Top Ten Improv Games for EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

This paper focuses on improvisation (also known as improv), which is one of the dramatic techniques that teachers are using in EFL classrooms today. Many teachers have found that improvisation is valuable for a multitude of reasons, including increasing student motivation and lowering foreign language anxiety, creating a positive learning environment, and generally increasing the level of enjoyment for foreign language students. There are numerous possibilities for teachers who would like to use improv games as a main component, or as a supplement, to the standard curriculum in their foreign language classes. This paper discusses the history of improvisation, and then gives a detailed explanation of ten popular improv games that teachers can use in their classes. It should be noted that these games are discussed as used by the author and may not match exactly with the definitions or parameters of similar games found on improvisation websites or in books about improvisation.

Many foreign language teachers are searching for new and innovative techniques to enhance the classroom learning environment and increase student engagement and classroom enjoyment. One option that some teachers are implementing is Performance-Assisted Learning (PAL). PAL is a growing trend in the EFL community in Japan because of the variety and freshness the techniques offer in comparison with the standard textbooks and regular activities that seem to saturate the foreign language curriculum. There are a wide variety of choices among the techniques within PAL (Kluge, 2018). Improvisation is one option that can be valuable within the umbrella of PAL because of the variety of games to choose

from, ease of use, potential for enjoyment, and increased engagement by foreign language learners. With resources such as books by Spolin (1963) and Johnstone (1979), and a plethora of articles on the subject, there are hundreds of improvisation games to choose from so that teachers can easily find games that match the skill level of the learners in their particular classrooms.

Improv games are also valuable for reinforcing speech patterns that are part of the standard curriculum but going one step further and providing the catalyst for more creative and genuine language use. As noted by Kobayashi (2013, p. 166), "The rules of improvisation can help to bring these elements back into the classroom and give students the confidence to become successful communicators and engage in spontaneous conversations." Students might be more apt to practice target language if they are given the freedom of expression and choice that improv games offer as a fundamental aspect of their nature. According to Becker and Roos (2016, p. 9), "In order to progress in their acquisition of the target language and to become truly communicatively competent, learners also need to be able to use language spontaneously and creatively." Improvisation offers the means for creativity in oral communication practice that can help students achieve higher levels of learning and proficiency.

Another valuable aspect of improvisation is the focus on cooperation and mutual understanding within the process of performing. Specifically, almost all improv games that are performed with more than one player require teamwork, cooperation, and reciprocity. As noted by Athiemoolam (2004), "Dramatic activity also fosters the skills of group interaction since the learners have to work in groups to discuss, negotiate and reach consensus," (p. 5). Students may be more likely to become engaged in the learning process if they enjoy the improv games that help to reinforce their learning.

History of Improv

Improvisation has been an important component of theater perhaps since the beginning of the art form. However, the art or act of improvisation in American theater was solidified, and eventually defined, by the works of Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone. As noted by Holdus et al. (2016), "After Commedia Dell'Arte died off, improvisational theatre was separately reinvented by two people, who in many ways have shaped improvisational theatre as it exists today: Johnstone (2012)

and Spolin (1963)." Her seminal guidebook *Improvisation for the Theater*, first published in 1963 and with two subsequent editions, has become known as the fundamental text for all those who have an interest in improvisation, and is sometimes referred to as the "Bible of improvisational theater" (Elliot, 2018). Actors, teachers, directors, and students throughout the world have used her methods and ideas for improvisation. More recently, foreign language professionals are using improvisation and other drama techniques which fall under the umbrella of PAL. Improvisation in particular is gaining momentum as a viable tool for foreign language teaching and learning, as opposed to the more common role-play activities that are included already in many EFL textbooks.

Another pioneer in the field of improvisation is Keith Johnstone. His influence in improvisation cannot be understated because of the sheer volume of ideas and quality of creative force that he has put forth since he began his career serving as the Associate Artistic Director of the Royal Court Theater in the 1950s. In addition to the two seminal books, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theater* (1979), and *Impro for Storytellers* (1999), his catchy slogans have become well-known to those who follow improvisation in any capacity. What allows Johnstone to produce innovative and useful improvisation games is his deep well of creativity and innovative thought. One example is found in his first published volume, where Johnstone (1979) stated:

> As I grew up, everything started getting grey and dull. I could still remember the amazing intensity of the world I'd lived in as a child, but I thought the dulling of perception was an inevitable consequence of age… I've since found tricks that can make the world blaze up again in about fifteen seconds, and the effects last for hours. For example, if I have a group of students who are feeling fairly safe and comfortable with each other, I get them to pace about the room shouting out the wrong name for everything that their eyes light on (p. 13).

