise of illegal alcohol production and distribution, as well as increased organized crime and gang-related violence associated with the black-market alcohol trade. While students were first provided with background information to support their understanding of the historical context, acting out the scenes required them to interpret and embody the social dynamics, character motivations, and cultural setting of the story. Through this process, students were able to develop a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the text, as well as its historical and cultural context, than would likely have been achieved through reading alone.

In addition to supporting comprehension, filmmaking projects promote collaboration and teamwork, as students take on different roles such as actors, directors, and editors. This shared responsibility can increase motivation and encourage active engagement, particularly among students who are less engaged in traditional classroom settings. Because filmmaking involves creating a product for an audience, it also provides a sense of purpose and authenticity that can further enhance engagement.

For the reasons described above, collaborative filmmaking can be understood as a natural extension of PAL, combining elements of performance, project-based learning, and collaborative learning. As such, it offers a promising approach for creating student-centered, active learning environments that support the development of expressive communication skills, confidence, and motivation.

A PAL Research Project

Introducing the Research

This study was conducted at a private university in Japan within the Faculty of Policy Management. The course, titled *Performance* (文化表現論), was a semester-long elective designed to develop students' expressive communication skills through performance-based activities. The class met once a week for 90 minutes over a 15-week semester. I was asked to take over the course from a previous instructor and was given the opportunity to redesign the curriculum. Drawing on my prior experience using PAL in required English communication

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courses, the course was restructured to emphasize active participation and student-centered learning.

The participants were non-English major university students, the majority of whom were members of university athletic teams. As indicated in the course overview, the class consisted predominantly of male students (17 male, 1 female) with generally low motivation for studying English and relatively basic English proficiency. For many students, the course was selected as an alternative to other available classes rather than out of a strong academic interest in English or communication studies. These characteristics made the group representative of learners who are often less engaged in traditional lecture-based classroom environments.

Course Structure and Objectives

In response to these learner characteristics, the course was designed to provide frequent opportunities for active engagement through collaborative performance tasks. The primary goals of the course included helping students speak more smoothly and naturally, build confidence when speaking in front of others, and develop teamwork and self-expression skills such as voice projection, intonation, and gesture. While much of the course incorporated English-language activities, the final filmmaking project was conducted in Japanese, allowing students to focus more fully on expressive and collaborative aspects of performance.

The course included a range of PAL activities such as scripted conversations, reader's theatre, and a collaborative filmmaking project based on Ernest Hemingway's "The Killers." These activities were designed to progressively build students' expressive communication skills and confidence, culminating in the production of a short film. Through this structure, the course aimed to create a supportive, student-centered environment in which learners could actively engage with both language and performance.

Implementation of Performance-Assisted Learning

Scripted Conversation Activity

The scripted conversation activity used in this course was adapted from a unit in the textbook *Performance* (Harrington & LeBeau, 2013) although the textbook itself was not formally adopted for the course. The selected unit focused on the theme of giving instructions and explaining procedures, and included a short skit in which a husband and wife communicate from different locations within a house. This scenario provided a useful framework for encouraging

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students to practice voice projection and clarity, as they were required to speak across a distance. In addition, the inclusion of contrasting character roles (a husband and wife) created opportunities for humor and increased student engagement, particularly in a class composed primarily of male students, as students were required to take on gender roles that differed from their own. The use of simple props, such as a bathrobe and a coffee maker, further enhanced the realism of the scene and encouraged students to embody their roles more fully. Students were asked to enter the scene as if they had just woken up, which added a performative and humorous dimension to the activity and helped reduce anxiety by creating a more relaxed and playful atmosphere.

The spatial arrangement of the performance further contributed to the effectiveness of the activity. Performers were positioned at opposite ends of the classroom, with the audience seated between them, requiring student actors to project their voices clearly across the room. This setup also created a dynamic viewing experience, as audience members needed to shift their attention between speakers. As a result, the activity took on a more theatrical quality, reinforcing the importance of vocal clarity while increasing audience engagement.

In addition to the main dialogue, the unit included preparatory activities such as listening exercises and guided script work, which supported comprehension and familiarized students with the language and context of the skit. While these materials informed the design of the activity, the classroom implementation was adapted to emphasize performance elements such as vocal projection, gesture, and physical positioning. By modifying the original activity in this way, the task was aligned more closely with the goals of PAL, particularly the development of expressive communication skills and active student participation.

While students generally responded positively to the activity, many initially had difficulty remembering their lines. Because the skit was structured as a demonstration task in which students explained the process of making coffee, each line corresponded to a specific step in the procedure. To support both comprehension and recall, students were required to incorporate at least one gesture for each line of dialogue, physically representing each step in the process. This requirement encouraged students to connect language with action, and appeared to support memorization and recall by linking verbal output with embodied movement. As students repeated the activity, their performances became more fluid and coordinated, suggesting that the integration of gesture not only enhanced expressiveness but also facilitated understanding and retention of the content.

The use of gestures also contributed to a humorous and engaging classroom atmosphere. Because each line was paired with a physical action, the audience could observe performers enacting each step while occasionally struggling to recall the corresponding English expressions. This type of visible, low-stakes struggle appeared to reduce performance pressure and create a

more supportive environment, as mistakes were framed as part of the performance rather than as failures. In this way, the activity not only supported language production and recall, but also encouraged risk-taking and increased student willingness to participate. The activity was implemented through a series of structured steps designed to gradually develop students' expressive communication skills and confidence, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Steps for the “Making the Morning Coffee” Scripted Conversation Activity

Step	Activity	Description
1	Class reading	Students read the script as a class to develop general understanding.
2	Pair reading	Students work in pairs and determine roles for the performance.
3	Voice projection practice	Students practice reading from a distance (e.g., opposite sides of the classroom) to develop voice projection.
4	Gesture integration	Students act out the script, incorporating at least one gesture per line.
5	Padlet recording (homework)	Students record and upload their performance to a dedicated Padlet board for review and reflection.
6	Final performance with props	Students perform the scene using props (e.g., coffee maker, filter, box, cups, bathrobe).
7	Performance conditions	Students stand on opposite sides of the classroom and project their voices over the audience.

Reader's Theater

The reader's theater activity was based on the play “Slow Food” from the Oxford graded reader *Five Short Plays* (Ford, 2008). This script was selected for both thematic and pedagogical reasons. The play encourages reflection on the fast pace of modern life and promotes the idea of slowing down and appreciating everyday experiences, extending the concept of “slow food” to a broader notion of a “slow life.” In addition, the setting of a fast-food restaurant provided a familiar and relatable context for university students, helping to increase engagement and comprehension.

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From a pedagogical perspective, the play also includes multiple choral lines in which customers speak in unison, requiring students to coordinate timing and delivery. This feature was particularly valuable in promoting collaboration and teamwork, as students needed to listen carefully to one another and rehearse together to achieve a cohesive performance. As a result, the activity supported not only the development of expressive communication skills, but also group cohesion and cooperative learning. This aligns with the principles of PAL, in which meaning is constructed through collaborative and expressive performance.

