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Yes and....: improv to improve your English skills

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Introduction

“Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise.[...] Through spontaneity we are reformed into ourselves. It creates an explosion that for the moment frees us from handed-down frames of reference, memory choked with old facts and information and undigested theories and techniques of other people’s findings” (Spolin, 1963: 3-4).

In the introduction to her seminal work, *Improvisation for the theater*, Viola Spolin highlights the benefits of theatrical improvisation. Through acting, students can see the language “as a vehicle for communication rather than as a subject to study” (Council of Europe, 2018: 27). This possibility to act spontaneously and to start learning afresh seems especially relevant to first-year university students who are studying English as a non-specialist subject and do not have the expected B2 level. These students tend to be frustrated about the wide gap between what they are expected to do and what they feel they can do. Most of them have studied English for seven years and yet many do not feel confident when speaking. Our hypothesis is that through the practice of improvisational theater in English, students may overcome the anxiety that they associate with foreign language learning and, more specifically, speaking.

Researchers in second language acquisition have shown that language anxiety greatly impacts academic behavior and performances. Horwitz *et al.* (1986, cited in Baran-Lucarz, 2022: 83) define language anxiety as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process”. Some even consider that it is “one of the best predictors of success” in foreign language learning (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991, cited in Baran-Lucarz, 2022: 83). As language anxiety is a type of social anxiety (*ibid.*: 85), activities known to lower social anxiety should be encouraged.

Improvisational theater has been shown to reduce social anxiety. For example, a study of 268 teenagers demonstrated that the participation in a school-based improvisational theater program reduced symptoms of social anxiety (Felsman *et al.*, 2019). Yet, while there has been much scholarly interest in the positive impact of dramatical acting to reduce social anxiety, there are few publications that analyze the specific benefits of improvisational theater on language learning in France.

What is improvisational theater?

Improvisational theater is defined as unplanned collaborative performance (Halpern, Close & Johnson, 1994, cited by Felsman *et al.*, 2020). In a 2018 paper, Roxanne Gagnon (2018: 252) notes that it is an art form dating back to the Atellan Farce¹ and the Commedia dell'arte. This art form gradually disappeared until there was a renewed interest for improvisational theater (hereafter “improv”) at the end of the 19th century when Stanislavski drew upon it for the basis of his acting method. Then, the 20th century saw the emergence of two major figures: Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone. Viola Spolin created improvisational techniques that continue to inspire improvisers as well as being recognized by educators and psychologists. As to Keith Johnstone, he developed the concept of Theatersports where opposing teams perform scenes based on audience suggestions. This format can also be found in Canada where improv matches appeared during the intermissions of hockey matches. The British and American versions of the TV show “Whose Line Is It Anyway?” popularized it in the early 21st century. This format is also very popular in France where amateur improv groups perform in different venues. In parallel to this competitive form of improvisation, long-form improv are improvised plays. This non-competitive format incorporates some of the key principles necessary to improv: trust and attentive listening.

These two principles can be said to stem from the concept of “Yes and...”. It does not mean that players parrot those words but that they accept every proposal made. It should be noted that a proposal or offer is not necessarily an utterance but can also be what an actor does on stage (*e.g.* interacting with an imaginary environment), a gesture or facial expression. Improvisers need to agree on a shared reality in order to develop their improvised story. This reality is created by their words within an imaginary space that they bring to life. Consequently, trust is the underlying principle of improv. On stage, players have only one another to create a story. And the way towards creation is by building it step by step, each player acknowledging what has been built before adding their own building block in turn. When applied to the foreign language classroom, this offers students a freedom to play with the language, unburdened of the fear of saying “something wrong.” Instead, they benefit from the trust and attentive listening of their fellow players.

¹ Atellan Farce were short improvised farces that were introduced in Rome around 300 B.C. (Dupont, 1988, cited by Gagnon, 2018).

Our experimental teaching

At the Science University of Montpellier there are approximately 1,400 first-year students each year. There is no English course during the first semester while the second semester hybrid course incorporates nine hours of presence in the classroom. The English level of the students is rather heterogeneous and many of them have an A2/B1 level. Although most have studied English for seven years, they are not comfortable with face-to-face interactions.

