

Building stories, trust and confidence: the transformative power of drama improvisation for adult EAL learners

By Jodie Whitehurst



The use of drama techniques in the language classroom (also known as performative language teaching) has been shown to bring a multitude of benefits to learners. In this article, Jodie Whitehurst explains the benefits of using improvisation with adult learners and shares some of her tried and tested improvisational games

When students learn performatively, connecting their minds and bodies in the process, classes not only become more energised, but students are more likely to retain new language structures (Maley & Duff, 2005; Sambanis, 2016), and make more effective use of non-verbal cues such as gesture and facial expression (Fonio, 2012; De Coursey, 2014).

Drama also provides meaningful contexts for using the target language, which can increase speaking motivation (Kao & O'Neill, 1998; Piazzoli, 2018) and promote fluency (Galante & Thomson, 2017). In addition to the linguistic outcomes, drama in language education has been shown to bring a wealth of social and emotional benefits. Among these are the reduction of speaking anxiety (Atas, 2014; Piazzoli, 2011), and increased confidence (Stinson & Freebody, 2006) and trust (Miccoli, 2003; Saglamel & Kayaoglu, 2013).

As a teacher of English as an Additional Language (EAL) to adult learners, these benefits inspire me to regularly use performative methods in all my EAL classes. I am also fortunate to teach a class called *Drama for Language and Life Skills*, in which students (predominantly EAL learners) practise English and develop a range of life skills through various dramatic approaches. One such approach that I have found to be enormously valuable to my learners is improvisation.

Drama improvisation, commonly known as “improv” or “impro”, involves the spontaneous creation of scenes and stories without pre-planning or the use of scripts. It is understandable that to some EAL teachers, such an approach may sound counter-intuitive, particularly

if working with anxious learners who are averse to taking risks.

If you have ever seen improv sketch comedy on stage or on TV shows such as *Whose line is it anyway?* or *Thank God you're here*, you will have witnessed professional comedians and actors showcasing enormous skill and quick wit in what is for the majority of performers, their first language. With this in mind, one might well ask: wouldn't throwing our EAL learners into such a high stakes, high-pressure style of performance leave them vulnerable to potential embarrassment or humiliation?

The reality is, as EAL teachers using these techniques, we should never simply throw our students into performing improvisations. Our learners need to be slowly eased into the space of drama and improvisation with non-threatening, enjoyable warm-ups to build trust and create a more relaxed atmosphere.

Furthermore, asking students to perform in front of the class is not a necessary element of the process (although it should not be ruled out for those students who may take great delight in doing this as they gain confidence). Improvisation in the language classroom can be a low-pressure, fun-filled experience in which nobody needs to be singled out. It should be made clear to all learners that the focus when using improv is not on being clever or funny, but on actively listening to each other and accepting and building on each other's ideas.

When introducing EAL learners to improvisation, a great way to start is to get them to use three of the key elements of improvising: offer, accept and build. Whenever a

scene is improvised between two or more people, one person must launch the scene with an offer. An offer is an idea that is presented to the other player(s) and can be verbal or physical/gestural. An example of a verbal offer might be: “Wow! That green hair really suits you!”. To successfully continue the scene and build a story, the other person in the scene should accept the offer by going along with the idea that they have green hair. Once they have done this, they should build upon that offer with something else that adds to the story of the scene and can be further built upon. See Figure 1 for an example of how this could be done:



Figure 1. Accepting an offer

The opposite of accepting an offer is blocking an offer. The act of blocking tends to stop the story in its tracks, and can leave the person who made the offer feeling somewhat lost and awkward. See Figure 2 for an example:



Figure 2. Blocking an offer

When students first work with improvisation, you may find their natural inclination is to block offers. For many, this will happen almost as a knee jerk reaction. In my own classes, I have noticed that this sometimes occurs if students are under the misconception that improvisation is in some way competitive and that the idea is to outdo or outwit your partner. On the contrary, one of the commonly professed pillars in the world of drama improv is that your goal should always be to make your partner look good.

To help your learners explore this notion, you can begin with really simple exercises (which I will later outline) that encourage accepting and building on offers. In a light-hearted, non-threatening manner, you can also demonstrate the difference between accepting and

blocking an offer and allow them to experience and reflect on how it feels to be on the receiving end of both. Like most improv activities, this can be done with all students working simultaneously in pairs or groups so that nobody needs to be in the spotlight.

