

Improvisation to Enhance Language Production and Critical Thinking

Noella Olson

New Hampshire Department of Education

Adult Educator Mini-Grant 2016

Abstract

The implementation of improvisation for language education is a developing practice. First language acquisition (LA) experiences point to aspects of play that also impact our understanding of second language acquisition (SLA). Play invites freedom to take risks and to learn from mistakes. Language learners (LLs) need many varied opportunities to produce authentic language for authentic purposes without the fear of taking risks (Brown, 2007). The unscripted nature of improvisation is an invitation for LLs to gain confidence in an atmosphere of play, risk-taking, and collaborative problem solving. Experiences with improvisation for language instruction are described along with teaching implications in consideration of research in the field of linguistics. The relevance of teaching for 21st century thinking and teacher as improviser are also considered (Sawyer, 2011).

Improvisation to Enhance Language Production and Critical Thinking

The most effective strategy to enhance language production is the invitation to play. Play is improvisational and play is foundational to learning (Lobman, 2011, p. 78). Intrinsic to play is the expectation of taking risks, sometimes succeeding and moving forward toward a determined goal and at other times, experiencing delay. Perceived failure motivates to explore further, to learn from mistakes, to improve, and to make further progress toward the goal. Play, the dynamic of give and take, and risk-taking are accepted foundational elements to both language acquisition (LA) and learning (Brown, 2007).

Infant language learning is optimized in a social context (Kuhl, 2014). Children learn a first language through play. A child learns the mother tongue through the trial and error of listening, responding and getting needs met while simultaneously learning the rudiments of grammar and vocabulary. This linguistic give and take is authentic language for authentic tasks. It's not scripted; it's improvised. It follows that language learners' (LLs) ability to learn is enhanced when given opportunity to approximate first LA experiences. *Improvisation brings an approximation of some of the experiences of first language acquisition to language instruction.*

English language learners (ELLs) need to attain to a level of proficiency where they are able to *think in English*. This statement comes out of my direct experiences with ELLs at various levels of proficiency. They communicate a painful lack of confidence in simply speaking English in authentic contexts.

While teaching in the Graduate Language Studies program at Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), I noted that too many students were uncomfortable with authentic language production. Although one of their most commonly stated learning goals is to *become more confident in speaking English*, they were afraid to take risks that would lead to the very confidence that they so needed!

Improvisation to Meet the Need

My solution was to create a learning environment where play became the focus and collaborative problem-solving became the reason for speaking. I introduced a series of brief improvisation experiences into my lesson plans for each class. Now students had to take risks in order to complete improvisation tasks. This was not an environment where mistakes would be perceived as a negative. Risk-taking was now encouraged, expected, and rewarded. Here was a clear invitation to play. Often, my directive to students was, “Don’t think! Let the language flow; don’t worry about making mistakes. Say what you need to say!” We had stepped into a new and refreshing learning environment. In the process of completing improvisation games there was evidence of laughter, reciprocal support, increased openness to risk-taking, and a much lower level of self-censoring (that is often expressed by second guessing and multiple starts).

Positive results with improvisation inspired me to experiment further by adding a graded improvisation assignment to my course syllabus for *Teamwork and Oral Presentation Strategies* at SNHU. The assignment guidelines included peer collaboration, non-verbal communication, engagement in dynamic settings involving entrances and exits, collaborative play while following rules for improvisation, and relaxed willingness to communicate meaningfully.

For this assignment, students were evaluated on

- Demonstrated willingness to take risks,
- Teamwork,
- Originality,
- Demonstration of the ability to appropriately interpret communicative exchanges, and
- Demonstration of the ability to respond meaningfully and creatively “Think on your feet”.

Again, students responded to this assignment with high enthusiasm and a sense of play while in process. Over several course terms student evaluations stated that experiences with improvisation helped them to overcome shyness and to gain confidence in authentic communicative exchanges. Perception of safety in avoiding mistakes can also be very limiting to growth and discovery (Hohn, n.d.). Sharing these experiences with my students convinced me that improvisation is a valuable aid to enhanced English language production for many reasons, including freeing students from fear of risk-taking. Shared laughter and having fun without anxiety over the possibility of making mistakes increased student willingness to take more risks. As a result, confidence increased.