The play also provided opportunities for cultural reflection and discussion. Set in an American fast-food restaurant, the story portrays customers becoming increasingly frustrated after waiting an unusually long time for their orders, eventually confronting the cashier, who reveals that no food is being prepared. While the situation is exaggerated for dramatic effect, it highlights differences in customer behavior and service expectations across cultural contexts. This contrast allowed the instructor to guide discussion on how service interactions and expectations may differ between Japan and the United States. For example, students were encouraged to consider differences in communication style, customer reactions, and perceptions of service quality. In this way, the activity extended beyond language practice, serving as a means of developing cultural awareness alongside expressive communication skills, which further increased student engagement by connecting the performance to real-world experiences and cross-cultural understanding. The reader's theatre activity was implemented through a structured sequence of steps designed to support the development of fluency, expressive reading, and collaborative performance, as outlined in Table 2.

Table 2

Steps for the "Slow Food" Reader's Theater Activity

Step	Activity	Description
1	Script introduction	Students are introduced to the script and its context.
2	Class reading	The script is read aloud as a class to ensure comprehension.
3	Role assignment	Students are assigned or choose roles within the script.
4	Group rehearsal	Students practice reading their parts in groups, focusing on pronunciation and fluency.

Step	Activity	Description
5	Expressive reading practice	Students work on intonation, pacing, and emotional expression.
6	Coordination and timing	Groups rehearse together to synchronize delivery, particularly for chorus lines.
7	Performance conditions	Students perform the script as a group, focusing on clear delivery, expressive reading, and synchronized timing, particularly during chorus lines.

Collaborative Filmmaking Project

The final project of the course was a collaborative filmmaking assignment based on Ernest Hemingway's short story "The Killers." Set in 1920s Prohibition-era America, a period marked by organized crime and gang violence, the story follows two hitmen who arrive at a small-town restaurant in search of a former boxer who has double-crossed an associate. Much of the narrative unfolds through tense, dialogue-driven interactions, with minimal narration and an emphasis on atmosphere and character dynamics. This structure made the story particularly well-suited for adaptation into a performance-based format, as students could focus on interpreting meaning through dialogue, movement, and interaction. In addition, the predominantly male cast of characters aligned well with the composition of the class, and the limited number of settings, Henry's restaurant and Ole Anderson's room, made it feasible to recreate the story using available classroom spaces.

The decision to implement filmmaking, rather than radio drama, was informed by the characteristics of the student group. While radio drama had been used successfully in previous courses with higher-proficiency learners, it was considered too demanding for this group, as it requires a strong command of both linguistic and cultural content. In contrast, filmmaking was selected because its visual and embodied elements were expected to support comprehension by allowing students to interpret and represent meaning through action as well as language. To further support comprehension, students were shown a short film adaptation of *The Killers* produced by Soviet film students (Beiku et al., 1956), which provided students a visual model of the narrative prior to beginning their own productions.

The filmmaking project was designed to be carried out within the constraints of regular class time and available campus facilities. Filming took place in a learning commons space

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adjacent to the library, while the regular classroom was used for preparation and rehearsal. Consideration of location and available space was an important factor in the design of the project, as the limited number of settings in the story allowed it to be adapted effectively within the classroom environment.

Students first read an adapted version of Hemingway's "The Killers" before using a radio drama adaptation by Marguerite (2015) as the script for their film projects. The radio drama script was then modified to suit the needs of the class and adapted for a visual performance format, culminating in the production of student-created film adaptations of *The Killers*. The script included six main characters as well as several minor roles. In order to ensure that all students had meaningful participation, the class was divided into three casts, and each scene was filmed three times with different groups of performers. Some students took on multiple roles across different scenes. During filming sessions, two casts were typically present in the learning commons of the university which served as the filming space: one group performed the scene there while the other assisted with filming, set adjustments, and support tasks. After completing a scene, groups rotated back to the regular classroom to rehearse subsequent scenes, while another cast took their place in the filming space. Although this rotational system presented logistical challenges, it allowed for continuous engagement and ensured that all students were actively involved in both performance and production processes. This structure also encouraged collaboration beyond performance, as students engaged in both creative and technical aspects of the filmmaking process.

To ensure that the filmmaking project provided meaningful opportunities for language development, a number of structured preparatory activities were incorporated. One key activity involved having students create detailed character profiles in English for the roles they would portray. Using a guided worksheet written in English, students developed their characters by specifying attributes such as name, age, gender, nationality, marital status, profession, educational background, personality traits, physical appearance, manner of speaking, fashion, hobbies, and special skills. Students then interviewed each other asking questions about each of these traits. This activity encouraged the use of descriptive language and required students to think carefully about how their characters would communicate and behave.

Building on this, students were asked to deliver self-introductions in English, in character, in front of the class. To support this task, a structured template was provided in English, guiding students in organizing and expressing key aspects of their character's identity. This activity required students to present their character's background while beginning to embody the role through voice, tone, and physical expression. Although the final film was produced in Japanese, these preparatory activities ensured that students engaged in sustained and scaffolded language use as part of the creative process. In this way, the filmmaking project supported both language

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development and expressive performance, while also helping students build confidence in using English in a meaningful and contextualized manner.

The production phase required a number of practical adaptations due to time, budget, and environmental constraints. In the original story, the hitmen are described as wearing long coats, hats, and scarves, concealing weapons and appearing out of place in the setting. However, because filming took place during the summer and resources were limited, these elements were adapted for practicality. Instead of heavy clothing, students used simple items such as baseball caps to suggest character identity. In addition, because the original story involves concealed weapons, the hitmen carried baseball bats as a visible substitute, allowing the scene to retain a sense of tension while remaining feasible within the classroom environment.

The set design was similarly improvised using available classroom resources. Desks and chairs were arranged to represent the restaurant space, and whiteboards were used to suggest divisions between areas such as the dining space and kitchen. Although minimal, this constructed environment provided a sufficient visual framework to support students' understanding of the narrative setting and character interactions.

Students also faced challenges in memorizing their lines within the limited production schedule. To address this, scripts were incorporated into the performance in a naturalistic way, such as being concealed within menus or placed on tables, allowing students to refer to them as needed. While this approach deviated from traditional expectations of memorized performance, it enabled students to focus more on delivery, interaction, and overall scene development. Despite the absence of a formal production budget, these adaptations allowed students to create a coherent and meaningful representation of the story, while also supporting comprehension through active, embodied engagement with the text.

Because of time limitations, the editing phase was completed by the instructor using iMovie after the final class session, and the finished film was uploaded to Padlet for student viewing. In a more extended implementation, students could be involved in the editing process using classroom computers, further enhancing their engagement with the production. The collaborative filmmaking project was implemented through a multi-stage process designed to support comprehension, character development, expressive performance, and production, as outlined in Table 3.