Our workshop opened in September 2023 for a first-semester course to volunteer first-year students who self-identified as not comfortable when speaking English and as not having the expected B2 level. It was agreed that the students who enrolled in the workshop instead of the regular English course would obtain two ECTS². As there is no actual course in the first semester in the regular program and the second-semester course of two ECTS is validated only by an on-line test, we wondered if students enrolled in the workshop would be able to keep up with the increased work. We decided to offer 12 two-hour sessions each semester and let the students decide whether they would enroll for one semester or both. Twenty-one students enrolled for the first semester, five dropped out and 15 decided to continue during the second semester. Eight new students joined the workshop for the second semester. We drew on our experience of the first semester (most of the dropouts told us their workload was too heavy to attend the workshop) by giving the students a few weeks to decide whether or not they wanted to enroll.

The number of students is limited to 24 and there are two teachers per session. This arrangement is modelled on the Glottodrama experiment (Nofri *et al.*, 2014: 7) in which two teachers work with the students: one focuses on language skills and the other on drama skills. A professional actor/improv teacher also participates in three sessions each semester including the end of semester show.

Content and organization of the sessions

As the workshop is designed for low-proficiency students, they are asked to complete some preparatory work on a Moodle online learning platform before coming to each session. The preparatory work aims at developing their listening skills and fostering their autonomy. Each online unit is divided into three parts: a video with a tongue twister, a video extract from a movie and a worksheet. Tongue twisters are selected based on recurring mistakes made by French speakers. The goal is to help them improve both their pronunciation and their ability to discriminate sounds. The videos are chosen both for their linguistic interest and their representativity of different film genres. The worksheet is meant to help the students improvise. It contains vocabulary lists divided into two categories: one identified as frequently used words and another of specific vocabulary that is directly connected to the topic. The objective is to develop A2/B1-level users' essential knowledge of general English as studies have shown that technical students and qualified technicians

² European Credits Transfer System en anglais, soit système européen de transfert et d'accumulation de crédits.

esteem their general English vocabulary as insufficient (Lancereau-Forster, 2014). The worksheet also presents the common tropes of the genre, stock characters and common settings. It is adapted from an idea that the project's professional actor and teacher (Julien Masdoua) uses in his French improv workshops, namely that technical knowledge of a specific world helps improvisers. Worlds can be defined as follows: fictional worlds (*e.g.* comedy), real world situations (*e.g.* the business world) or historical worlds (*e.g.* the Cold War). We decided to focus mostly on fictional worlds as they provide a cultural focus to the workshop. Knowledge of these worlds is meant to facilitate the work of the actors who can then rely on their knowledge of stock characters and jargon to act and react in a given situation (*i.e.* the prompts given by the audience). We found this approach motivated students to memorize new words and be more comfortable uttering them. In addition to the preparatory work on Moodle, the students keep a reflexive journal in which they report on each session, prepare for the next, and choose three to four words that they would like to memorize and practice. The purpose of the journal is to allow the students to both have a “think place” and to keep track of their progress. (Moon, 2006, cited in Lapaire, 2022: 4).

The workshop introduces the students to a large variety of improv games and exercises. It always starts with a warm-up that includes a tongue twister that the students are invited to practice before coming to class. The activities are usually done in constantly changing pairs or small groups with all the students working in parallel. This gives the students plenty of opportunities to speak, to act, to become acquainted with whole group and to feel confident talking to everyone. Improvisation in front of the whole group begins when the professional actor first comes to the workshop. As an experienced actor, he takes turns helping them improvising and building the story. All the students reported in their journals that they enjoyed this session even though they may have been nervous when called onto the stage.

