

Why Teach Improv? Teaching Improvisation in University EFL Communication Classes

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Abstract

Improv, or improvisation, is not just for teaching performers and students. It is also taught in workshops to help people with social anxiety, ADHD, and autism (Amador, 2018), business leaders (Kulhan & Crisafulli, 2017), seniors, therapists, military and more. This paper focuses on the application of improv skills and techniques to EFL teaching. First, this paper describes what improv is, and what it is not, and compares and contrasts it to other similar performance teaching methods readers may be familiar with. The paper then examines the principles and skills taught in improv and argues why they are ideal for EFL communication teaching. It then outlines the typical components of the author's improv university lessons. Finally, it explains the ways by which activities were made increasingly challenging throughout the first semester leading to students performing short improv scenes in front of a small audience of classmates.

The image of modern-day improv is mostly from the TV show “*Whose Line Is It Anyway?*” In this high-paced, intense show professional comedians compete against each other by not only saying funny lines quickly, but also singing and dancing. So, it makes sense that most teachers would never think that improv would be ideal for teaching EFL communication. Trying to be fast, funny, and win points with jokes, all in a second language, is much too difficult for a second language learner.

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However, while improv is often funny, it is not actually about telling jokes or trying hard to be funny. In fact, improv performances do not need to be funny and telling jokes will often ruin a scene (Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994). Even so, improv often is funny as participants are typically placed in a situation that is a strange combination of two or more elements that do not usually go together. In this kind of context, if the actor plays the situation straight, the result is often quite funny. If, for example, the scene is: “A guide takes tourists around, but clearly has no idea what he is talking about”, all performers have to do is act out the situation in a straightforward way and often humor will be a by-product.

Improv Is a Craft

Several years ago I was reading a book on Improv called *Truth in Comedy: The Manual of Improvisation* (Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994) for enjoyment. I had performed stand-up comedy and was interested in learning more about other forms of comedy. As I read, I realized that improv is not just performing without preparation, it is a craft with many principles and rules that help improvisers perform well. Improvisers actually come prepared to speak spontaneously, because they have learned the craft. The principles of this craft are communication skills that are taught in improv workshops and classes through games, activities, and practice.

Improv vs. Other Similar Teaching Methods

Improv is similar to other methods of EFL communication education. Let us compare improv versus other forms of acting or theatre such as roleplay, readers theatre, drama theatre, screenplays, and drama techniques.

To start off, let us look at what these methods have in common. As Walker (2022) suggests, the major challenge for a teacher wanting to use any of these creative methods in an academic setting, “is in ensuring specific language-based learning objectives are being met, whilst also encouraging creative freedom amongst the students” (p.112). Thankfully that challenge makes for a better curriculum. Whether using screenplay, drama, or improv, there is more to these

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approaches than just memorizing lines or speaking spontaneously. These teaching methods offer “considerably more learning opportunities when approached not as a traditional listening and speaking activity, but as a foundation for creative exploration in which language acquisition is organically embedded through context” and “provide students with a clear context to the learning objectives set out by the teacher” (p.114).

So how do these methods differ? Textbook dialogues and roleplays are often based on achievement goals relating to grammar points or vocabulary. A typical textbook dialogue focuses on prescribed vocabulary or grammar that may sound awkward when put together. The language used, while often useful, may not always be natural or have a realistic context. However, roleplays and readers theatre scripts can vary—they may have these textbook qualities or may be more context-based depending on the goals of the teacher.

Drama theatre and screenplays focus more on message and context, much like real life. Modern screenplays and drama theatre offer scripts written with more authentic English that a student might encounter in real life, where the context of each scene is important in getting across the overall message.

Improv takes this focus on context even further. Rather than providing scripts, improv provides prompts or situation cues that students must use as their context for communicating. Without a script to rely on, students must listen closely to what their group members say. Because listening is so important, students have to stay in the moment and not think ahead. Students are encouraged to speak “truthfully”—that is, to speak authentically based on the situation and according to the character they chose for the scene. The ESL student’s words may not be grammatically correct at times—they are, after all, second language learners—but they will speak with the English language ability that they have at that time, much as they would have to if they traveled abroad.

So, the emphasis in improv is even more on the message than on speaking correctly. The major challenge and opportunity is that students must figure out how to communicate with the English ability that they have, making communication skills essential. “What do I say when I do

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not have the right vocabulary or sentence structure to convey my message?” “What is the workaround to say what I need to say?”