Table 3

Steps for “The Killers” Collaborative Filmmaking Project

Step	Activity	Description
1	Text introduction and background	Students read an adapted version of Hemingway’s “The Killers” as a class for comprehension and are introduced to the historical context of the Prohibition era.
2	Comprehension checks	Students complete quizzes on key scenes (Scenes 1 and 2) to confirm understanding of the story.
3	Model viewing	Students watch a short example of a student-produced film adaptation to observe performance and filming techniques.
4	Group formation and role assignment	Students form groups and take on roles such as actors, directors, and production support.
5	Script marking (voice)	Students annotate the radio drama adaptation script (Marguerite, 2015) for voice inflection, stress, and pacing in preparation for performance.
6	Padlet audio recording (homework)	Students record individual lines with attention to voice inflection and upload them for review.
7	Script marking (emotion)	Students annotate scripts to reflect emotional tone and character intention, followed by additional recordings.
8	Character development	Students create character profiles, including background and personality traits.
9	Character interview	Students interview each other in character to deepen understanding of roles.
10	Character self-introduction	Students introduce themselves as their characters, reinforcing role embodiment.
11	Filming and reflection	Students film scenes over approximately 2–3 weeks, with ongoing recordings and weekly reflection activities.

Step	Activity	Description
12	Film editing and distribution	The instructor edits the film using iMovie. The completed film is then uploaded to Padlet for viewing.

Overall, the course was structured as a progression of PAL activities that moved from controlled, low-risk tasks to more complex and creative forms of performance. Beginning with scripted conversations, students developed foundational skills such as voice projection, clarity, and the use of gesture to convey meaning. Reader's theater activities then extended these skills by emphasizing intonation, timing, and expressive delivery within a collaborative group setting. These activities prepared students for the collaborative filmmaking project in which they were required to integrate voice, gesture, movement, and emotional expression in a more open-ended and learner-centered context. Through this sequence, the course emphasized learning through active participation and performance, providing students with meaningful opportunities to develop expressive communication skills, confidence, and collaboration. The following section examines the student evaluations of this approach, focusing on student engagement, motivation, and the development of expressive communication skills.

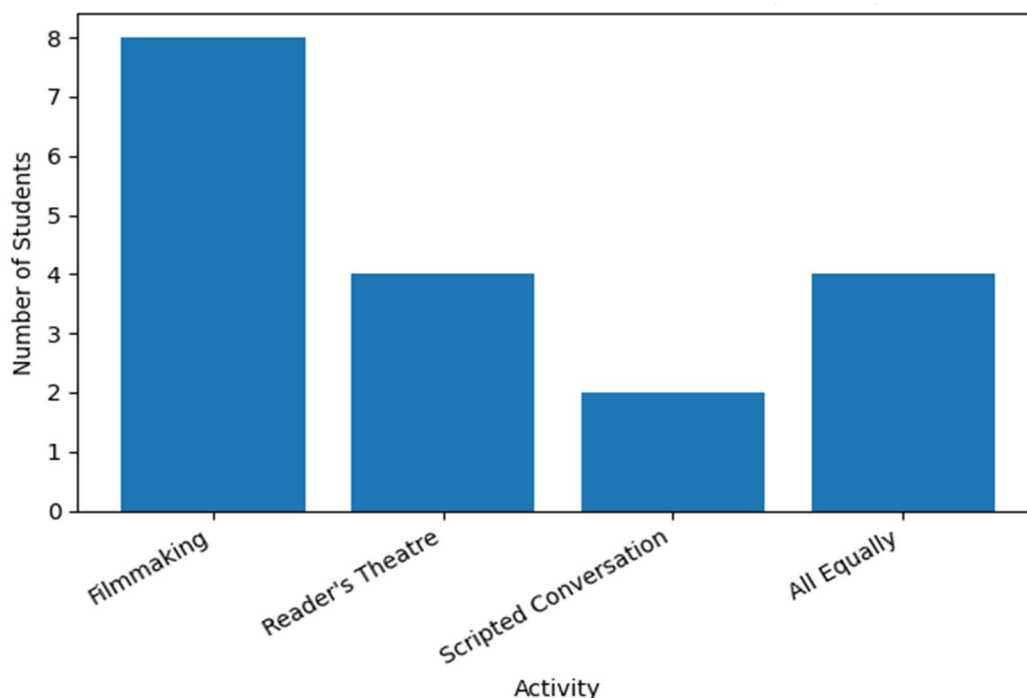
Student Feedback and Observations

Student Engagement and Motivation

A ten-question survey was administered to students during the final class of the semester to gather feedback on their experiences with the performance activities, including their perceived effects on motivation, confidence, and learning. The survey included a combination of Likert-style items and open-ended questions, allowing for the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. Student survey results indicate a generally positive response to the PAL activities, with a particular preference for the filmmaking project. Of the 18 students surveyed, eight identified the filmmaking project as their most enjoyable activity, while four selected reader's theater, two selected scripted conversations, and four reported enjoying all activities equally. These results suggest that while all PAL activities were well received, the filmmaking project was especially engaging for the majority of students. This may be attributed to its collaborative, creative, and multimodal nature, which allowed students to actively participate in both performance and production processes. All students indicated that they would be willing to take a similar course again, suggesting a high level of motivation and overall satisfaction with the course. As shown in Figure 1, the filmmaking project was the most preferred activity among students.

Figure 1

Student Preferences for PAL Activities (N = 18)



In addition to these quantitative results, qualitative feedback gathered from students' responses to the open-ended questions further supports the value of the activities in promoting engagement. Students reported that the activities were enjoyable, interactive, and different from traditional lecture-based classes, contributing to a more motivating and student-centered learning environment.

Expressive Communication

Student responses suggest that the activities were effective in developing expressive communication skills. Eleven students (61%) noted the importance of non-verbal elements such as gesture, facial expression, and vocal variation. For example, students reported that “gesture is necessary,” “facial expression is important,” and that they learned to use voice strength and variation when speaking. Others commented that “you need to move more than you think to communicate,” highlighting an increased awareness of the role of physical expression in communication. At the same time, some students noted that combining language and expression was challenging, suggesting that the activities pushed them beyond their usual communication practices. These responses indicate that students were not only practicing language, but also developing a deeper understanding of how meaning is conveyed through multiple modes of