This innate ability to understand the creative aspects of improvisation are what practitioners like Spolin and Johnstone have shared with the theater world. Teachers implementing improv and other PAL techniques today seek to expose their students to this creative energy in hopes of enhancing the learning process for foreign language students. Many modern educators adhere to the notion that it is no longer adequate to simply rely on pedagogical practices focused on teacher-centered lectures, but rather accept the need for student participation in the learning process

(Maheux & Lajoie, 2011). The qualities inherent in improvisation (creativity, spontaneity, and innovative thinking), are key elements that teachers can rely on to try and improve student engagement and increase enjoyment for their foreign language students. With this in mind, the following are ten improv games that teachers can try with their foreign language classes.

Top Ten Improv Games

There are a multitude of possibilities when teachers are deciding which improvisation exercises to try in their classes. The following is a top ten list of highly effective activities taken from personal experience and informal self-reflective practices. These practices include informal surveys and one-on-one discussions with students following completion of the improvisation activities at various times throughout my last five years of university teaching. The list begins with the top three choices, which are geared towards lower-level or beginner-level English students. These first three activities can be used at primary and secondary school levels as well as university because they require little or no English oral competency.

Activity One: Mirror, Mirror

Mirror, mirror, sometimes referred to simply as *mirror* or *copycat*, is a simple and fun warm-up activity that is useful for energizing a subdued class or for getting the creative juices flowing before moving on to more complex improvisation or other drama techniques. To begin, choose two of the more outgoing students in the class and have them stand facing each other about three or four feet apart. If the class is a newer class for the teacher, it might be better for the teacher to take part in the demonstration portion of the activity.

Next, one of the two participants will begin the improvisation by moving their arms in any way they choose. This can be simple waving up and down, or more complex movements such as breakdancing-style waving or disjointed movements; anything works in this improv. Partner B must try and imitate, or mirror, the movements of partner A as best as they can. There is no set time limit for how long the mirroring should last. Generally, 20-30 seconds is enough. The key is for the lead player to be creative and spontaneous in their movements, such that the action is engaging and interesting for the observers and the participants.

Step two is for partner A and partner B to switch roles. Now partner B begins the action and partner A does the mirroring. Again, spontaneity and creative expression are the key. If the teacher observes partner B repeating the same movements as partner A in turn one, then the improv should be stopped and new players should be inserted from the audience. The time for turn two can be shorter if the action loses energy or can be extended if partner B chooses to try and "one-up" partner A's movements in turn one, which would be a desirable progression.

Turn three follows turn two, but this time there is no leading partner. The teacher will facilitate the action with a basic signal to begin. At this time both partners begin moving and simultaneously trying to mirror their partner's movements. This is when the stakes are raised and the game increases in intensity. Along with the increase of action, students must now utilize cooperation and teamwork skills, which magnifies the value of the activity. This can be used as a wonderful lead-in to pair or group work because students' fundamental tendency to work together is activated through turn three of the improv.

After partner A and partner B have successfully completed the demonstration portion of the activity it is time to include the entire class. The students form two lines, facing each other in the same manner that the demonstration took place. The same three rounds can be utilized, or the teacher may choose to skip ahead to turn three depending on time and student engagement. The activity can also be done in a *kaiten sushi* or *speed-dating* format where students rotate partners after a random interval. This option allows for more variety and interaction with a wider range of partners.

Mirror, mirror ranks number one on the list because of the simple nature of the game, but perhaps more important for foreign language students is the fact that the activity involves no language skills whatsoever. Because of this aspect of the improv game it can be used in any foreign language environment, and at any grade level, with positive outcomes (such as increased energy and student engagement) almost guaranteed.

Activity Two: Fruit

Activity two is called *fruit*, and it involves another simple game that can be used as a warm-up activity or as a change-of-pace activity during a lesson on food. In this activity, two or more

students come to the front of the classroom or to a designated area that allows for some movement and for all others to view the game easily. If the classroom has movable desks it may be beneficial to clear a space in the middle of the room and have the students form a wide circle to allow the players to perform the improv in the center area.