Improvisation Defined

1. Improvisation is reacting and adapting to change as it is presented in real time.
2. To compose, recite or sing on the spur of the moment.
3. To “think on your feet” in a give and take response to new ideas.

To improvise successfully players must agree to play by the rules. Briefly stated, the rules of improvisation uphold and encourage collaboration, focus, listening, inventiveness, and playfulness. Agreement is the one rule that can never be broken; players must be in agreement to bring the improvised scene forward (Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 2001). In the words of Viola Spolin (1999), “It is the process of solving a problem that releases intelligence, talent, and genius” (p. iiv).

Implications for Language Instruction

Implications for language instruction are significant. All of the following are required for participation in any given improvisation game or scene:

- Listening,
- Turn-Taking,
- Negotiating for meaning,
- Skills for repair,
- Attuning to a variety of accents,
- Developing comity across cultures, and
- Taking risks.

This is but a short list of relevant skills that LLs develop in the process of improvising.

Significantly, these skills are critical to learners at all levels of proficiency and stages (Kramsch, 1981; McKay, 2002). Improvisation is as appropriate for young LLs as it is for adults; children are natural improvisers. With reference to improvisation, Spolin states (1999), “The problem of teaching the child is the same as that of teaching the adult. The difference is one of presentation” (p. 256).

It cannot be overstated that in order for improvisation experiences to succeed, students must feel safe. Affective factors relating to students' perception of language identity toward the target language, motivation, and risk-taking all impact second language acquisition (Brown, 2007). Improvisers must be guided to relax and to develop trust. They must trust that taking risks will lead to a positive outcome.

Improvisation impacts language instruction by,

- Developing positive language identity. (If they're laughing and having fun they're motivated to speak English.)
- Developing both pragmatic and communicative competence.
- Increasing a willingness to take risks.
- Developing skills for listening & focus including an awareness of non-verbal communication cues.
- Developing skills in achieving comity and intercultural awareness.
- Developing receptive competence by learning to recognize differences between accents.
- Encouraging persistence for adult learners.
- Challenging students to break through barriers by releasing tension.
- Increasing fluency (Kramsch, 1981, p.21)
- Developing critical thinking skills for the 21st century, most notably, collaboration & innovation (Kelly, 2012; Sawyer, 2011)

Improvisation Impacts Literacy

As a result of positive classroom experiences with improvisation, I continue to explore implementation specific to language instruction. Consequently, I also use improvisation with adult literacy and low-beginning students. (In this case, literacy includes LLs who are illiterate in their first language as well as those who are able to read limited text in English.) Without fail, at the start of improv games, I observe transition in the overall atmosphere from a condition of timid reluctance, to eager playfulness and much language production. To date, I'm always amazed at the energy that language play releases within a group of low-proficiency adult LLs. Notably, similar results were reported at the conclusion of a professional development that was designed to teach improvisational activities for literacy teaching in Chicago schools called *The Second City Educational Program* (Smith, McKnight, 2009).

Specifically, I consistently use a variety of improv games using the alliteration *Peter Piper*. Alliteration serves to immediately capture attention and suggest an atmosphere of playfulness. In terms of language instruction, while there is obvious focus on rhythm, students are also experiencing elements of pronunciation, listening, and linguistic complexity. Notably, these are features that *motherese* provides infants in early LA (Kuhl, 2014; Ryan, 2002). *This points to the approximation of LA experiences and explains why improvisation is effective in enhancing language instruction.* I also use improv games based on word association that help to reinforce key vocabulary, listening skills, and communicative competence in the context of play.

Process Drama is another example of improvisation that is significant for developing literacy and language production across the domains. Process Drama is unscripted. Students ‘write’ their own play through action, reaction, and interaction (Bowell & Heap, 2001, p. 7). When students collaborate to tell a story through process drama, they engage in all the elements of discourse, i.e. turn-taking, negotiation for meaning, and repair. While experiencing an atmosphere of play, beginning LLs are introduced to skills that develop proficiency.