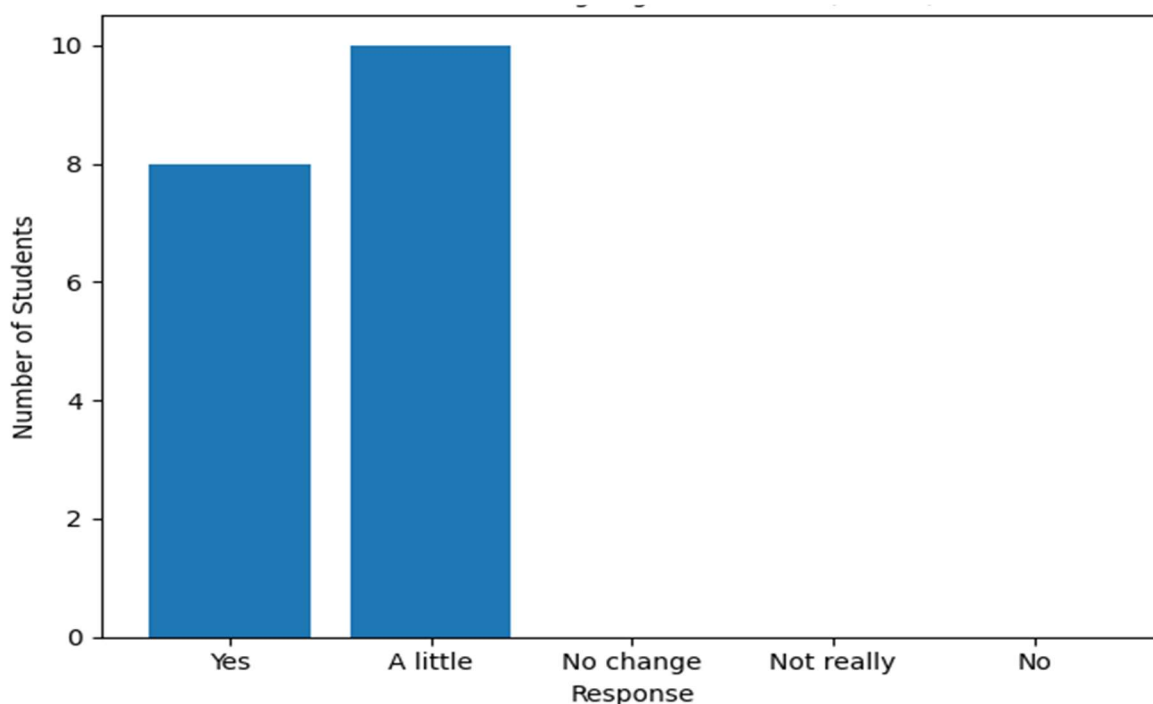
expression. These findings are consistent with previous research on performance-based learning, which highlights the importance of gesture, vocal variation, and embodied communication in developing expressive language skills (Fleming, 2006; Rees, 2018).

Collaboration

Student feedback also highlights the importance of collaboration in the learning process. Twelve students (67%) reported that working in groups helped them learn more effectively and develop communication skills. Responses such as “I learned the importance of cooperation,” “my communication skills improved,” and “it became easier to understand” suggest that collaborative performance activities created a supportive learning environment. In addition, students noted that they were able to learn from their peers and work together more smoothly over time. These findings support the idea that PAL activities promote social learning and help build a sense of group cohesion in the classroom. As shown in Figure 2, all students reported that performance activities contributed to increased confidence in using English, with no students selecting neutral or negative response options.

Figure 2

Student Responses to “Did Performance Activities Help Build Confidence in Using English?” (N = 18)



Filmmaking

The filmmaking project, in particular, appeared to play a significant role in deepening students' understanding of the course content. Thirteen students (72%) reported that making a film helped them understand the story and its characters better, while the remaining five students (28%) indicated that it improved their understanding "a little." These findings suggest that acting out scenes and physically embodying characters encouraged students to interpret the narrative and represent meaning through both verbal and non-verbal communication. The combination of performance, collaboration, and visual representation enabled students to move beyond surface-level comprehension and develop a more meaningful understanding of the text and its cultural and historical context. Supplementary language activities designed to support character development also provided all students, including those with minor roles, with meaningful opportunities to engage in expressive speech.

Conclusion

Student feedback and classroom observations indicated that this performance-based approach was particularly effective for learners who are typically less responsive to teacher-centered instruction. The collaborative nature of the activities fostered a sense of shared responsibility and peer support, which in turn contributed to increased motivation and confidence. In addition, the filmmaking project allowed students to engage more deeply with both the linguistic and cultural dimensions of the source material, further enhancing their overall understanding.

While this study was limited to a single course context, the findings suggest that incorporating PAL into language instruction can provide a valuable alternative to more conventional methods, particularly for reluctant learners who may benefit from active, experiential approaches to learning. Future research could explore how similar approaches might be adapted across different proficiency levels and institutional settings.

In this sense, the *Performance* class and filmmaking project based on "The Killers" proved to be a "killer" course in more ways than one, demonstrating high levels of student engagement while effectively enhancing students' expressive communication skills and confidence.

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Improvazilla's Intercultural Improv Dojo: A Pedagogical Case Study of Expressive Development and Belonging in Tokyo

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Abstract

This study presents a pedagogical case study of a long-standing, English-language improv (improvisational theatre) workshop in Tokyo, which functions as a "Third Place" for a diverse cohort of native and second-language (L2) speakers of English. While the benefits of improvisation are widely documented, the specific teaching methodologies that facilitate participant development in adult community settings remain under-examined. Using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) of an in-depth interview with the instructor triangulated with participant data, the paper explores three aspects of this pedagogy: accessibility, syncretism, and contextual response and outcomes. These findings offer practical insights for arts and language educators on fostering expressive agency, and draw attention to resilient yet under-researched foreign-language theatre communities in Japan.

本研究は、母語話者および第二言語（L2）話者からなる多様な参加者層にとっての「サードプレイス（第3の居場所）」として機能している、東京で長年続く英語によるインプロ（即興演劇）ワークショップに関する教育的事例研究である。インプロの有効性は広く報告されているものの、成人のコミュニティ環境において参加者の成長を促す具体的な教授法については、依然として十分に解明されてい

い。本稿では、指導者への深層インタビューに対するリフレクシブ・テーマ分析 (RTA) を実施し、参加者データを用いた多角的検証を交えながら、本教育実践の 3 つの側面 (アクセシビリティ、シンクレティズム、文脈への対応とその成果) を探究する。これらの知見は、表現におけるエージェンシーの育成を目指す芸術および語学の教育者に実践的な示唆を提供するだけでなく、日本において持続的に活動しながらも、これまで学術的な焦点が当てられることの少なかった外国語による演劇コミュニティに光を当てるものである。

This study examines Improvazilla's Improv Dojo in Tokyo, an intercultural workshop led by facilitator Chris Wells. In a city where linguistic barriers and cultural rigidity often lead to isolation, the dojo functions as a “Third Place” (Oldenburg, 1999)—a neutral ground distinct from home and work—where mistakes can be normalized and function as “gifts¹”, and vulnerability is protected. For many international residents, this environment transforms the workshop from a recreational activity into an intercultural Community of Practice (CoP)² (Wenger, 1998) and a social refuge.

As a foreign actor in Tokyo, finding this specific improv workshop became a turning point for my own expressive development in English as an L2, as well as my Performative Expressive Freedom (PEF)³ (Yebra Lara, 2026). While the connection between improv and L2 communication has been documented in Japanese educational contexts (e.g., Gray, 2024; Okada, 2018), witnessing my own development and that of my peers compelled me to investigate the specific pedagogical mechanisms that facilitate these outcomes in a non-formal, community-based setting.

In this research, I am an “insider,” with over three years of participation in the workshop under study. While this perspective offers valuable access, I recognize the potential biases. Therefore, I combine reflexive strategies with methodological triangulation to ask:

¹ "Mistakes as gifts" — An improv principle that reframes errors as creative opportunities. (Katzman & O'Connor, 2018).

² CoP — A social process of learning where members negotiate new ways of being and a shared identity through active, sustained participation.

³ PEF — a felt sense of expressive "lightness" in performance, facilitated by an adaptive navigational agency.