The improv begins when the teacher assigns a situation to the players. There is no requirement for the situation, although it would be best if it is something familiar to the students and filled with interesting possibilities. For example, it would be best not to try to use a situation between a business CEO and a salary man because students do not have a frame of reference for this scenario. Whereas, if the situation were a teacher who catches one or more students cheating on a test, this would be something that the students could relate to because they would be used to the environment that the improv explores.

The scenario can also be decided upon by the students after brainstorming a list of possibilities. This option allows for the students to be more invested in the entire activity as well. After choosing the scene the next step is to choose a designated fruit. Again, the teacher can assign a fruit, but it is best if the students decide. The teacher can even ask for possibilities, and then have a vote between the top two or three.

Once the scenario has been chosen, the players are given a signal to begin. At this time the students act out the scene, but instead of using regular dialogue they can only say the fruit that has been designated for the scene. The players must try and express their thoughts and feelings without using regular speech. This forces the players to rely on facial expressions, gestures, and intonation when saying the fruit word. There is a good chance for laughter and humorous outcomes with this improv activity, which helps to create a positive atmosphere and enhanced learning environment. As with most improv games, there is no set time limit. The teacher, working as facilitator, can decide when to end the scene.

Other options for *fruit* involve adding or eliminating players during the improv or changing the designated fruit midway through the game. The only drawback to *fruit* is that only a few players can perform the improv at a time, but this can be remedied easily by dividing the class into small groups and having each group perform their own game. This might make for a very loud classroom however, so this option may be better for smaller classes of less than 20 students.

Activity Three: Numbers

The third activity is called *numbers*, or sometimes referred to as *1-50*. This is another activity that involves very little English language skill, but still can be valuable for inducing spontaneity and creativity. Furthermore, it is useful for creating energy, enthusiasm, and a positive atmosphere at the beginning of a lesson or as a supplement to a lesson based on numbers. This activity is especially useful for low-level learners who are unfamiliar with numbers beyond 10, or for review of numbers for intermediate-level learners.

This activity begins by choosing two participants. Again, it may be useful, but is not necessary, to choose two higher skill level classmates or two of the more outgoing members of the group. The teacher can also participate in the first round as a demonstration. The game then proceeds with a simple exchange between the two players, in which one or more numbers is said in succession by each player. For example, player one may begin by saying 'one, two, three', followed by player two's reply of 'three, four'. There are no rules about how many or how few numbers are to be stated in each turn. This is where the teamwork and the cooperation of the players is important. Through non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions or gestures, the two players will realize when each is finished with their particular set of numbers and when it is now time for the other to take their turn.

The key element of the improv game is that emotion and expression must be included when each player gives their turn of numbers. Similarly to the *fruit* game, the idea is that the two players are having a "conversation" using non-standard oral communication; in this case only numbers.

A possible differentiation is to add the element of an argument somewhere in the number stream. For example, the teacher may require that the players become involved in an argument for numbers 31-40, and that the argument is then resolved by the time 50 is reached. This adaptation helps to ensure that the two players do not get stuck using the same emotions or repeating the same pattern when taking their various turns.

Although the game is designed as a two-player improv it can also be adapted for more than two participants. In this scenario the players involved would need increased teamwork and

turn-taking awareness. However, if two or more of the players started their turns at the same time it would not necessarily be a hindrance to the game. In fact, it might allow for some added humor and some more improvisation from all players in the game.

Activity Four: Tag

The first three activities are excellent for warm-ups or for very low-level English learners. The next three on the list can also be used in these situations but are more suited for intermediate and advanced-level English learners or for classes where there has already been a positive learning environment established through time spent together and familiarity among all group members and the teacher. For these situations the improv game *tag* is an excellent choice. Perhaps the most well-known of the improv games; *tag* involves two or more players who act out a scene that has no pre-determined direction or outcome. Within the course of the scene a student not involved in the scene at the beginning will touch a participating player and say "tag," replacing the tagged player in the scene. The new player must then change the direction of the action in any way they wish. This can be done in any manner that the interloper chooses, so there are innumerable possibilities for creativity and innovation within the scene.

There are no set rules as to how many new members can "tag" into the scene. There are also no set rules as to how long the scene should last. As a general rule it might be helpful to finish the scene when each original player has been tagged out, or to simply let the scene come to a natural end after a progression of action has seemingly been resolved or when there is a significant pause in action or dialogue, or a lull in the overall energy of the scene.