Improvisation Experiment

I recently designed a class called *Improvisation Experiment*. Enrollment was open to all including Higher Education students and ESOL teachers. Sixteen students joined the class. Mostly, the proficiency level was intermediate and also included one college student who was a non-native speaker, an experienced ESOL teacher (a native speaker), and two beginning students. Together, the class represented nine countries and seven first languages. Each class met for two hours over a period of five weeks.

This class was designed for maximum student participation in a variety of collaborative, communicative settings requiring improvisation. Students were challenged to discover and increase their ability to focus, perceive, and receive communication while working in collaboration to solve problems and otherwise engage in original communicative actions. *The sole purpose of this class was to learn how to improvise and play with language.*

Participation in the improvisation games and scenes challenged LLs to create language that was authentic and *in the moment*. They were explicitly encouraged to develop a positive

attitude about taking risks and making mistakes in language production. Students were introduced to the rules of improvisation and guided through a variety of foundational improvisations designed to develop trust, focus, listening, and community building. Students learned to communicate on deeper levels by using non-verbal communication and gibberish to complete improvisations.

My reason for designing this class was to discover more about the effectiveness of improvisation for language instruction. How do improvisation experiences help to develop the confidence needed to create authentic communication for authentic purposes? Would experiences with improvisation lead to one's ability to *play with words, think in English* and otherwise *have fun* while creating authentic, *in the moment* communication together? I wanted honest feedback from the students; this collaborative experiment belonged to all of us. Students were also asked to evaluate their own experiences and to provide peer feedback at the end of each improvisation. Reflection and group discussion provided students with another opportunity to speak in a relevant context.

In Their Words

When asked to evaluate their experiences, specifically, to answer the question, "Did this class help you to *think in English* and improve how you communicate?" Here is what they said at the end of five weeks:

- An experiential class is more effective for enhancing communication skills than one with a big emphasis on reading.

- Prior learned vocabulary was activated. In the words of one student, he could “*break through the wall*” for retrieving and using the “*words*”. When the improv required specific vocabulary, he found that he “*don’t think about it, but just say it*” while acting in role.
- “*Play is key!*” “*Because we know that it’s ‘just a game’, we can relax and just play, not worry about making mistakes.*” (The entire class agreed with this statement.)
- They reported being able to apply experiences from this class to communication in the community.
- In their words, English teachers should know that it’s very important to help students to relax when faced with risk-taking. “*Develop student trust that it’s going to be fun and not scary to join in the game. Make them feel safe! Encourage them to keep going, stay in the game and keep on taking risks.*” They strongly stated that a teacher must be skilled in this area.
- They found it refreshing and effective that there was “*absolutely no use of technology*” in this class, but only person-to-person communication. “*Too often teachers will use technology just because it seems the thing to do but it doesn’t bring any enhancement of language learning to the process.*”
- From a native English speaking, experienced ESOL teacher, “*The difficulty and challenge of the improvisations required confidence to grow*”. (The development of confidence in the process.)
- “*It’s a shame this class has to end!*”

Improvisation Activates Critical Thinking

Simply stated, critical thinking involves being able to apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information to arrive at a rational conclusion or solution. Critical thinking is essential to effective problem-solving, innovation, and creative collaboration. Preparation for success in the 21st century demands a norm of activated critical thinking; information and ways of perceiving information are in constant flux. “How do you prepare individuals for the unexpected, when the challenges they will face depend less on what they know and more on how they think?” (Kelly, 2012, p.6).

Educators, leaders, and trainers in the business world understand the relevance and impact of improvisation for talent development. LLs deserve the same attention so that they too are prepared for relevant 21st century thinking. The most effective language instruction includes the activation of critical thinking skills. Successful improvisers are called upon to hone their ability to apply, analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and otherwise innovate as they develop a scene or play a game. Improvisation is an effective tool for critical thinking in addition to its effectiveness in enhancing language acquisition.