"How is improvisational theatre pedagogy adapted within the Improvazilla Improv Dojo to shape an accessible yet rigorous learning environment for intercultural adult learners?"

Pedagogical Approach in Scholarly Literature

While psychological and social benefits of improv are well documented—such as reduced anxiety (Krueger et al., 2019), increased confidence (Zondag et al., 2020), and improved communication skills (Keates & Beadle-Brown, 2022)—the specific pedagogical dynamics that produce these outcomes in intercultural and L2 contexts remain under-examined.

Foundational texts from pioneers like Viola Spolin (1999), Keith Johnstone (1999), and Del Close (Halpern et al., 1994) provide direction on *how to teach* improv, and Sawyer (2004) extends these principles into education with his notion of “*disciplined improvisation*.” However, despite important precedents existing, such as Lobman’s (2005) foundational study of teacher practice and Ito and Sako’s (2024) recent case study of a Japanese improv instructor, in-depth analyses of community-based improv workshops, especially in intercultural, adult settings, remain limited.

While historical overviews of improv in Japan exist (Sonobe & Fukuda, 2016), along with studies on rural intercultural theatre projects in the country (Head, 2022, 2023), pedagogical analyses of how independent, urban, intercultural community-based performing arts spaces utilizing English as a lingua franca operate remain scarce.

This paper addresses these gaps by analyzing Improvazilla Dojo workshops in Tokyo. This case study offers an opportunity to observe a practical application of the collaborative principles that constitute an “improvisational ethos” (Tanner, 2019)—a learning environment where the work is in service to the collective, power is shared, and participants interact without the pressure of evaluation. Tanner and McCloskey (2023) found these very principles lacking in much of their systematic literature review.

Methodology

I selected the Improvazilla workshop through purposeful sampling as an information-rich case (Patton, 2015), given the instructor's over 30 years of experience, its long history (originating in 1994; Sonobe & Fukuda, 2016), and its unique intercultural environment (a mix of native and L2 English speakers in Tokyo). Data collection primarily consisted of an 2-hour semi-structured interview with the instructor, Chris Wells (who consented to be named). To triangulate these insights, I drew on over eight months of participant observation (mid-January to mid-September 2025), audio recordings, and archival documents.

The analysis applied Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019), following *the six phases: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing potential themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the report*. Informed by my long-term immersion as an insider-researcher, I utilized a hybrid approach to analysis: it was fundamentally inductive but experientially grounded. The inquiry was initially organized around three main areas of interest derived from my prior observation: (1) Accessibility, (2) Content, and (3) Context. During the coding phase, the process remained open and data-driven, facilitating the active generation of codes and themes from the instructor's narrative. Simultaneously, the analysis was theoretically informed by concepts such as Tanner's (2019) improv ethos and Rodenburg's (2008) "Second Circle"—a state of active presence and connection. These concepts served as flexible lenses rather than rigid categories.

Throughout the review phase, I actively sought tensions and contradictions within the data. Some quotations were lightly adjusted for readability without altering meaning.

Informed consent was obtained for data collection and the use of participant photographs and quotations. For images where individual consent from every person pictured was unavailable, all faces were masked to ensure privacy.

Research Setting: The Improvazilla Improv Dojo

The Improvazilla workshop origins trace back to the Tokyo Comedy Store (TCS) in 1994, which Sonobe and Fukuda (2016) identify as one of the two primary streams through which improv was established in Japan. Wells—a founding member whose pioneering role is documented in local publications (Chase, 2019; Narigon, 1995; 2019)—is the central figure in the workshop's subsequent evolution; the company's website offers contemporary context and self-description (Wells, n.d.). His pedagogical approach is informed by a diverse background: a degree in psychology, experience counseling adults with co-occurring mental illness and drug addiction, and a long career in Japan as a professional narrator and voice actor.

Wells describes his pedagogy as “syncretic,” blending philosophies from multiple schools (see Theme 2). During the formal observation period, the curriculum operated on a flexible, pay-per-class model, structured around three weekly workshops:

- **Beginner+:** Focused on short-form⁴ improv and performance fundamentals. While centered on beginner needs, it remains a valuable practice space for experienced players. Held on Wednesdays.
- **Intermediate+:** Focused on long-form⁵ improv structures. Designed for students with an existing foundation in improvisation. Held on Tuesdays.
- **All Levels:** Focused on Genre Long-form improv. Framed as “All Levels,” to welcome participants regardless of their prior improv experience, its weekend schedule further broadens accessibility. Held on Saturdays.

Workshop Attendance and Demographics

Annual class records for 2025 indicated high traffic (over 1,200 attendances across *more than 200* distinct participants). The cohort represents a multicultural attendance where approximately 30 – 40% of participants are non-native (L2) English speakers. Within this diversity, Japanese participants constitute 12.2% (n=26).

⁴ Short-form— Short, self-contained games or scenes, usually unrelated.

⁵ Long-form— Multi-scene formats that emphasize story or theme development over disconnected games or scenes.

Figure 1

Instructor Chris Wells Facilitates a Student Showcase.



Note. Photo provided by Burak Ayaz. (2025).

Findings: The Anatomy of an Intercultural Pedagogy

The analysis generated three interrelated themes that address the research question: (1) Scaffold for Safety and Accessibility, (2) The Syncretic Dojo, and (3) Response to Context & Outcomes. Together, they view the workshop's pedagogy holistically.

Theme 1: Scaffold for Safety and Accessibility

This theme addresses the learning environment that appears to minimize anxiety, build trust, and make improv accessible to a diverse, multicultural, and often transient population.

Engineering Early Success Through Accessibility

The first layer addresses the anxiety that often arises even before a participant enters the workshop. This apprehension is often heightened for foreigners navigating unfamiliar cultural expectations.

With years of experience, Wells recognizes the doubts that often precede participation, as he explains: *"Sometimes literally, someone has thought about taking my*

workshop for a year or a year and a half before they work up the courage to walk through that door... So, I'm not going to squash that person." (Wells, interview)

This understanding informs a pedagogical design aimed at lowering the barrier to entry: accessibility is built into the workshop itself. The flexible drop-in model moves away from the rigid, sequential curricula common in many improv schools. Wells explains that even the All Levels class—though sometimes more demanding—remains open to beginners “because some people can’t come on the weekdays,” adding, “I don’t want [my] pedagogy to get in the way of people learning improv.”

In this way, the structure directly responds to the realities of Tokyo’s international community, allowing participants to join when they can, without the pressure of a long-term commitment. While the Intermediate+ and All Levels classes tend to attract more stable groups of experienced players—allowing content and genres to rotate flexibly with the group’s progression—the Beginner+ class sees a more fluid attendance, with many newcomers cycling in and out. To provide continuity in this shifting environment, Wells designed a year-long curriculum organized around twelve monthly themes (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

The Annual Curriculum for the Improvazilla Impro Dojo's Short-form



Studio Gokko The Improvazilla Impro Dojo Short-form Impro Program					
JANUARY	FEBRUARY	MARCH	APRIL	MAY	JUNE
					
Scene Initiations	Relationships	Status & Archetypes	Space-objects & Environments	Story and Plot	Characters
JULY	AUGUST	SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER
					
Games & Game-like Scenes	Formats and Edits	Themes and Open Scenes	Justification	Genres	Stagecraft and Performance

Note. Image provided by Chris Wells.