Activity Five: Freeze

Activity five, known as *freeze*, is similar in design to *tag*, but with one distinct difference. As with *tag,* the game begins with two or more players acting out a scene with only a starting point for the action determined at the beginning. In *freeze* the difference comes when another player enters the game. Instead of touching an existing player, the person who wants to enter the action simply says "freeze", and then takes the place of any player they choose. The key to the game, and what provides for the most challenging aspect of the scene, is that the person entering the scene must do

so with their body in the exact position of whoever they are replacing. The new player can then become a completely different character, which includes an animal that fits the shape that the departing player was set in at the time of the freeze.

There are several variations that can make freeze even more exciting and unpredictable. The first is to have all the non-participating class members line up, and then the teacher inserts each one at random intervals by saying "freeze," such that all class members will have participated by the time the game is finished. With large classes the teacher can also divide the class into smaller groups and have each group perform their own game.

Another possible variation is to have the line of non-participating members stand with their backs to the action so that they are unaware of what position the players are in when they must enter the scene. This possibility increases the need for quick thinking and creative improvisation.

Activity Six: Tell the Tale

This game is often used in writing assignments because of the cooperative nature and elements of teamwork that are required. However, this activity can also be used as a fun oral improv game. The game involves a continuous story that is told by the members of the class as a whole, or it can also be done with smaller groups depending on class size and set-up. The teacher will set the stage for the game by having all class members stand up and form a circle. If the class is large the game can be played by having smaller groups stand in designated areas and form their own circle.

The teacher will begin the story by giving a prompt, which is simply an opening line of an undetermined narrative. The story is then continued by the next player in the circle. The action continues by each class member adding a new sentence to the story. The teacher can choose to end the tale when every player has participated, or the story can continue until there seems to be a natural end or when time constraints dictate.

Some variations include having class members or group members brainstorm for opening lines before beginning the game. Another option is for the class to brainstorm a list of descriptive adjectives and verbs that then must be included whenever the teacher or the players decide within

the course of the storytelling. This option also gives teachers an opportunity to teach and reinforce lessons on descriptive adjectives, verb tenses, and general sentence structure.

Activity Seven: Helping Hands

The seventh activity, called *hands* or *helping hands*, is a more physical-based improv game, but also involves language use along with the standard elements of creativity, teamwork, and innovative thinking. As the name suggests, players will be helping each other by taking on the role of the hands for the student who is telling a story or acting out a scene. It seems a bit complicated at first glance, but in fact this is a very easy improv game that can be quite humorous and entertaining to all who are involved or viewing the action. The set-up is simple in that one or more students are chosen to be the players. The players then come to the front of the class, middle of the circle, or other designated area where the entire class can see and hear clearly.

The teacher then assigns a scene that the participants must act out, but with a twist. A corresponding classmate is chosen to be the "hands" of each participating member. The "hands" student stands or sits behind the main player and puts their arms under the players armpits such that their arms and hands appear to be the arms and hands of the person doing the scene. Then the "hands" person must gesture and make movements to try and express the emotions and feelings that the main player is saying. Very creative *hands* players might add certain small actions to increase the engagement of the audience, such as scratching the head or chin of the player or rubbing their nose or ear to express some emotion or to imitate regular physical tics that many people have.

Activity Eight: Emotional

The eighth improv game, which is called *emotional* or *emotion*, is another game that does not rely heavily on language skills, but rather focuses on the use of changing emotions and irony to create fun and exciting exchanges. The game is set up in much the same way as many of the other games on this list; there are two or more players chosen to take part in the action. The scene is chosen by the teacher or assigned through brainstorming or by a call for ideas. After setting the scene, the

players begin to exchange what can be considered as a normal dialogue for whatever the situation calls for.

The game then turns on the addition of a specific emotion that one or more players is assigned by the teacher or the audience. For example, a student may call out "anger," at which time one or more of the players must continue in the normal progression of the scene but by showing the specified emotion regardless of the content of the dialogue. This can cause a great deal of ironic humor if the scene is completely different in emotional content than what would be expected in a normal exchange. There are some really funny possibilities, such as a wedding proposal given in extreme sadness, or a funeral eulogy given in blissful happiness.

The class should decide beforehand whether one or more of the players will take on the designated emotion so that the action is not interrupted during the scene. Adding multiple emotions within the same scene can be tricky but is possible with intermediate to higher -level classes. Another possible alteration is to combine a game of *emotional* with *tag* or *freeze*. The combination would allow for many students to participate, as well as ensuring variety and spontaneity when new players enter the fray.