Teacher As Improviser

Sawyer (2011) makes the case that teachers are most effective when they are skilled in disciplined improvisation. Teachers must be deeply knowledgeable of content while able to recognize optimal teaching moments as they are presented by students’ responses and exchanges. Disciplined improvisation implies demonstrating creativity and flexibility within the structure of a well-planned lesson or curriculum (p. 2).

In addition to an enhanced learning of content knowledge, when teachers are skilled at disciplined improvisation, students learn more than the content knowledge: “They learn a broad range of thinking skills that have been widely identified to be essential in today’s world” (Sawyer, 2011, p.16).

Additionally, in a discussion about professional improvisation and teacher education, Stacy Dezutter (2011) states,

My assertion is that the key feature that teaching *should* share with jazz music and theatrical improvisation, although it currently does not, is the availability of an explicitly held and deliberately taught body of knowledge about how to successfully improvise in order to accomplish the intended aims of the profession (Sawyer, 2011, p. 29).

Clearly, there is an invitation and need for teachers and teacher educators to investigate and apply the benefits of improvisation for professional development and excellence in the field.

Conclusion

The most effective context for learning is play. This becomes evident from both observation and consideration of children in a natural and safe, social setting. Play is intrinsic to improvisation in that in order to do it, one must be willing to focus, experiment, respond, adapt, innovate, create, and have fun without an impeding fear of taking risks.

First language acquisition is accomplished in a social context of play, where there is freedom to receive, perceive and respond in an ever increasing world of communicative inter-play. (Kuhl, 2014) refers to “the potent role that social interaction plays in language learning” (p. 211). Considering the relationships between play and learning, improvisation and play, LA and SLA, it makes sense that improvisation effectively enhances language production.

My experiences with improvisation for language instruction consistently support my developing belief that language production is enhanced when LLs are given an opportunity to *play with the language* in a setting of supportive structure (Sawyer, 2011). In addition, I have discovered that when engaged in only improvisation, with no other explicit language instruction, LLs increased their ability to speak authentically, gained confidence and were successful collaborators across cultures. In the words of my students, “Play is key!” There is still much to be discovered about language learning on the playground of improvisation.

References

- Bowell, P. , Heap, B. S. (2001). *Planning Process Drama*. London: David Fulton Publishers Ltd.
- Brown, H. D. (2007). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* (Fifth Edition ed.). White Plains, NY: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Halpern, C. , Close, D., Johnson, K. (2001). *Truth in Comedy*. Englewood, CO: Meriweather Publishing.
- Hohn, G. (n.d.). (Transactors Improv Company) Retrieved from thefiz.biz
<http://thefiz.biz/whatitis.html>
- Kelly, K. (2012). *Leadership Agility: Using Improv to Build Critical Skills*. Retrieved from www.execdev.unc.edu.
- Kramsch, C. J. (1981, October). Discourse Analysis and Second Language Teaching. *Language in Education: Theory and Practice*, No. 37. Retrieved from ERIC database (ED 208675)
- Kuhl, P. K. (2014). Early Language Learning and the Social Brain. *LXXIX*. Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press. Retrieved from <http://symposium.cshlp.org/content/79/211.full.pdf>
doi: 10.11101/sqb.2014.79.024802
- Lobman, C. (2011). Improvising within the System: Creating New Teacher Performances in Inner City Schools. In R. K. Sawyer (Ed.), *Structure and Improvisation in Creative Teaching*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- McKay, S. L. (2002). *Teaching English as an International Language*. NY: Oxford University Press.

- Ryan, J. M. (2002). *Silence, Songs, and Sounds: Developing Second Language Literacy through Poetry*. Retrieved from Yale National Initiative:
<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/2011/3/11.03.02.x.html>
- Sawyer, R. K. (Ed.). (2011). *Structure and Improvisation in Creative Teaching*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, K., McKnight, Katherine S. (2009). Remembering to Laugh and Explore: Improvisational Activities for Literacy Teaching in Urban Classrooms. *International Journal of Education & the Arts* , 10(12). <http://www.ijea.org/>
- Spolin, V. (1999). *Improvisation for the Theatre* (Third Edition ed.). USA: Northwestern University Press.