Application of Improvisation to Communicative English Classrooms

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Abstract

Students often hesitate to speak out in communicative English classrooms at Japanese universities, even though they have a basic knowledge of English vocabulary and grammar. They can be out of practice, afraid of making mistakes, not actively involved, and/or just being shy. In this paper, using improvisation games in communicative English classrooms as 'active learning' is suggested as an effective method to allow students to 'wear masks,' to lessen the fear of making mistakes and to overcome shyness. In fact, it has been shown that people participate in group activities more by pretending to be someone else. That improvisation can be an effective training tool, is supported by studies of humor in education. These studies show humor increases flexibility, creativity, and thinking outside of the box, and that it can increase student's self-esteem, as well as motivation, and has been shown to decrease anxiety, stress, and help students to learn more in classrooms. In this paper, the authors provide some background of improvisation, its links to humor, and actual improvisation games which can be used as effective active learning tools for the communicative English classroom.

Key Words : Improvisation, Communicative English Education Classroom, Classroom Activity, Humor

1. Introduction

The acknowledgment by The Ministry of Education in 1998 of the necessity for a more communicative method of teaching through the Course of Study has lead language teachers in Japan to employ more communicative activities in their classrooms. Teachers have come to recognize the need for teaching English in a more communicative context to enable students to use English among themselves. (Takashima & Sugiura 2006: 59).

However, one of the challenges English instructors have in Communicative English Class in Japanese Universities is getting students to actually participate in the classroom. Students can be shy, afraid of making mistakes, lacking confidence, and unable to understand the context of discussion to such an extent that they have little meaningful participation in class, despite having had years of formal English education.

In this paper, the authors will introduce improvisation, an established method of performance, as a possible remedy to this situation. Given some of the issues in Communicative English classrooms in Japanese universities, such as the ones mentioned above, improvisation games arranged for language learning purpose seem like a natural choice as an active learning method. The games provide students mental and physical activities, as well as allow them opportunities to exercise creativity, become flexible enough to take risks, make mistakes, solve problems and, importantly, to have fun.

Furthermore, when improvisation is examined from the perspective of humor studies, using humor as a teaching tool has multiple positive effects. Many humor studies in education have shown that humor decreases stress, reduces anxiety, increases self-motivation, enhances self-esteem and improves the classroom environment (Garner 2006, Morreall 1997, Hill 1988).

According to Fotis (2014), "improvisational comedy is a system of creativity that focuses on the cooperation of a group of players to create completely original performances based on set structures and rules that can be performed spontaneously in front of an audience or used as a

means for generating scripted material (p.381)." Improvisation games can also be used in classrooms to create better relationships among groups of students, and thus improve team-work skills, and possibly better student-teacher relationships. By introducing improvisation and its games, this paper seeks to suggest a possible method for active learning in the communicative English classroom.

2. Definition, Description, and Brief History of Improvisation

In order to discuss the advantages of using improvisational games in communicative English classrooms, it seems important to offer a definition and description. Also, because the background for the establishment of this performing art leads into how its learning exercises developed, its rather complex history and multiple roots should be introduced to help understand the relation between improvisation and its possible relevance in education.

2.1　Definition

Improvisation encompasses a diverse range of disciplines: from stage acting, to dance, to music. In order to discuss the applicability of improvisation to the English language classroom, it is perhaps first necessary to narrow the focus to improvised acting, or more specifically improv comedy—for these are the activities which we will later discuss— and to further define what we mean by the term.

One central quality of all improvised acting, whether comedic or otherwise, is its unscripted nature and the absence of pre-planning. This spirit of spontaneity is defined by improvisational theater pioneer, Viola Spolin, as: "the moment of personal freedom when we are faced with a reality and see it, explore it and act accordingly." (Spolin, 1963: 4) In the actual practice of exploring that "reality" some performers, adhere to a philosophy of 'anything goes,' while others reject the notion of a form without focus in favor of a more structured approach, such as employing various games, or performance styles, which will be covered later.

Another forerunner in the field of improvisation, Keith Johnstone, has

similarly been quoted on the subject of improvisation defining it as follows: "a loosely structured practical guide for psychologically and physically unblocking human beings, thus enabling them to generate good stories with three-dimensional characters through spontaneous collaboration." (Dudeck, 2013: 3) Improvisation, then, is about focusing on what is happening right in front of the player; of being in the moment and exploring an imaginary framework, and, through the process of doing so, ultimately gaining freedom of expression.