Building trust and confidence

The first improv classes are designed to instill a “yes, and” mindset, that is to say it creates a benevolent framework in which students are comfortable playing with the language and learning how to listen to each other. The aim is to practise in a playful and relaxed atmosphere in order to avoid the detrimental effects of anxiety on the quality and fluency of their performance (Baran-Lucarz, 2022: 87). Most of the activities are carried out in pairs and students change partners throughout the session, which allows them to communicate with each member of the class individually. The teachers move around the class and provide help when asked but give no unsolicited feedback. They provide vocabulary answers on request and write the word(s) on the board. The last half hour is spent answering further questions and going over the words written on the board. The students are encouraged to take notes of the words that they do not know and/or take a picture of the board to review them later. After the third class, a student reported in his diary that he had learned a new word thanks to his classmates (that he referred to as “friends”) and that he was feeling more sociable and enjoying it.

All the classes start with a physical warm-up that includes a diction warm-up. For instance, in one exercise, we divide the room into four areas and volunteer students call out four different emotions corresponding to each area. After repeating the tongue twister that they had to practice at home in chorus, they walk around from one area to the next while delivering their line (tongue twister) with the corresponding emotion. The exercise encourages participation, including that of the teachers who can join to create a closer relationship with students. Students are encouraged to use their bodies to stress their emotions and modify the volume of their voices. Many students reported in their journals that they enjoyed the activity, declaring it was “fun” or “useful”. Combining pronunciation with improv games allows the students to relax and perform better, thus reducing language anxiety which has been shown to have an especially detrimental effect on L2 pronunciation (Baran-Lucarz, 2022: 88).

The workshop is also designed to make the students feel more comfortable using their bodies when they are improvising. A typical exercise would be “Follow the leader”. In this exercise the students, in a single line, are given a situation such as “you are entering the jungle”. The leader reacts to the prompt and moves around the room with the rest of the group following the leader and imitating her/his movements. Leaders change throughout the game and they are given several situations. The aim is to encourage students to use their bodies to create a fictional environment around them but also to bond and listen to each other. Bonding between the students is extremely important as language anxiety is not always competence-based but often identity-based. It can be caused by the fear of a negative opinion from their peers (Stroud & Wee, 2006: 301). Thanks to bonding, learners become more comfortable acting together and thus also speaking together. As one of the rules of improv is to valorize one’s partner, it creates a sense of benevolent cooperation in the students.

Finally, there are exercises intended to develop confidence by changing the way participants see themselves as foreign language speakers. Studies have shown that there is a strong connection between L2 pronunciation and identity (Guiora, 1972; Walker, 2011 cited in Baran-Lucarz, 2022: 90) and improv helps to explore different identities. Students are encouraged to improvise as if they were stereotypical characters from the different genres that we study over the course of the semester. For instance, they can be asked to walk around the room as detectives looking for clues or a pirate seizing a ship. They are given movie quotes from each of the movie genres studied and they are also encouraged to use the script of the video given as assignment to shadow one or two lines, that is to say students attempt to repeat those lines and imitate the speaker. They are encouraged to choose a special focus which, for instance, can be a specific intonation or specific sound. The goal is to let them practice pronunciation in character instead of being daunted by their ideal pronunciation L2 self.

Modifying attitude towards mistakes

When students improvise, they speak without preparation. It enables them to perform as they would in real-life situations. This “spontaneous creativity” modifies their attitude towards the language: they do not fear making mistakes anymore (Lacoste, 1980 cited in Gagnon, 2018: 256). Improv games are used to help them see that mistakes are part of learning and that when it comes to improv, mistakes can be a source of fun. The playfulness of some of the activities changes the stakes: they stop focusing on the language and concentrate on communicating successfully with their partners instead. Some of the warm-up exercises are designed to move the focus from the language to the body as a tool for performance. While some activities are meant to develop their ability to focus on what is being said to them, they also allow them to see mistakes through the lens of humor which relieves stress and reduces tension (Martin, 2007, cited in Bell & Pomerantz, 2019: 64). For instance, in one improv game, the players are only allowed to ask questions. This game is played in a small group and when a player makes a mistake (*i.e.* answers a question), s/he is out, and another pair starts improvising. It is challenging, and after a few rounds they are encouraged to manipulate imaginary objects while they are thinking of a new question. As their practice of improvisation progresses, they come to see that humor is an important part of improv, whether it comes from mistakes or is done voluntarily.

