



Tips for Teachers

Improv Ideas for the Language Classroom

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Every time I attend an ELT conference in Japan or a nearby country, I am amazed by all the communicative English textbooks on display in the materials room. One would think that, with all the energy and money being poured into the communicative endeavor, students would have no problems speaking in English by now. Sadly, this is not the case. My own impression is that little progress has been made in students' speaking skills over the past twenty years. Textbooks are brighter than they used to be, with impressive accompanying videos and on-line activities, but for the most part they fail to engage students and, most importantly, fail to boost their speaking and listening abilities.

Recently, I have turned to alternative sources to try to find engaging activities that help students become better speakers and listeners. One promising source, I believe, is the realm of improvisational theater, or improv. The improv philosophy and its many techniques have been described in several popular books, including one by the actor Alan Alda. Although improv involves theatrical performance, its various tenets—an emphasis on deep listening, supporting one's conversational partner, and keeping a dialogue alive by adding ideas—hold much value to language learners. In this article I will introduce three improv tasks which have worked well in my English courses with students of varying English ability levels. The first two tasks play out like word games, and the last one is more communicative in nature.

Activity 1: Group sentences

This task encourages students to work together as an ensemble in order to produce meaningful, if a bit bizarre, sentences. The following steps can be taken.

1. Students should form groups of five to six students.
2. The instructor should tell students that groups will work together to produce sentences, with one word spoken by each person in turn. The instructor can demonstrate this by working with one group. The instructor can begin by saying I, and then one person in the group should think of the next word in the sentence, for example *think*, and so on.
3. Students can do the task on their own, producing as many sentences as they can during a five-minute period. Each group should select one member as the record-keeper, whose job it is to write down the sentences.
4. When five minutes are up, the record-keepers can come up to the board and write down their group's sentences.

If there are any problems in grammar, these can be corrected, but I prefer not to make a fuss over minor mistakes, to prevent a fear of errors from strangling their imaginations. Higher-level students can be given a theme to accompany their group sentences. For example, they can be told that their goal is to compose thoughtful proverbs. Some examples of proverbs can then be shown, such as *There is no royal road to learning*, or *A rolling stone gathers no moss*. Students can come up with their own proverbs, whose meanings the class can then ponder.

Activity 2: Repeat the last word

People tend to think about what they will say next while their interlocutors are speaking. As a result, they often miss the last thing the speaker says. This task forces students to listen carefully to their partners' utterances down to the last word. The idea is for a speaker to listen to a spoken sentence, and then state a new sentence beginning with the last word in the previous sentence. The steps below can be taken.

1. The instructor should first model the task, either by writing sentences on the board or choosing a volunteer from the class to demonstrate with. For example:
A: I need to buy some *eggs*.
B: Eggs are produced by *chickens*.
A: *Chickens* cannot fly very *far*. [Etc.]
2. Students should then be divided into pairs and told that they have three minutes to do the task. More than three minutes and the task may start to become onerous.

3. The instructor can then have students switch partners and do the task again.

The instructor should remind students that their task is to create sentences, and not a meaningful dialogue with their partners. This task can also be done in groups or by going around the class. I prefer to have students work in pairs initially to get them accustomed to focusing on their conversational partner. I also tell students that it is all right to change the number or tense of the last word spoken by their partner, or to add a functional word like an article or preposition, if this makes it easier for them to come up with a sentence.

Activity 3: Yes, and...

This is perhaps the definitive improv exercise. The goal is to affirm what one's partner says, and then add to it—essential elements in keeping a conversation alive. The following steps can be taken.

1. The instructor can introduce this task orally, or by writing sentences on the board, for example:
A: Today is a beautiful day.
B: Yes, and today's homework was easy. A: Yes, and...
2. Students should then be divided into pairs, and each student in each pair should take the role of A or B. Again, students should be given a time limit, perhaps two to three minutes.
3. Student A should begin, by saying *Today is a beautiful day* or another sentence.
4. Student B should continue by saying *Yes, and*, and adding a new thought, and then A should continue, and so on until the time limit is up.
5. The instructor can then have students switch partners and try the task again

Beginning with a new first sentence can help to keep the task fresh, for example: *Our school has a nice campus*, or *It's fun to play sports*. Higher level students can be asked to come up with their own first sentence. Also, students should be told that their sentences can be either factual or fictional, and it is all right if their conversational topic wanders from the first sentence. In fact, this is part of the fun! This task can also be done in groups, or, in small classes, by going around the class.

Once students get the hang of this activity, the instructor can introduce variations to keep the task from becoming tedious. Students can be shown a few different expressions for agreement to replace *yes*, *and...* such as *I know*, *That's right*, *I agree*, *I know*, or *yeah*, and then add their new thoughts. Through repeated practice of this task, the *yes*, *and...* part will come to fall away in importance as students realize how conversations in English often involve a continual adding of ideas about a subject, rather than the question-answer patterns that often appear in textbooks.

Final thoughts

These tasks help students to view communication as a dynamic exchange, in which full attention and active contributions are required of both speakers and listeners. They may also promote empathy in students, as they must listen attentively to their partners. I recommend trying these tasks from time to time, to help students become accustomed to them. Language learners—like actors—need ample time for rehearsal.

For more on improv:

Alda, A. (2017). *If I understood you, would I have this look on my face?* New York: Random House.

Madson, P.A. (2005). *Improv wisdom*. New York: Bell Tower.

About the Author

Ian Willey holds an MA in TESOL from Kent State University and a Ph.D. in Sociolinguistics from Hiroshima City University. When not working on research projects, he tries to find ways to get his students at Kagawa University to speak up in class.