Improvisation is also a process of overcoming the fear of failure, by learning that failure is not personal, rather part of the process of learning. This allows players the freedom to try out many things, which they might never have the chance to experience during the course of their own lifetime. Not many have the opportunity to wake up as a country's President. In improvisation, however, everyone can.

2.2 Description

Improvisation need not be comedic, but the incongruity found in the scenes often can be delightfully funny, to both the players who are discovering the story as they go along, and the audiences who howl with laughter as they witness the process unfold before them. This type of comedic performance is often referred to as improv, and within this smaller classification can be found three yet smaller categories, which, according to Fotis (2014), are short form, long form, and sketch-based improv, or scriptprov. While all of these share similarities, they are vastly different in practice.

Short-form improv, is comprised largely of games—a type of performance where the players must act within a specific set of rules. These rules can be predetermined, such as popular games used in many improv venues around the world, or even made up on the spot. Scenes in short form typically last a few minutes (approximately 1 to 7 minutes). This style of improv was developed largely from games invented by Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone to either develop, or remove, certain destructive habits in the players. Are players planning too far in advance,

and thus missing vital cues provided by their scene partners? Are they overriding other players' choices due to a fear of losing control? Traits which disrupt the flow of a scene can be trained out of the players through games designed specifically for that purpose.

Long-form improv can last anywhere from 10 minutes to more than an hour, depending on the style, and more closely resembles a play (or even a musical). Sketch-based improv, on the other hand, uses improvisation to develop scenes, which are later performed by the players, and possibly improvised upon. This performance style is used by groups such as Second City, and in shows such as *Saturday Night Live*.

For the purpose of this paper we will focus more specifically on the games used in the short form as the vehicles for learning, and will discuss this in section 4.

2.3 Brief History

Improvisation has evolved from a variety of performance arts, each with its own rich tradition. On the surface, these may seem to be completely disparate branches of learning; such as music, dance and theatre. However, their improvised forms all share a common goal: to aid performers in free expression, and to overcome an overdependence on tradition.

According to Frost and Yarrow (2007), improvised theater evolved from mime, clowning and *Commedia dell'Arte*, a bawdy form of masked performance, which originated in Italy in the 16th century. It involves improvisation upon a set of standard subjects, or *sogetti*; routines, or *lazzi*; and prepared passages, the *concetti*. The reverberations of *Comedia dell'Arte* were felt as far as Russia and France. Directors such as Stanislavsky at the Moscow Art Theatre, and Copeau at Vieux-Colombier both incorporated its techniques into actors' workshops, as well as acting schools. This was in an attempt to break down artificial barriers which the directors believed had been created between the actors of that time and the material they were exploring.

What follows is a period of collaboration between the different centers

of theater, in both Russia and the West. Actors and directors criss-crossed between Paris, Moscow and New York to study and further the use of improvisation, mainly as a tool of exploring material. It was not until the mid-20th century, however, that improvisation became an independent style of performance, the world over.

2.4 Improvisation as an 'active learning' method

The use of improvisation and improvisation games expanded beyond the stage and live shows (such as *Saturday Night Live*). Some filmmakers use it while filming, and "Fortune 500 companies have begun using improv as part of their corporate training structures, and improv as a philosophy for how to live one's life is gaining in popularity (Fotis 2014: 383)." That improvisation is not only entertainment, but can also be used as a training tool is clear. It has developed as a training methodology for the purpose of learning certain skills, such as: problem solving, team-work, communication, and possibly language.

The Central Education Council of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan reported some policies and methods regarding the future education system in *Towards Qualitative Changes of University Education for New Era* in 2012. Among a number of suggestions for global education, so called 'active learning' has been strongly endorsed by the council. 'Active learning' is the general term for a teaching/learning method which requires learners' active participation instead of a one-way, lecture-style education often employed by instructors. This type of learning fosters the development of general abilities, including cognitive, ethical, social, knowledge acquisition, experiential, as well as the development of refinement. According to the Central Education Council, activities such as group-discussion, debate, and group-work in classrooms are also effective, as well as discovery learning, project-based learning, problem-solving learning, experimental learning, and research learning.