This framework intends to give students a clear sense of what to expect and provides the instructor with a structure for selecting exercises and shaping feedback. Core principles such as the practice of “Yes-And”⁶ remain constant while the monthly themes allow all students to practice and revisit those foundational skills. At the same time, the plan remains flexible, adapting each session to the particular mix of students present, maintaining accessibility while still providing consistency. In practice, Wells tailors his exercise choices to the group, selecting “failure-proof” activities when many less experienced participants are present. He explains:

Nothing we did in the [Beginner+] class could result in abject failure, because with “Freeze tag”⁷ we do the “thank you,” and with “Emotional call,”⁸ whatever you do is okay. And then we also did “New Choice,”⁹ which you can’t really fail at that either[...] I want to make it easy for people to succeed, especially when there are many new people. (Wells, interview)

In addition to the careful selection of games, anxiety is further addressed through reframing failure as part of the learning process. As Wells tells students during class: “Embrace “the suck” (being bad at something). “The suck” is part of learning[...] be okay with sucking at something; it’s perfectly all right.” (Beginner+, 25.03.12) This “permission to fail” creates the necessary conditions for early, low-stakes success. Humor and playfulness help to reinforce the joyful, low-stakes environment where trying is more important than the result—an approach that seems to align with Tanner’s (2019) ethos of “participating without evaluation.”

At the same time, this pedagogy exists within a broader artistic boundary: while the “dojo” is designed as an inclusive learning space where “anybody can do improv,” Wells also distinguishes it from performance for a paying audience. As he explains, “Some say it takes seven years to become a good improviser.” (Beginner+, 25.03.12).

⁶ Yes-and — Principle of accepting and building on a partner’s offer.

⁷ Freeze Tag — A two-player game where a scene freezes and a new player enters, taking one performer’s exact position and initiating a different scene. A convention in this workshop allows players to say “thank you” if they feel stuck, signaling their partner to lead instead.

⁸ Emotional Call — An exercise in which directors call out emotions mid-scene, prompting players to shift tone. The instructor frequently reminds students that any level or form of expression is valid.

⁹ New choice — A game where a bell or cue prompts a player to replace their last word or phrase with whatever comes to mind, continuing until the cue stops.

Cultivating Safety and Trust

The data show that participants experienced the environment as supportive, with a “safety net” where mistakes are actively encouraged. This softens the gatekeeping typical of many performance spaces—where there is often a “right way” to do things—allowing experienced performers and beginners to collaborate. Such a structure fosters the non-judgmental space needed for learning through vulnerability.

This safety net is built on consistent practices that reduce perceived risk and reinforce the instructor’s role as a supportive guide rather than an authoritarian judge. Wells consistently presents corrections as subjective, employing phrases such as “*for my money*” or “*this is my opinion*.” This reduces the power distance in the room, enacting what Tanner (2019) terms the principle of “*sharing power*.” He avoids setting himself up as the “*final arbiter*,” recognizing that he offers just “*one perspective on improv, and there are lots of different ways to do it*.” Wells also describes the importance of “lowering his own status”—an approach he explicitly connects to Johnstone (1999). Using statements such as “*I may have explained this poorly*,” he presents himself as fallible, assuming responsibility when an exercise goes wrong and sustaining the low-stakes atmosphere in which mistakes feel permissible.

Regarding exposure, Wells often splits the class into smaller groups, and exercises or scene work performed in front of the entire group is kept explicitly voluntary—especially when many are new or less experienced. At the same time, student showcases are framed as class sessions: participants pay for the class, while family and friends can attend for free. By keeping the showcase within this supportive circle, Wells mitigates the performance anxiety a public-paid show might induce. These strategies are meant to help students feel less exposed and reduce the pressure of being watched.

Trust is also fostered through shared language and embodied modes of presence. The concept of Rodenburg’s (2008) “*Second Circle*”—a state of active presence and connection—plays a central role in this shared vocabulary. Wells constantly connects this concept with foundational improv exercises, providing a shared language to build the trust necessary for vulnerable work.

This [repeat and reply]¹⁰ was an exercise [...] none of you were in 'First Circle,' trying to think of what to say next, right? You couldn't be in 'First Circle'¹¹ because I gave you a task, and the task was listen and repeat. (Beginner+, 25.01.15)

Task-based exercises like this are used to bypass intellectual anxiety and guide participants into a shared state of connection, reinforcing the “safety net.” Another important element of support is side-coaching—brief, in-the-moment adjustments offered during in-class performance. (see Theme 2, “Tools, Not Rules”)

While these practices emphasize openness and decentralization, Wells also establishes clear structural boundaries that centralize his instruction when needed. This apparent contradiction reflects a broader ethos: protecting the collective learning space. *“The only time I’m sharp with someone is when they’re doing something that interferes with other people’s enjoyment [...] I don’t let students correct other students.” (Wells, interview).*

By centralizing feedback, the instructor breaks from ‘sharing power’ to preserve foundational tenets like ‘serving the collective’ and ensuring participants can engage “without evaluation” from their peers (Tanner, 2019).

This boundary-setting also includes a classroom norm: students are expected to accept corrections without arguing or justifying in the moment—a pedagogical strategy rooted in acting instruction. Wells notes that prolonged discussion can disrupt the rhythm and embodied focus of practice, though he invites questions and dialogue during the closing circle (see Theme 2).

Theme 2: The Syncretic Dojo

I conceptualize the workshop’s core pedagogy using Wells’s own language, terming it the “Syncretic Dojo.” This combines his “syncretic” philosophy—*“they all have part of the answer, but nobody has the whole answer” (Wells, interview)*—with his emphasis on a “dojo” model of practice.

The “Dojo” Philosophy: Repetitions Over Analysis

*“It’s improv jazz, baby. We’re not going to analyze this s**t too much. You’re just going to do it.” (Intermediate+, 25.09.23)* The core principle of the “dojo” is to shift students

¹⁰ Repeat and Reply — An exercise where each response must begin with the partner’s last sentence.

¹¹ “First Circle” — Refers to a withdrawn, inward-focused energy that limits connection, while “Third Circle” describes outward projection that lacks receptivity.

from thinking to doing. As Wells puts it, *“thinking about and discussing improv can only get you so far”* (personal communication, 25.09.27). This belief drives his emphasis on repetition—“getting the reps in”—to prevent the over-analysis that often hinders beginners. *“I want to get to the reps as quickly as possible [...] by the end of it, you should feel like that was a workout.”* (Wells, interview)

This is reinforced by splitting the class into smaller sub-groups, allowing more students to practice simultaneously and increasing the number of individual repetitions. (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Participants Practicing in Small Groups



Note. Photo provided by Chris Wells (Beginner+ workshop, 2025).