Activity Nine: Little Voices

The ninth activity is called *little voices*, and it is a fun and creative improv game that can be used to reinforce situation-specific language learning, such as ordering food at a restaurant or checking in at an airport or hotel. The set-up is to choose a scene and then decide on the number of players. The players then take on the role of inanimate objects in the scene rather than the people who would normally be acting out the scenario. For example, in a scene involving ordering food at a restaurant the players could take on the roles of the menu, table cloth, silverware, chairs, or even the lights on the ceiling or the pictures on the walls of the restaurant. The idea is that the players have a language exchange that is a sort of running account of the action that the people of the scene are doing but given from the vantage point of the inanimate objects. For example, the player being the silverware might comment about how they were not cleaned properly and how the restaurant goers are unhappy with them.

There are many humorous possibilities with *little voices*, but the players need to be creative, resourceful, and insightful when creating dialogues because the game will stall if they are unwilling to try and complete the scenario enthusiastically. For this reason, the game should be used only when the students are comfortable with the scenarios they are given. Ideally the game should be used as a post-lesson follow-up for reinforcement of learned concepts rather than as a warm-up or introductory activity. Additionally, *little voices* is probably better for small numbers of players (ideally two to four and not more than five) because of the challenging language and creative thinking involved. Smaller seminar classes would be a prime situation for utilizing this improv game.

Activity Ten: Remote Control

The tenth activity is a personal favorite because of the connection with electronics and video viewing involved. The game is called *remote control* or *remote*, and it involves acting out improvisational scenarios, much like many of the games discussed previously. The twist with *remote control* is that the action can be controlled much like a video or movie can be controlled when using a remote control device. For example, the audience might yell out "rewind," at which point the player or players must try and retrace their previous movements and dialogue. Just like in the comedy movies that employ this action, the results are almost always hilarious and entertaining.

The game is generally performed as a warm-up because of the quick nature but can also be used as a follow-up activity for reinforcement of concepts or specific language that has been taught recently. The fact that there are a limited number of actual commands that could be employed is a possible hindrance to the game, but if the game is kept short and spontaneous then it is fine to use the same commands several times. One key factor is that the player or players must try and continue the action even if they are given a challenging command. For example, if someone yells "mute" the players must continue in the normal progression of the scene, only without any noise. This allows for excellent practice using expressions and gestures. This aspect of the game makes it a good choice for advanced classes or for practice with presentation classes.

Gestures and facial expressions, along with posture and stance, are key components taught in many presentation courses, so using *remote control* would be useful in these situations.

Variations

All of the improv games discussed in this article are open for adjustments and modifications. Additionally, many of these games are well-suited for combinations with others on the list or with games not mentioned in this discussion. Specifically, the games *tag* and *freeze* can be combined with almost any other improv game because they are basically focused on exchanging players into the action.

Concerning the language requirements, modifications can be made for all of the games listed here by spending some time reinforcing target language or key words and phrases before performing the games. If necessary, the teacher can make a list of key words and phrases on the board or projector before beginning the activity. This is borderline crossing over into role-play activities but can still qualify as improv if choice remains available for the players when performing the actions rather than requiring specific words and phrases be used. The teacher must be careful to make the distinction between a role-play activity and an improv. Improvisation is sometimes confused with simulation or role-play, but it is important that the scene has an open-ended aspect in order to qualify as a true improvisation (White, 2012). Therefore, even if the teacher needs to make a list of key words and phrases for the students to use during the improv game, the element of improvisation is still intact as long as the outcomes are not pre-determined.

Conclusion

Improvisation can be a valuable tool for teachers at any grade level to implement within the context of a foreign language curriculum because of the elements of creativity, spontaneity, and innovation that improvisation offers. Improv games can be used effectively with just a basic knowledge of games to choose from and how to set up the games. Improvisation can be effective regardless of the teacher's experience or background (or lack thereof) in theater. Furthermore, improv games do not rely on any specific student skill level because the plethora of games to choose from ensures that there are games which match any environment. The possible advantages

of improvisation (increased motivation, lower anxiety, and a refreshing variety or change from the standard EFL classroom activities), make it worthwhile to try even if teachers are not very familiar with the background or basic structures of improvisation. The ten choices discussed in this paper provide a good starting point for teachers who are inexperienced in the use of improvisation but would like to add excitement and energy to their daily lessons. Additionally, there are hundreds of other improvisational theater games that can be used to practice speaking, listening, and presentations skills for English language learners.

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