University-level education is expected to adopt some type of active learning. The report also indicates that some universities have made

progress towards the globalization of students through active learning.

To successfully be involved in improvisation games oftentimes involves a high level of physical as well was mental participation, and requires working in pairs or groups. There are multiple challenges to be figured out, in the form of conflicts in the stories being told, and the games themselves offer a continuous problem-solving experience. In the classroom, as well, students are required to be highly motivated and participate in activities in order to act in front of the class in an open discussion environment. Though individual English abilities may be limited, a student's mind and imagination are not limited by the instructor or text books. In many classrooms in Japan it is taught that there is only one right answer and all others answers are wrong. In improvisation, all the ideas are accepted by the group. This type of freestyle learning environment would allow lower aversion to making mistakes, and would allow students to be more active in performance and speak out in a communicative English classroom.

Using improvisation in the classroom promises a number of benefits in the classroom, as instructors teach and students learn English communication skills. In the next section, we will introduce some of the advantages of using improvisation in Language learning classrooms.

3. Benefits of Improvisation in a Language Learning Classroom

As we have mentioned, in the English communication class in Japan, many students hesitate to speak out, due to the fear of making mistakes. They freeze up, and, in order to avoid drawing any kind of attention to themselves, they do not participate.

While in a performance environment, audience feedback to a scene-in-progress can be immediate and, at times quite vocal, in a classroom, there should always be an atmosphere of support. Responsibility for a scene lies with all members who are in it, and while there is a tendency for some inexperienced players to feel pressure to come up with a 'magic solution' to a scene, once players realize that the responsibility for the scene/game is a shared one, they relax and open up.

Johnstone (1979) finds mask-work to be a powerful learning device. In wearing a mask, students are allowed to let go of their day-to-day identity. This is especially true after they have engaged in the effective exercise of seeing and acting out new identities. In the theater or stage, the actual use of masks and costumes is effective because it represents different emotional states and social roles.

In classrooms, students may not actually wear physical masks, but the acting out of different identities gives them an invisible mask, allowing them to be 'someone who speaks English'. This gives them the excuse to become someone who they are usually not, and by doing so makes students less afraid of making mistakes, and in turn freer to take risks.

3.1 Alleviates Unhealthy Competition & Builds Interpersonal Relationships

As we have mentioned, one of the difficulties with teaching students in Japan is getting them to risk standing out. This is partly based in the deep-rooted cultural tendency of "the nail that sticks out to get pounded down," or [出る杭は打たれる] *deru kui ha utareru*. This may function to keep "well-behaved," quiet students in a class, however, this is a particularly troublesome mindset for learning a language, as practice is the key to gaining mastery. This alone, however, is not the sole culprit in the classroom. Unhealthy competition between peers, and the pressure to score can also take their toll on the learning process.

Keith Johnstone (1979) discusses the need to take the pressure off of students, saying, "Normal schooling is intensely competitive, and the students are supposed to try and outdo each other. If I explain to a group that they're to work for the other members, that each individual is to be interested in the progress of the other members, they're amazed, yet obviously if a group supports its own members strongly, it'll be a better group to work in." (Johnstone 1979: 29)

Spolin also identifies competition as a source of anxiety, noting that, "A highly competitive atmosphere creates artificial tensions, and when competition replaces participation, compulsive action is the result. Sharp

competition connotes to even the youngest the idea that he has to be better than someone else." (Spolin 1963: 10). Finding ways to help students work together then should be one of the goals of a communicative English classroom.

Because improv students learn to work with one another, they begin to realize that they are not in direct competition with one another. In fact, they can often not succeed on their own. Each story is built one step at time, and if one player steamrolls over everyone else's ideas he or she will soon discover the other players pulling away from every idea offered. It is only by sharing a vision that a scene can be created, and vision can only be shared with agreement between all parties on stage.
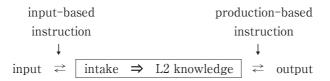
Interpersonal relationships, between not only the players on stage, but also the meta-relationships between the characters themselves are an integral part of improvisation. The players, those people doing the actual improvisation, must feel free to offer ideas, and have those ideas accepted by their partners. Without that trust, it becomes impossible to make any meaningful progress within a scene unless the players are working in tandem. Trust is either gained or lost on the basis of whether ideas that are offered are given acceptance, or not.