Once this goal of listening to each other and working together is clarified, the impact on learners' confidence can be significant. Having other class members listen to their ideas, accept them and creatively build on them is so affirming and validating. As students become more experienced working within this playful learning approach, they learn to trust others within the class and themselves (Balyasnikova, Higgins & Hume, 2018). This often leads to greater willingness to communicate spontaneously in English.

In addition, the lively nature of the activities brings a sense of energy and joy to the classroom which can have a positive effect on learning. As Viola Spolin (1963, p. 4), one of the key pioneers of improvisation games for the theatre, observed: “Skills are developed at the very moment a person is having all the fun and excitement playing a game has to offer – this is the exact time he is truly open to receive them.”

Improvisational games

The games described below are a mix of well-known improvisational games and my own adaptations of them. While these games were not specifically created for language learners, I will outline some key areas of communicative focus that can be applied to an EAL setting for each of the games.

These are very simple activities, requiring minimal preparation, which gently introduce learners to the basics of improvisation. If your students enjoy these and you feel they are ready to progress to more extended, complex improv activities, refer to some of the resources recommended at the end of this article.

As with all drama-based learning activities, when teaching through improvisation, it is important to create an open space that invites free movement and creativity: push the chairs and tables to the outside of the room before you begin. If you are teaching through an online platform such as Zoom, ask your students to work in a space where they can push in their chairs, stand up behind them and have some room to move around. Pair work or small group work can be done in breakout

rooms. As the teacher, visiting breakout rooms to offer support, clarification, suggestions or feedback is akin to circulating in the physical classroom.

1. Tennis ball, balloon, slimy fish

This energising, non-threatening game is a fantastic way to warm up the class and relax learners. It's also a simple way to introduce the idea of accepting verbal and physical offers. I usually play this with the whole class in a circle, but you could certainly have your students break off into pairs or small groups to play it.

Preparation: Before you begin, get all the students to imagine they see a tennis ball on the ground. Ask them to pick it up, keeping their hand in a shape that reflects the size and weight of the ball. As they are doing this imaginative work, be sure to join them, as enthusiastic teacher participation goes a long way towards motivating, relaxing and empowering your students.

Have them (and yourself) play around with it: bouncing it, throwing it up and catching it, etc. Next, instruct them to put both hands around the tennis ball and imagine the ball growing in size until it becomes a balloon. Have everyone play with the balloon now, bringing to life its new size and weight and the speed at which it moves in the air.

The game: One person starts by holding an imaginary tennis ball. They make clear eye contact with a person anywhere in the circle and throw the tennis ball to that person saying "tennis ball" in a strong, clear voice as they throw it. If working online, students should first say the name of the person to whom they are throwing. An effective instruction to give your students, is to throw their voices at the same time that they throw the ball.

The receiving player should catch the ball according to the way it was thrown, for example, reaching their arms up if the ball was thrown high, and repeat the words "tennis ball" as they catch it. The catcher then has a choice: they can continue to throw the tennis ball to another player, again calling out "tennis ball", or they can visually transform the tennis ball into another object such as a balloon, slimy fish or in fact any other object they wish – a hot potato, for example.

When catching or throwing objects where the texture (e.g. slimy) or temperature is specified, they should physically respond to these elements (the teacher should model this first). The object does not need to be transformed with

every throw. A tennis ball may be thrown five or six times before somebody decides to change it to another object. In this way, the game gently warms the learners up to the notion of accepting offers, without putting pressure on them to create new ideas in front of the class.

Areas of communicative focus:

- You may wish to choose a theme for the game, giving it a specific language focus. For example, on the theme of fruit, the students might throw strawberries or watermelons and can enjoy the creative process of transforming the shape, weight, texture, etc.
- There can be a strong focus on adjectives, if you specify that each object thrown must be named using an adjective and noun. For example, a *slimy* fish, *soft* pillow, *cold* snowball. By physically embodying these adjectives and the objects they describe, students are more likely to retain new language.
- The need for eye contact and voice projection in this game can build confidence with these valuable elements of communication.

2. Word ball / word tennis

Preparation: Facilitate a class brainstorm to elicit a list of word categories (e.g. *sports, animals, vegetables, family members*) and write the list on the board where students can easily see it.

The game: This game can be played in a group, like Game 1, or played in pairs like a game of tennis. If playing in a group, start by asking a student to select a category from the board. The student makes eye contact with any student in the circle and throws them an imaginary ball while calling out the first word that comes to their mind related to the chosen category. The recipient then throws the ball to somebody else while calling out another word from the category, and so on.