Some participants experience this highly practice-based approach as a kind of demanding mental workout. As an L2 speaker myself, I found that this focus on doing rather than overanalyzing is particularly effective in lowering the "affective filter" (Krashen, 1982)—the emotional and psychological block that inhibits language production. Wells encourages students to prioritize communication over grammatical perfection: *“Non-native speakers, don’t get in your head about grammar[...] just plow through. Just make it happen.”* (Beginner+, 25.05.28)

This stance also addresses linguistic gaps: instead of the common theatre practice of pretending a mistake did not happen, Wells advises students to acknowledge the gap: *“If*

somebody tells you about [something] that you have no idea what it is... Hide in plain sight. Do not pretend to know what it is. Just ask" (*All Levels*, 25.01.18). This approach values connection and helps partners to stay "on the same page" despite linguistic obstacles.

An objective of this repetition-based practice is to move students beyond conscious, analytical thought and toward an instinctual, embodied engagement, building "muscle memory" so students can eventually internalize the different "instincts" of improv. Within the workshop, the instructor frequently associates this non-analytical stance with experiencing "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). As he advises students, "*You shouldn't be thinking when you're doing improv [...] you should be feeling and responding and reacting. All the thinking stuff should become subconscious.*" (*Beginner+*, 25.01.15)

The dojo metaphor extends beyond repetition to the workshop's "ritualized" structure. Sessions begin with "*What's on your mind?*," an exercise to air external concerns as a group, and conclude with a circle for collective sharing and review. In addition to the brief pauses for reflection between exercises, this closing circle opens the door for dialogue, making a space for questions, reflections, or points participants wish to raise—often invited by Wells's familiar prompt for "*questions, comments, doubts, demands, criticisms, or denials.*" (*Beginner+*, 25.09.17)

A Syncretic and Intercultural Foundation

The "dojo" content is explicitly syncretic, blending diverse improvisational philosophies. From Keith Johnstone, Wells incorporates status work—exercises exploring high and low status—and the pedagogical value of repetition:

"We asked [Keith Johnstone]: 'What do you do when people don't get a concept?' And he just said, 'You just repeat it; you just repeat it again and again.' And I took that as: okay, if Keith Johnstone says you repeat it all the freaking time [...] the epiphany comes at totally different times for people." (Wells, interview)

Johnstone also influenced Wells's teaching stance of lowering his classroom status to diffuse pressure. (see Theme 1) Similarly, he adapts the "Game of the Scene"¹² from the improv training center Upright Citizens Brigade (UCB) (Besser et al., 2013), broadening it into what he calls the "That's it" moment—the interesting thing about the scene—framing it

¹² Game of the Scene—the central pattern or premise that drives a scene, typically used or developed for comic effect.

as not necessarily comic and opening it to relational or emotional possibilities. Influences from the Chicago-based Annoyance Theatre and its co-founder, veteran improviser Joe Bill, are also explicit, with the instructor often citing Bill on externalization¹³ and the use of silence. Although flexible, a personal preference for narrative strongly shapes its structure. As the instructor states in class, *"We are hardwired to like stories [...]. In this 'improv house,' even when we're doing silly fun games, we try to have a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end."* (Beginner+, 25.05.14)

This narrative focus is supported by frameworks he adopts from the Los Angeles-based school Impro Theatre; he incorporates their model for genre-based workshops, their structures for long-form improvised plays, and the concept of Second Circle, which he first encountered there. Wells makes these influences explicit:

I want to go back a little bit to the fundamentals of POV, which leads to character, which leads to relationship, which leads to story. This is from Impro Theatre in Los Angeles; they do these genre-based plays, and they're very strict about being in Second Circle. (All Levels, 25.04.05)

Regardless of content, the pedagogical goal is to provide a wide foundational understanding of improv. *If you study here for a year, you will have a good foundation [...] enough of a little bit of each of these different schools [...] that you can [...] get involved.* (Wells, interview)

By bringing these concepts together, the workshop helps participants develop a flexible set of skills for navigating diverse improv settings across cultures.

"Tools, Not Rules": A Pedagogy for Performer Autonomy

"Rob Adler says, 'Tools, not rules.' [...] everything we're doing can be broken eventually, but you guys need the training rules at the beginning." (Intermediate+, 25.02.11). Following this "tools, not rules" philosophy (Adler, 2017) the workshop provides performers with a toolkit of improv principles. These are foundational techniques, not inflexible laws to be followed dogmatically. This seeks to guide performers toward a point where the techniques become instinctual, freeing them to apply, adapt, or break the 'rules' in service of creative freedom.

¹³ Referring to Bill's quote: "If it's in your head, it's just your opinion," which highlights the importance of expressing ideas in a way that makes them legible to others during performance.

Instructor interventions aim to guide the learning process while fostering creative autonomy. These take multiple forms: indirect feedback, such as the “*bank shot*” (Wells, 2018)—described by a student as “giving feedback to one person when he secretly means it for another person”; and direct, in-the-moment actions like side-coaching or restarting scenes. As in this example: “*Go back to the beginning, and really, first of all, why is he here? Who the hell is he? What are his symptoms? How long have they been going on? How does he feel about this?*” (Intermediate+, 25.01.24)

Feedback is calibrated to the student's experience: foundational for beginners and more specific for advanced improvisers. The objective of this feedback is not to provide the “correct line” or “what the teacher would have done” but to cultivate perceptive improvisers able to identify issues in a scene. As Wells explains: “*What I want people to understand is fundamentally, ‘what is the issue here?’ ‘what’s the disconnect?’ ‘what wasn’t working?’ [...] I try to extract a fundamental concept.*” (Wells, interview) In practice, feedback also takes the form of guided questioning—such as “*What would you love to see happen in act three?*” or “*What can we learn from this?*”—which returns interpretive agency to the group.

Beyond feedback, Wells facilitates practice using what he describes as “training wheels”—structural constraints designed to simplify the complexity of different tasks. For instance, he frames the long-form structure of “The Harold”¹⁴ in a simplified version in practice: “*This is The Harold with training wheels. It’s very strict because we’re just learning how to do it right [...] three simple beats in the First Act.*” (Intermediate+, 25.04.29).

¹⁴ The Harold—A foundational long-form improv structure combining group games with successive rounds of scenes. It is designed to develop initially separate narrative or thematic threads that gradually converge through recurring patterns and callbacks, resulting in a cohesive performance.

Figure 4

Participants Perform *The Harold*, a Long-form Improv Format.



Note. Photo provided by Chris Wells. (Intermediate+, 2025).

We can identify practices that could also be categorized as ‘training wheels’ throughout his pedagogy, with exercises like “*repeat and reply*” in Beginner + Class or in All Levels with preset narrative structures. Even the class design—splitting into smaller groups to maximize repetitions and reduce anxiety—functions as a kind of training wheels. In every case, these supports are designed to be internalized and eventually removed, releasing performers into greater freedom and autonomy.

Theme 3: Response to Context & Outcomes

This theme examines how this pedagogy supports connection, growth, and belonging—serving as an intercultural “lifesaver,” a space for personal development, and a “third place.”