It is partially this drive to compete with others that causes students to form barriers within themselves to any deep connection with the material. Yet, in English language classes, oftentimes participants are encouraged to try out material in pair work or in small groups, and, in this type of exercise, relationships are also important. It is then of the utmost importance to foster participation in students. In the classroom, where the ability to converse with others and be supportive of the learning process is essential, it is easy to see how training in improvisation would be of immense value.

3.2　Increases Intake

It has been mentioned that improvisation is an effective method for active learning, thus it is important to note that greater participation leads to greater levels of input and output, and thus increased intake.

The concept of input and output comes from Ellis's book (1997) on input-based and production-based instruction (see figure 1)[1].

Figure 1: Ellis's Input-based and production-based instruction
(1997: 84) arranged by authors

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    input-based                    production-based
    instruction                     instruction
         ↓                               ↓
input  ⇄  | intake  ⇒  L2 knowledge |  ⇄  output
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Input-based instruction has been defined as, "instruction that aims to teach learners a linguistic item by systematically exposing them to it in the input rather than by giving them opportunities to produce it in themselves (Ellis, 1997: 139)." This kind of activity puts the emphasis on processing information rather than generating it, and has predominantly been the type of learning method used in Japan.

On the other hand, production-based instruction is, "a type of form-focused instruction that aims to teach a specific linguistic feature by eliciting sentences containing it from the learner (Ellis, 1997: 139)." As Ellis suggests, this active form of learning puts the focus on generating content through such activities as blank-filling exercises and games of various kinds.

Intake is "that portion of the input that learners attend to and take into short-term memory (Ellis, 1997: 140)." Input and output are both effective for different purposes. Because the focus of this paper is to help students communicate in the English language learning classroom and allow them to operate the language to suit their needs, we are focusing more on output-based production as it is key in acquiring communication ability.

In line with Ellis's suggestion, examples of games which can aid in-class participation will be introduced in section 4.

3.3　Problem Solving

Much of improvisation was devised for the purpose of creating an 'imaginative awakening' in students as Hodgson & Richards mention in their book *Improvisation* (1966: 8). The development of improvisation seems to universally be a reaction against stagnant modes of expression and thinking.

Within a game, performers are tasked with fulfilling a set of requirements, such as: speaking each sentence in a certain number of words; to perform a *Fairytale in a Minute*; or experience a change in social status within the game. This type of continual challenge to come up with answers to problems trains problem-solving skills. "Since there is no right or wrong way to solve a problem, and since the answer to every problem is prefigured in the problem itself (and must be to be a true problem), continuous work on and the solving of these problems opens everyone to their own source and power. How a student-actor solves a problem is personal to him, and, as in a game, he can run, shout, climb, or turn somersaults as long as he stays with the problem (Spolin, 1963: 20)." Whether the problem is real or imagined is irrelevant, as what matters is the practice of seeing things from different directions, and thinking outside of the box.

According to Dudeck (2013), "It is clear Keith developed the Impro System not just for unlocking and releasing the talents of the actors at the RCT Studio[2] but for rediscovering the imaginative potential of individuals, like himself, who had been oppressed by their education. Keith's schooling had conditioned him to favour intellect over imagination: 'I learned never to act on impulse, and that whatever came into my mind first should be rejected in favour of better ideas' (p.5)."

As Spolin suggests, focusing on the crisis at hand and the exercise of solving problems allows people to naturally come together—to share a goal, and at the same time experience personal freedom. Generating excitement in the participants about playing the game keeps those involved open to experiencing. In this type of environment, not only are people freer to act individually, but come up with more solutions to

problems as a group.

3.4 Functions of Humor in Education

Improvisation is sometimes called 'Improvisation Comedy' because in many cases, whether intentionally or not, improvisation performance happens to be humorous. Johnstone (1979) in his *Impro: Improvisation and the Theater*, recalls how increased shows of deference acted out by students in a class often triggered uproarious laughter. The situation, characters, and lines are created spontaneously and unexpectedly both for the players as well as the audience in every scene, and are frequently very humorous.