Humor may help students understand and remember forms and meanings better than if they were encountered or taught only within a serious environment as some evidence suggests (Bell & Pomerantz, 2019: 65). In an improv exercise in which students worked in groups to try to get their partners to guess idioms, a student misread “the price went through the roof” and his team guessed “the prince went through the roof” which had a greater visual impact and led to a better recall at the end of class. We note that this exercise, like any other improv activity, requires physical action and triggers an emotional response which “can lead to improved retention of language structures and vocabulary” (O’Gara, 2008, Kao & O’Neill, 1998 & Sambanis, 2013, cited in Giebert, 2014: 142).

Finally, as participants speak without preparation, they do not anticipate the fear of speaking. Their relation to the language is transformed in a way similar to that found in the practice of process drama³. As they take on a role, their “immediate need to speak purposefully can become stronger than their level of anxiety about speaking” (Baldwin & Galazka, 2021: 13) as they “become preoccupied with working in role and responding to the dramatic situations, their anxiety about making mistakes is reduced and their confidence grows (*ibid.*: 17). Baldwin & Galazka further note that the successful outcome in an imagined scenario helps students feel more confident in real-life situations. An example of this could be the party-quirk game. Students, in a group, are told that they are going to attend a party. A volunteer plays the host and all the guests are given a party quirk. The goal is to carry out conversations as if they were attending a party while trying to guess the other students’ quirks. Some of the party

³ “Process drama is a whole class activity, which involves everyone working in role together within an imagined time, place and situation.” (Baldwin & Galazka, 2021: 9).

quirks we used were “You act like you are on a survival show” or “You repeat the last word of every sentence.” As the students are focused on trying to play their quirk and guess the other students’ quirks, their desire to speak becomes stronger than their fear of speaking. Some students who self-identified as shy reported in their journals that they had particularly enjoyed that activity. Improv taps into our inner desire to tell and listen to stories and as it brings about positive emotions such as curiosity and fun, it can be an effective tool to fight language anxiety (Baran-Lucarz, 2022: 91).

Evaluation

The students participating in the workshop receive three grades. The first grade corresponds to the work done on Moodle and their journal entries. The second grade is a vocabulary test at the end of the semester based on a list that each student creates. Finally, they have a grade for their attendance at the end-of-semester show. During this show, students perform on stage in front of an audience. All the improvisations are based on audience suggestions. Each audience member writes a topic on a piece of paper and these topics are drawn randomly by the master of ceremony who reads the topic to the students. A professional actor participates in all the improv scenes which boosts the students’ confidence. Students were nonetheless told that they would not have to improvise if they did not feel comfortable as audience participation would be equally important. However, they all volunteered to perform on stage. As to the vocabulary test, they all scored 100%. We checked whether they still remembered these words at the beginning of the second semester with a word game compiling all the words from their lists. Students were in teams and had to guess the maximum number of words in 10 minutes. They had played similar word games during the course of the semester, and we noticed that they were more comfortable when giving definitions but also using their bodies to in the guessing-the-words activity. The scores were quite high for all the teams.

In the first semester, students answered a questionnaire after a few weeks of practice to assess whether they were feeling more comfortable when speaking English. A total of 94% reported being more comfortable when speaking English to a classmate during the workshop while 59% reported being more comfortable when speaking English in other situations (while 35% neither agreed nor disagreed). As for the second semester, a post-course survey was designed in collaboration with the Observatory of Pedagogical Transformation of the university of Montpellier (the report below is a translation of their report).

In all, 44 students answered the anonymous survey. Half of the respondents had attended the workshop for either one or two semesters and the other half had attended regular first-year English courses during the second semester (as there are no courses during the first semester). Survey questions were administered in French. Statements were rated on a five-point scale of agreement: I strongly agree / I agree / neutral / I disagree / I strongly disagree.

