

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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