McGhee (1979) defines the Incongruity Theory of humor as follows: "The notions of congruity and incongruity refer to the relationship between components of an object, event, idea, social expectation, and so forth. When the arrangement of the constituent elements of an event is incompatible with the normal or expected pattern, the event is perceived as incongruous (McGhee 1979:6-7)." When the situation, act, or speech in improvisation is unexpected, it becomes humorous. In this way, some of the characteristics of improvisation and functions of humor in education share common features.

A number of studies on humor in education have shown the benefits in using humor as a teaching tool to produce a positive pedagogical effect, a more relaxed classroom atmosphere and to increase student interest as well as retention of material. According to Garner (2006), some of the psychological effects of humor are to decrease stress, reduce anxiety, enhance self-esteem and classroom environment, and increase self-motivation. Each of these effects is beneficial in the learning process. Garner also points out the physiological effects. Laughter improves respiration and circulation, lowers the pulse rate, decreases blood pressure, oxygenates blood, and releases endorphins. These effects improve attention and lessen stress that might adversely impact learning.

Other studies by Hill (1988), and Morreall (1997) have shown that using jokes and creating a humorous environment in the classroom can

help students to learn more efficiently and have a more positive attitude. Hill states, "humor has a positive effect on the learning environment, to initiate, maintain, and enhance learner interest, and to facilitate retention (Hill 1988: 20‒24)". Morreall, in his *Humor Works* (1997), states, "The stage of our lives when we learn the fastest is precisely the stage when we take the most risks and are least afraid of mistakes.... And humor can be a big help in setting a tone of acceptance of mistakes (Morreall 1997:140)". In a humorous environment, students are more receptive to new knowledge and different values, and as such they are also more accepting of the information presented by the instructor. In this sense, improvisation games in the classroom can provide a similar environment to students.

It is also observed in one of author's class that when students learn language, culture, or skills of intercultural communication through humorous stories or jokes, students talk about the episodes outside of the classroom. This repetition helps the students to develop a better understanding and more stable knowledge of the subject matter of those which students acquire.

Morreall (2008) also says, humor can "foster analytic, critical, and divergent thinking; catch and hold students' attention, increase retention of learned material, relieve stress, build rapport between teacher and students, build team spirit among classmates, smooth potentially rough interactions, promote risk taking, and get shy and slow students involved in activities (Morreall 2008: 465)."

According to those previous studies on humor in education, appropriate humorous material can help learners to retain their motivation and interest, reduce stress and anxiety, and improve the classroom environment and learning efficiency. Improvisation games in the classroom provide a similar atmosphere due to the general elements and humor of improvisation.

4. Improvisation games in English Learning classrooms

The various forms of improvisation have been introduced previously in section 2. Short-form improvisation seems to be most appropriate for the English learning classroom because games are easier for the beginner, and less dependent on a high level of skill in the target language. It might benefit the educator to separate the games used in the classroom into word games, physical games (involving movement), and justification games (where the players must find justification for random elements introduced by other players).

Side coaching, or providing help from the sidelines, is also recommended. At times the students will be giving most of their attention to speaking in the target language, and the added challenge of simultaneously creating a story may prove to be too much to process at first. Should this happen, providing side-coaching, is highly encouraged to guide students back to territory where they can navigate. As in sports, side coaching, as Spolin suggests "is accepted by the student-actor once it is understood. It is used as the players are working on stage. It is a method used in holding the student-actor to the Point of Concentration whenever he may have wandered away." (Spolin 1963: 28)

For the total beginner to improv, the instructor can provide the situations (e.g. show us a scene at the zoo!) as well as the characters to be played, (e.g. truck driver, doctor, etc.) or relationship between the players (ex: parent and child). It is also possible to introduce the target phrases or vocabulary which the students are to incorporate into the scene for the purposes of aiding intake (Ellis 1997).

4.1　Word Games

Word games allow students to practice using their vocabulary, and can be a great form of output.

a. Give the Wrong Name

This is a game recommended by Johnstone in *Impro* (1979) that requires students to walk as they talk. Students go around the classroom,

pointing at objects (possibly even other students) and calling them by the wrong name.