Improv and drama techniques often use the same exercises or games to practice acting skills. This is because they both come from the work of Viola Spolin in her foundational book called *Improvisation for the Theater*, (Spolin, 1999). Kobayashi (2012) describes drama techniques as using “spontaneous ‘games’ to promote group synthesis, build confidence and encourage creative thought. They require no rehearsals, costumes or scripts; nor do they have to be perfect.” (p.30). The same is true for improv. The difference is that while improv falls under the umbrella of drama techniques, improvisation is not only about games but also a form of theatre that can be acted out in front of an audience both in short and long form. In my classroom, I have used improv games to practice communication skills that have helped my students spontaneously perform improv scenes in front of a small audience by the end of the first semester. Let us look at the communication skills taught in improv that help students get their message across.

Why Improv Is Perfect for Teaching EFL

Before we go over a few of the principles, and skills, of improv, let us define the word “offer” in improv. An offer is any feeling, word, or action given by one performer to another.

The most famous principle in improv is that performers should say “Yes, and” to all offers. Improvisers need not use the exact words “Yes, and”, but they must be accepting (“Yes”) and adding to or building on what another improviser says (“and”). For example, if the first student says “I’m hungry. I’d like to go out and eat.”, the second student would not say, “No thanks, I’m not hungry.” That rejects the offer. Instead, they might say “Sure (*yes*), how about the Chinese restaurant downtown? (*and*). Then the first actor might say, “OK! (*yes*) Let’s go in my car.” (*and*).

Each improviser accepts what the previous person says or does, and adds to it, and the conversation continues. Experience shows that if someone says “no,” that is, in some way rejects the offer, the conversation in an improv performance often hits a dead end. Actually, even if the

response is only “yes”, it is still difficult to keep the conversation going. However, “Yes, and” keeps the scene moving.

The “Yes, and” skill of accepting and building on what someone else says or does is a great skill for keeping a conversation going in real life, including conversations in a student’s second language. In improv, knowing that your partner or group will always accept what you say or do can be a real relief for second language learners who are often anxious about making mistakes or being rejected when speaking.

Next is the principle: “There are no mistakes, only opportunities.” I tell my students that this goes further than simply saying, “mistakes are OK.” The principle “There are no mistakes” means that whatever you say or do in an improv scene will not only be accepted by the other group members, but also used in the scene. What looks like a mistake that should be rejected, becomes an opportunity. Again, this takes away the stress that many learners experience around making a mistake in a second language in their regular studies. Acceptance like this leads to the next skill.

This skill of working with a supposed mistake is called “justifying” in improv. For example, if someone mimes a steering wheel but then says, “We’re flying!” To justify this “mistake” another performer might say, “This new car can transform into a plane.” Improv actors practice the skill of justifying with various games or activities so that they will be ready to work with whatever is thrown at them in a scene. One such activity is called “Strange Gift.” Here one player gives another a bizarre gift (e.g., “a broken traffic light” or “a bag of teeth”). The receiver must thank them and justify why it is exactly what they wanted. “Justifying” and “no mistakes” teaches the performers to support each other and creates trust. They learn that they will not be laughed at or rejected even if they say something that might normally be considered wrong. Justifying, which is really a form of adapting, is a skill that will be useful for a second language learner when facing real life situations where they will need to adapt.

Another principle of improv is “make your group look good,” which connects to the principle that “no one should stand out.” One actor should not take over a scene, instead the mindset is “How can I support my group?” This is a team approach. The emphasis on group work in improv works well with the strengths and values of Asian societies, that emphasize the group

over the individual. Asian students can use their strengths in group work to overcome their tendency to hesitate. Another benefit of focusing on the group is that students think less about themselves, and thereby feel less pressure. To apply these principles and make them communication skills, students play many games or activities that focus on one or more of the skills.

Why Improvisation? Why Should I Use Improv as an EFL Teacher?

Many educators see the value of the communication skills students learn from improv. As White (2018) states, in “Top Ten Improv Games for EFL Classrooms,” “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” (p. 50).

How I Teach Improv

I work in a medium-sized public university in the Chubu region of Japan. My improv lessons are taught in the General Education Department to students of a variety of majors, including education and medicine. Classes typically consist of 30 to 35 first year students.

Typical Lesson

Journal writing is important in my improv classes. At the end of each lesson, students write short notes about the improv activities we did that day. For homework, students are asked to reflect on what we did in class. They refer to their notes, and typically write from 80 to 125 words, sharing their reflections and insights about what they did. They typically focus on the improv activities just done in class and, in terms of the improv principles and skills learned so far, write about such topics as: What did I learn from the activity or others? What did I notice? How have I improved? What could I do better?