The survey included six measures: interest in language practice, vocabulary learning, its meaningfulness and its use, language anxiety and perceived learning. Each measurement included several items (see appendix).

The mean value obtained for each measurement was always higher when the students had attended the improv workshops. However, not all the differences were statistically meaningful.

The results show that:²²

- students who attended the improv workshop deemed that they improved their spoken skills more than those in the regular first-year course;
- there is a greater increase in the interest for spoken language practice among the students who attended the improv workshop;
- students who attended the workshop declared they were better able to overcome their language anxiety;
- the more the students increased their interest for spoken language practice, the more they deemed they had improved their skills.

Although the experiment was limited to a small group of volunteer students, we noticed that students who attended the workshop during the first semester were more comfortable speaking and with greater fluency during the second semester. Our impression is also confirmed by their journal entries. Improv seems to be an effective tool to improve the attitude of students who seem to have lost all hope in their ability to speak English and to help them realize that they do not need to speak flawlessly to be able to communicate. Improv is suited for the language classroom, including within the competency-based approach that is currently implemented in higher education in France. When students improvise together, they not only communicate but they also act and interact, simulating real-life situations as much as possible. They develop communication skills that will be useful towards their careers as scientists. These may also help them to engage with non-expert audiences.

The limits of using improv in the classroom may be that teachers who are not familiar with the activity may be reluctant to use it. One way to circumvent this problem could be to attend improv workshops or performances. This activity is furthermore recommended for novice teachers as it prepares them for the unpredictability of teaching itself (Gagnon, 2018: 260). Improv teaches people to “think on their feet”, a skill that is much needed when facing a classroom of students.

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Appendix 1 – Survey questions

Toutes les réponses sont sur une échelle de Likert à 5 points (Pas du tout d'accord; Plutôt pas d'accord; Ni d'accord, ni pas d'accord ou je ne sais pas; Plutôt d'accord; Tout à fait d'accord).

A. Questions sur le sentiment d'efficacité personnelle lié au cours

SEP apprendre le vocabulaire

Dans le cours suivi ce semestre:

- j'ai été capable de bien apprendre du nouveau vocabulaire
- j'ai pu bien retenir de nouveaux mots
- je suis parvenu à bien mémoriser des termes nouveaux

SEP donner sens au vocabulaire à apprendre

Dans le cours suivi ce semestre:

- j'ai pu donner du sens au vocabulaire appris
- j'ai appris de nouveaux mots en sachant leur donner du sens
- j'ai été capable de comprendre le sens des termes appris

SEP apprendre à mobiliser le vocabulaire en contexte

Dans le cours suivi ce semestre:

- j'ai appris à utiliser le vocabulaire dans des situations concrètes
- j'ai été capable de mettre en contexte les mots appris
- j'ai su appliquer les nouveaux mots dans des situations concrètes

SEP surmonter les craintes de s'exprimer en anglais

Dans le cours suivi ce semestre:

- j'ai surmonté les craintes de m'exprimer en anglais
- j'ai su dépassé mes réticences à parler en anglais
- j'ai surmonté mon appréhension de l'oral en anglais

SEP favoriser l'intérêt pour la pratique orale de la langue

Le cours suivi ce semestre:

- a développé mon intérêt pour la pratique orale de l'anglais
- m'a donné plus envie de parler en anglais
- a développé mon appétence à discuter en anglais

B. Questions sur les apprentissages perçus grâce au cours

Grâce au cours suivi ce semestre, ma pratique de l'anglais est telle que:

- je suis plus à l'aise pour parler anglais avec mes camarades
- je suis plus à l'aise pour m'engager sans préparation dans une conversation sur un sujet familier
- je suis plus à l'aise pour donner mon avis
- je suis plus à l'aise pour reformuler mes propos
- je suis plus à l'aise pour corriger mes lapsus et erreurs après en avoir pris conscience
- je suis plus à l'aise pour prononcer des mots nouveaux
- lorsque je ne connais pas un mot, j'ose davantage proposer une formulation alternative (par exemple, "un camion pour voyageur" pour "un bus")
-