While there may be concern over associating the wrong name with a target object, there is little worry of memorizing a wrong word since all involved understand that they are making mistakes on purpose.

This is an excellent game for raising the mood of a class. Students are able to relax because there is no "wrong answer," as all answers are wrong from the start.

b. Word Association 1: Linear

In its simplest form, this game is a free-association exercise. Students start with one word, and then list words in succession, with each word being related to the previous one, in a linear fashion.

Apple, red, rose, thorn, sharp, etc...

This is already a game that many second language learners are familiar with, but it bears repeating here as a starting point for the following word-association games.

Another variant of this game recommended for small groups is: after one member says a word "each member of the group in turn responds immediately with another word to whatever word has just been uttered (Hodgson & Richards 1966: 56)." Once everyone has completed a round, the group moves to the next person, who begins the next cycle.

Apple, red, sweet, fruit, shiny.   Cat, furry, dexterous, etc...

c. Word Association 2: Theme

In this game, students list all of the names of things that they can associate along a theme, or subject, such as animals:

Rabbit, dog, cat, parrot.

d. Non-associated words: Non-Linear

In this exercise, students pair up or work in small groups and, one at a time, list words that are completely unrelated:

Candy, bus, cloud, monkey, etc.

This game can be much more difficult to those attempting it for the first time, as the mind naturally finds links between related subjects, yet struggles when forced to work outside of those.

The purpose of this exercise is to train flexibility, and to force the mind to think in a non-linear fashion.

e. Word-at-a-time

This is a game suggested by Keith Johnstone *(1999 p. 131)*. "Players construct a story by adding a word each. The stories have to be grammatical and they have to make sense."

The original intent of this game was to prevent players from planning too far into the future, and thus miss what was happening in front of them. By only allowing players to use one word at a time it trains them to be adaptable to the changes made by others, and to carefully listen to what is being said.

Example:
↓ *A: Jeffrey...*
↓ *B: picked...*
↓ *C: up...*
↓ *A: his...*
↓ *B: toy...*
↓ *C: truck.*
↓ *A: Jeffery...*
↓ *B: noticed...*
↓ *C: a...*

↓ *A: note...*
↓ *B: attached...*
↓ *C: saying,*
↓ *A: "Meet*
↓ *B: me*
↓ *C: at*
↓ *A: the*
↓ *B: park.*
C: --Jessica

This game can be used to take the pressure of constructing a complete sentence off a beginning language learner, and yet still allow them to participate. While basic knowledge of English grammar is necessary, the teacher (and other students) can assist when necessary, by providing a word that fits the context. As this game follows the rules of grammar, words that do not fit the context can simply be dropped, or changed, and the story resumed so that it makes sense.

Making the story about a person (with a name), performing a specific task, helps stories to flow much more easily, as people tend have a greater interest in following a subject and direction. Limitless stories can be told using this game, and if for some reason students get stuck and the story fizzles out, students can simply start over.

Alternate version: If students are getting stuck when creating a story, another possible way to play this game is to come up with a single sentence and then begin again.

4.2   Physical Games: Linking the body to the mind

Physical games are ones that involve moving around.

What Comes Next?

This is another game recommended by Johnstone that is both low-pressure and requires the player to move about. Typically, one player stands in front of the group, and he or she is simply required to act out the suggestions given by the other students.

> Player: "What comes next?"
> Students: *You get out of bed!*
> Player: "What comes next?"
> Students: *You go to the sink.*
> Player: "What comes next?"

> Students: *You splash water on your face.*
> Player: "What comes next?"
> Students: *You get dressed.*
> (Teacher: "WAIT! You didn't get your clothes first!)
> Player: "What comes next?"
> Students: *You go to the dresser.*
> Player: "What comes next?"
> Students: *You get your clothes.*
> Player: "What comes next?"
> Students: *You get dressed.*

Students may call out actions which stray away from what is happening. Johnstone suggests that this type of "blocking" comes from a natural fear of the unknown. If this happens, it is recommended for the teacher to simply steer the activity back to what is at hand.

Also, in order to avoid talking about activities which may be unpleasant for students to perform (as suggestions can often come from the unconscious mind, not all are socially appropriate), it is important to remind students that they may be up next, so everyone participating should keep suggestions appropriate.