During a typical lesson, I put students into random groups of 3 or 4 and start with a speaking warm-up. I do this so that over the semester they will get to know everyone in the class

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and build comfort and trust in the classroom. I give the students a simple relatable question such as, “What is your favorite music group or singer?”

Next, it is time to share their journal writing homework. Students take a moment to silently reread their journal reflections. After that, students either read that journal entry or share it from memory. As the class gets closer to the end of the first semester, I encourage students to share their entries from memory, or only glance at the journal as they share.

Often, I give a short lecture on a principle or concept of improv that relates to what we are doing that day. I teach principles like “justifying” or “honesty” and students write notes from the whiteboard for homework. At midterm, I give a test on the major improv concepts and principles taught in class.

Next come the warm-up improv activities that we learned earlier in the semester. Students then learn new activities to practice the skill we are learning or reviewing. Each time, I explain what skills this activity practices. Otherwise, students might think the games are just silly games and not understand the point of the activity. Students then practice the new activity. Early in the semester these might be gesture and counting activities such as “What is it?” and “Counting on you” and then gradually they might be activities that require quick thinking and speaking like “Fortunately, Unfortunately.” Finally as we approach the end of the semester the activities, such as the “Martha Game” (see end of the next section for explanation) look more and more like a regular improv scene. At the end of the lesson, students reflect in their journals in bullet-point form.

Progressing Through the Semester

I progress step-by-step through the semester so that students can gradually get to where they can perform improv with some confidence and trust in their classmates. Here are some steps that I use to make it as gradual and gentle as possible.

First, students need to get to know each other. The first activities should be simple and allow for lots of laughs. I also emphasize from the start that there are no mistakes in improv and that the goal is not to “do it right” but to enjoy the process and the activity. The games are not competitive.

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Each class, students are in new groups of three or four so that they get to know as many classmates as possible. Sometimes, later in the lesson, groups combine and repeat an activity in a larger group which increases the challenge and their confidence.

Gradually, games become more challenging and closer to resembling performing an improv scene. Toward the end of the semester students will perform improv in front of another group of three or four students and then later in front of two groups. It is only during the middle to the end of the second semester that they perform in front of the whole class. However, to save time and keep a comfortable atmosphere, evaluations of performances are done in front of two groups.

What does improv look like? Due to limited space, groups perform simultaneously in different corners of the classroom, with one group performing while another provides the scene prompt, such as, “A restaurant where the waitress keeps getting the order wrong”. The performing group does not plan anything, not even roles, but just starts performing immediately. Typically, one or two members of the group move toward the center of that part of the room (the stage) and begin. They need to move and use the “stage” area, otherwise they will stand in a small circle and talk and be less likely to act out the scene with lots of movement. They perform for two or three minutes. Afterward, the watching groups clap, and then the groups switch roles.

An example of an easier activity that is similar to performing an improv scene is called “The Martha Game”. Just like an improv scene, performers go near the corner of the room and also get a scene prompt, such as “The Beach”. Instead of having conversations, they only need to go out and say what they are. The first student might say “I’m a parasol” (*and gesture with their whole body being a parasol*). The next one might say “I’m a wave” (*and act out being a wave*), the third person might be a beach chair. Finally, the fourth person is an actual human and walks out to the beach and interacts or comments on the parasol, beach chair, and wave. That person might say something like “Oh the waves are so nice”, (*putting their feet near the waves*) and “It’s hot, I think I’ll stand here” (*under the parasol*) and so on. These activities build toward two to three-minute improv scenes.

It is really rewarding when students can spontaneously perform their improv scenes. After everyone is done, I congratulate them on their scenes and remind them of the first class of the

semester when many felt that they could not do a scene without any preparation. I can see in their reactions that they realize they have come a long way. Second semester students review previous activities and skills and learn new ones.

Conclusion

Improvisation exercises teach communication skills such as “Yes, and” and “No mistakes” effectively in a fun, relaxed environment that helps students improve at listening, speaking spontaneously, and continuing a conversation. This happens gradually over a semester as trust is built up between classmates and as activities become increasingly challenging. Improv skills of listening, adaptability, and collaboration carry over to real-world communication. Future research could explore whether students’ feelings toward English and their confidence in speaking spontaneously improve significantly by the end of a one or two semester course.

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