If a person gets stuck for an idea or if they accidentally say a word that does not fit the category, they can energetically and joyfully throw the ball up in the air and say "Waaaa". Immediately, all participants join in with the "Waaaa", while doing a full circle spin. I have found that this creates great energy and hilarity among the students and also reinforces the idea that mistakes are nothing to feel bad about; rather they can be celebrated as part of the process together. After a "Waaaa", the person with the ball starts again with a new category.

Note: The “Waaa” part of the game is inspired by a game called “The house is on fire, let’s..” in the book *Enlivening Instruction with Drama and Improv* by Kathleen R. McGovern & Melisa Cahnmann-Taylor.

Variations: Instead of calling out words connected to categories, you can have students call out words using a specific target sound, letter or spelling pattern.

Areas of communicative focus:

- Targeted vocabulary revision
- Active practice of specific sounds and spelling patterns
- Active listening
- Spontaneous speaking.

3. Dance, freeze, explain

Preparation: before playing this game, it’s useful to pre-teach or brainstorm stalling strategies to use while thinking of responses, for example: *That’s a great question; I’m so glad you asked; Well, I’m actually...* Write these phrases clearly on the board so that students can easily see them during the game. This can greatly reduce a sense of pressure learners may feel when having to think of an idea on the spot.

These are very useful and potentially empowering phrases to use in social or work situations outside the classroom. Within the classroom, I have observed that using such phrases tends to bring a sense of playfulness and humour to the game; my students usually grin from ear to ear and giggle as they say “That’s a great question!”

If necessary, you should also teach or revise the tenses students will need to use for the game: present continuous and possibly past continuous (if you plan to play the variation).

Before starting the game, also be sure to demonstrate how to play (as outlined below) with a couple of your own physical and verbal examples.

Resources: A device on which to play some upbeat, energising music.

The game: Start the music and ask all students to move simultaneously, in whatever style they like. Ideally, dance along with them, as they are much more likely to abandon their inhibitions if you do so. If your students show resistance to the idea of dancing, you may wish to simply refer to it as “moving”. Demonstrate ways in which they can move their bodies in interesting ways, making different



Students from Williamstown Community and Education Centre show how drama and improvisation builds confidence and expressive skills.

shapes with their arms and hands, while exploring various heights through bending knees or reaching up. When the music stops (this is easier to do subtly if you have a phone or remote control in your hand), everyone must freeze and hold their position.

At this point, ask individual students the question, “What are you doing?”. They must give a response that explains their physical position using the present continuous. For example, if they have their hands above their head, they might say, “I’m lifting weights,” or, “I’m trying to stop my ceiling from collapsing.”

While this game does not involve the accepting of offers from others, the frozen positions the students land in essentially act as physical offers to themselves. They must accept the offer their bodies give them and build an idea from the position. Encourage them to use the stalling phrases if needed.

If a student is clearly struggling to respond, even after using stalling strategies, you might ask the class, “What do you think Leyla is doing?” and they can help with suggestions. Repeat by asking several students around the room what they are doing, before putting the music back on for another round.

Variation: As an alternative, when the students freeze, they could each ask the person closest to them, “What are you doing?” and simply share their ideas with each other. You could then extend this by allowing them to relax from their frozen positions, and ask students to report back what they found out about the other person. This could be done using the past continuous, for example: “What was Abdullah doing?” “He was polishing his teapot.”

Extension: The ideas from the game could be further developed through group brainstorming. Ask the whole class open-ended questions, for example:

- “Why was Abdullah polishing his teapot?”
- “Maybe he was preparing afternoon tea for his neighbour.”
- “Perhaps he was trying to impress his wife.”
- “I think he was trying to make a genie come out.”

Such brainstorming may even lead to written tasks such as writing a short story or the script for a more extended scene.

Areas of communicative focus:

- Stalling phrases – useful language to use when we need thinking time
- Practising present continuous tense in context
- Active listening and reporting information using the past continuous tense
- Spontaneous speaking
- Language of speculation – *Maybe, Perhaps, I think...*

4. Yes, and...

Yes, and... is a popular game, commonly used when introducing learners to improvisation, because it explicitly teaches learners the concept of accepting offers and then building on them to create a story.