4.3　Justification Games

Justification games are those where the players are presented with new information, either by the audience or by other players, and must then come up with a reason for its inclusion. In a sense, all improvisation could be said to be a justification, because the players are constantly being presented with new bits of information in the form of "offers" given by other players. It is then necessary for everyone involved to reasonably explain why this fits into the given context.

'yes and...'

Many beginning improvisers resist having their safe and orderly worlds challenged by the ominous threat of change, many times seem-

ing to temporarily forget that none of the improvisation is real. They refuse to change, and negate ("block") offers given by other performers in an unconscious attempt to stay in control. Keith Johnstone developed the "yes and..." exercise to train players to accept new information, uncritically, and to learn to use it.

This game can help people new to improv by removing rejection from the process and, in turn, the English student, by providing a safe framework in which to practice conversation.

> *A: Let's go to the beach.*
> *B: Yes, and let's build a sandcastle.*
> *A: Yes, and let's build it really big.*
> *B: Yes, and let's build a door!*
> *A: Yes, and let's go inside!*
> *B: Yes, and let's find a princess made out of sand.*
> *A: Yes, and let's find a sand dragon guarding the princess...*
> *B: Yes, and...*

While the game can often go into fanciful realms, it is by no means necessary to make it unrealistic.

> *A: Let's go to a restaurant.*
> *B: Yes, and let's sit down.*
> *A: Yes, and let's pick up a menu.*
> *B: Yes, and let's read the menu.*
> *A: Yes, and let's call over the waiter..*
> *B: Yes, and...*

It is important to take things one step at a time, and, as in *What Comes Next,* deal with the next logical step.

Language play is an important or even necessary component of language acquisition allowing learners to experience with new voices and new ways of expressing themselves. ... playing with and in a new lan-

guage work to draw learners' attention to form meaning relationships within the language being studied (Bell 2014: 672).

The number of improv games is countless, with new games being developed constantly. As mentioned, many of them are used to train specific qualities into or out of performers, however, the ones listed here have been chosen for their ease of use in, and appropriateness to, the English-teaching environment.

5. Summary and Further Research Discussion

In this paper, the main discussion has been to introduce improvisation games as a possible tool for use in the communicative English classroom. We also described its functions from the perspective of its roots in freeing creative impulses in actors, as well how it relates to humor studies. The humor in improvisation games can help students feel comfortable to participate, as it increases "motivation and reduces anxiety, enhances the classroom environment, increases student responsiveness, creates a positive instructor-student relationship, improves class attendance and test performance, and promotes learning (Dunbar 2014: 207)". It seems clear that improvisation games have the potential to be highly effective in English learning classrooms.

Improvisation has the latent ability be a strong addition to the methods of active learning, but has not been widely implemented, as teachers of English in communicative classrooms lack the know-how to instruct. While improvisation in Japan is slowly gaining a following as a performance art, there seems to be little awareness of its applicability to the communicative classroom as a language-learning tool. As one of the authors being an experienced improvisation performer with career of over ten years, he will attempt, in his English classrooms at university, to provide a new dimension to English education and recommend improvisation as a methodology for communicative English.

Also, collecting data and researching student-teacher relationships in classrooms where improvisation games are used will be an interesting topic for the further study of this topic. According to Wanzer, Frymier,

& Irwin (2010), appropriate humor can create a comfortable learning environment, improves relationships between students and teachers by reducing tension and anxiety. Instructors who provide improvisation games in English classrooms seem to be well-positioned to establish better relationships with students. Better instructor-student relationships, in turn, help to develop better performance. Improvisation, then, can serve as a bridge between educators and students and help them share an understanding for each other.

Van Giffen (1990) has shown in his studies that there is a positive relationship between instructional humor and students' evaluations of teacher effectiveness. Also, according to Murray (1983), the use of humor was considered one of the main teaching behaviors that distinguished "outstanding" from "average" and "poor" lecturers.

In order to clearly indicate the combined effects of improvisation games and humor in the communicative classroom, more practical experiments and research will be indispensible, topics that we will further investigate in the future.

Notes

1   Originally, the arrows only went from left to right. Arrows can also be drawn from output to input, however, to show that what a learner says or writes can also serve as samples of language from which intake can be derived.
2   Royal Court Theatre Studio

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