A “Lifesaver”: A Response to the Intercultural Context

The workshop’s design responds to the isolation many foreigners experience in Japan by creating a supportive community. Wells reflects on this purpose, framing the workshop as a social anchor: *“I could see what a lifesaver the workshops were, especially at the beginning. (Wells, interview)”*

Beyond an improv class, the workshop is a considered response to an observed social need. For some participants, the workshop indeed functions as this refuge, becoming a space where the often salient identity of “foreigner” can feel temporarily softened. This normalization allows the workshop to serve as a space free from the social pressures of navigating a different culture, including the need to “code-switch” in professional or daily life. Wells notes that for students working in Japanese environments, the workshop is a place where they can *“just be themselves.”* Diverse participants echo this, describing the workshop as a separate space where they can simply “be human,” leaving their daily fears, anxieties, and the constant awareness of being a foreigner outside.

Acknowledging the challenges faced by many foreigners in Japan, Wells highlights the need for a space that actively fosters connection, noting: *“I saw people developing friendships [...] and just how important that is when you’re a foreigner in Japan, which can feel very much, like, exclusionary, right?” (Wells, interview)* The pedagogy, therefore, cannot be separated from its social function; its accessible structure and safe atmosphere are deliberate adaptations to serve a community in need of an anchor.

Recognizing this demographic reality and challenges, Wells aligns the objectives of the workshop: *“Most of the people that come [...] aren’t going to become performers [...] So part of the objective was basically helping people with their lives through improv” (Wells, interview).* The pedagogy, therefore, cannot be separated from its social function and context; its accessible structure and safe atmosphere are intentional adaptations to the international community in Japan.

“Coming Out of Their Shell”

Reflecting on the benefits of the workshop after decades of teaching, Wells notes several shifts in his students, such as becoming more creative, open, and more effective communicators and listeners—skills perceived as directly transferring into their professional and personal relationships. Following instructor and student reflections, it appears that the workshop functions as a catalyst for personal development, a place where people, in the instructor's words, can “come out of their shells.” As he describes:

I've definitely had multiple students that have 'come out of their shells.' I see someone who starts off painfully shy and gradually just starts to open up like a flower, and I respect those people so much because they're putting themselves in a situation that's very difficult for them; that is their nightmare. (Wells, interview)

Several participants' accounts mirror this, detailing how they moved from a fear of public speaking to willingly taking risks on stage. They also note that this growing comfort with making mistakes fosters a greater acceptance of others and that the communication skills practiced in the workshop frequently transfer into real-world scenarios, such as job interviews. Wells also observes behavioral shifts, such as overcoming negativity and developing confidence, communication skills, and adaptability—changes that often extend beyond the workshop.

The Workshop as a “Third Place”

The workshop has become a community hub—a “Third Place” outside home and work (Oldenburg, 1999)—showing how theatre can foster belonging within Tokyo's international community. *“It's a safe space where you can be around foreigners. It's not a bar. People aren't drinking... We need these places, you know?” (Wells, interview)*

One participant describes this environment as “a place of genuine presence, where nobody is sitting and watching or using smartphones, and everyone is joining.” Furthermore, it functions as a refuge from the social and hierarchical pressures that many participants face. For those operating in Japanese professional environments, the workshop offers a respite from “code-switching.” Wells explains, *“I've had students that have come here after being*

isolated in a Japanese company [...] and you're code-switching the entire time [...] and then they come to the workshop, and they can just be themselves." (Wells, interview)

This non-hierarchical structure is relevant in the local context. One Japanese participant notes that the workshop feels like gathering with "old friends," contrasting with the strict *senpai-kohai* (senior-junior) hierarchies common in Japanese society. By offering a space where participants can temporarily let go of cultural and social pressures—such as hierarchy, fear of making mistakes, or the need to fit in—the workshop seems to support not only improv practice and soft skills development but also, for many, a sense of meaningful community.

Figure 5

A performance in progress at the Film-Noir Student Showcase.



Note. Photo provided by Ross Kirsling. (All Levels, 2025).

Discussion

From Safety to Expressive Agency in Community

This case study of the Improvazilla Improv Dojo illuminates how an intercultural workshop seems to construct an environment of “psychological safety” (Edmondson, 1999)—a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. The instructor’s strategies, such as using “failure-proof” exercises, reducing the pressure towards performance, and maintaining an anti-authoritarian feedback stance, appear to build an environment that seems to facilitate the conditions for vulnerable creative work and risk-taking.

This foundation of safety seems to be what allows for the emergence of a more holistic “improvisational ethos” (Tanner, 2019). From this perspective, even apparent contradictions, like the instructor centralizing feedback while avoiding open discussions during exercises, can be understood as pedagogical choices that uphold tenets like *“Work in service to the collective.”*

Despite the positive results this workshop seems to generate, every model has its natural tensions and boundaries. The open drop-in model brings new people constantly, especially in the Beginner+ sessions, making the repetition of basic concepts and exercises constant. While these explanations are necessary for newcomers, for students who have taken the classes several times, they can feel repetitive. Another tension arises when the class is separated into smaller groups to practice simultaneously. Although the instructor actively monitors the room during these exercises, the simultaneous format means that certain interactions inevitably slip by uncorrected—such as participants preventing the scene from advancing. Due to the pedagogical restriction against peer-correction, this situation may occasionally frustrate some more experienced students, who must learn to be patient with peers' learning processes.

While the workshop design prioritizes accessibility, this has its natural limits. Regardless of language, because improv inherently embraces imperfection, the workshop clearly functions as a useful space for practicing English, and occasional corrections do occur. Many non-native speakers continuously participate in the workshop without the expectation of having flawless English skills. However, to maintain the focus on the collective improv practice—the main objective of this space—participants require sufficient functional communicative agency to comprehend instructions and engage with other students.

Despite these pedagogical limits, I argue that this case is a positive example of an improvisational ethos in action—something that, as Tanner and McCloskey (2023) note, many improv studies struggle to maintain. The nuance of this case suggests that these core principles work as a dynamic framework that is continuously negotiated to remain effective within its specific context.

Although the Dojo is not a formal English education setting, it provides something that most traditional language classes do not: a lack of judgment and a focus on free, flowing communication over strict linguistic accuracy. For the community's many second-language speakers (myself included), this pedagogical design appears to lower the “affective filter” (Krashen, 1982) through improv practice and a sense of belonging. By embracing mistakes over 'correct' answers, this environment fosters the necessary linguistic risk-taking to move beyond strict self-monitoring and toward embodied communicative agency. Such improvisational practices can be adapted for formal language classrooms or early-stage language acquisition settings, helping to bridge the gap between accumulated linguistic knowledge and actual expressive freedom.

Of course, I must acknowledge the limitations of a single-case, insider study. Moving forward, I want to conclude with an invitation for future research to explore the bridges—or the lack of them—among Japan's diverse performing arts ecosystems. Japanese participants represent only 12.2% of this long-standing community, which highlights a persisting distance between intercultural and Japanese-only artistic spheres. By bringing this dynamic to light, I hope to encourage a more inclusive academic discourse. Recognizing these resident-led groups as an integral part of the Japanese theatre scene will hopefully foster future dialogue and study across these often-separated creative landscapes.

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