Preparation: Brainstorm with your class for a range of phrases that can be used when making suggestions and write these up on the board. For example: *We should... Let's... Maybe we could... Why don't we... How about...*

Next, model the game as outlined below by asking one of the more confident students (or a volunteer) to join you in a demonstration. In addition (or as an alternative) you may wish to show one of the many videos demonstrating “Yes, and...” available on YouTube.

The game: Select a context for the scene or elicit a context from the class. This can be done using the question words: *Who, What and Where*, i.e. *Who* are the characters in the scene? *Where* are they? *What* are they doing/discussing/planning?

An example of a context for a two-person scene might be two friends eating at a café while planning their upcoming housewarming party. Working in pairs, one person makes a verbal offer: “I’ve been thinking about our housewarming party, and I think we should have a space theme.”

Their partner must then accept the offer by saying, “Yes, and...” and following up with a related offer to build the story further. This continues back and forth so that a story develops:

- “Yes, and let’s make a huge rocket out of cupcakes”
- “Yes, and maybe we could have an alien rock band playing on a moon crater stage”
- “Yes, and we can wear our astronaut suits,” and so forth.

As your students become more confident with the game, encourage them to invigorate their scenes with body language, movement and even the use of simple props where appropriate. Having a box of scarves in the room is an invaluable resource, as these can easily be transformed into various prop and costume items.

Variation: This game can also be used to explore the notion of recounting a (fictional) story. An example of this in groups of three is a manager questioning two employees arriving late for a meeting. The offending characters (A and B below) use the “Yes, and...” structure to build the story of their excuses, using a combination of past continuous and past simple:

Manager: Why are you both so late?

A: We were heading to the meeting when we heard a loud bang in the tearoom...

B: Yes, and when we went to check it out, we saw the microwave had exploded!

A: Yes, and there were flames everywhere.

Manager: Did you call the fire brigade?

B: Yes, and while we were waiting for them, I broke a heel on my shoe!!

Areas of communicative focus:

- Spontaneous use of English
- Language of making suggestions
- Use of past simple and past continuous tense to recount an incident
- Students can explore/revise vocabulary related to specific themes on which you wish to focus, depending on the scene context: e.g. parties, workplace/office, shopping, travel, etc
- Active listening
- Creative story building.

Learner reflections

When teaching language through drama, reflection is a vital part of the process. It enables learners to understand why they have been learning in a style that will most likely be unfamiliar to many in the beginning. Students feel empowered when they can articulate the progress they have made and the benefits they have gained. After a recent six-week unit on working through improvisation, students in my *Drama for Language and Life Skills* class reflected on the impact this work had on them as learners and as people. Their comments below illustrate a multitude of social, emotional and communicative gains:

“I’m so happy to join this group, like a family and I build up my confidence for speaking for the public.”

“It helped a lot, not to feel shame about speaking bad[ly].”

“At first [it] was very hard for me because I wasn’t relaxed, but after I participate[d], this class made me sure it’s important not to be shy to talk aloud and I am very free of stress.”

“It helped me feel more confident to apply for a job.”

“Lots of skills working together at the same time: brain, muscle, talking and thinking –very active!”

Putting it into action

In the professional learning workshops I run, I always remind language teachers that you do not need to be a drama teacher, actor or comedian to use these or any other performative techniques. The aim is not to teach EAL learners to be actors but to facilitate the exploration of communication in the target language through drama.

You are already an expert in language teaching and should use this knowledge combined with your understanding of your students’ specific needs when selecting improvisation activities to incorporate into your lessons. It is always best to start slowly and gently, both for your learners and yourself, so nobody feels thrown in the deep end. Try a simple activity from those outlined above or find others in the resources listed below. Finally, ensure that you participate with energy and enthusiasm yourself, showing your learners that you genuinely believe in the benefits drama will bring to them. If you do, your class will be much more inclined to join you on what will hopefully turn out to be an engaging and transformative learning journey.



Having a box of scarves in the room is an invaluable resource, as these can easily be transformed into various prop and costume items.

Recommended resources

Books

- Enlivening Instruction with Drama and Improv: A Guide for Second Language and World Language Teachers* by Kathleen R. McGovern and Melisa Cahnmann-Taylor
- Teaching English with Drama* by Mark Almond
- English through Drama* by Susan Hillyard
- The Drama Book* by Alice Savage
- 101 Drama Games and Activities* by David Farmer
- ESL Drama Start* by Julie Meighan
- Games for Actors and Non-Actors* by Augusto Boal

Websites

- <https://dramaresource.com/>
- <https://spolingamesonline.org/>

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