

Using Improvisational Exercises for Increasing Speaking and Listening Skills

Pamila J. Florea

Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Yong-In, South Korea

Bio Data

Pamila Florea is a Lecturer at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies and a former psychotherapist and social worker. Her main research interests are in spontaneous production skills, the use of creative writing, and the juncture where learning and joy meet. She has studied Improvisation with comedySportz in Philadelphia (USA).

Abstract

If language learners do not interact with the material they are learning, it is difficult for them to understand and integrate it. In classes where students are reluctant to speak, it is often helpful to integrate a stem or other structure to encourage this skill. Acting and Comedy improvisational exercises allow students of all abilities and interests to participate and make manifest grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation lessons in a fun and realistic way, right away. By using acting and comedy improvisational techniques, students not only are provided that structure but are encouraged to speak quickly and decisively, thus decreasing their reliance on their native language and allowing them to utilize the vocabulary and grammatical structures of the target language more naturally. This paper explores the philosophy of improvisational exercises as well as ways to foster spontaneous speech and increase listening skills for language learners. Multiple formats for specific patterns will be discussed including the use of nonsense words, stem completion, and cooperation. The writer will show how these techniques naturally require students to attend to listening as well as contextual cues as secondary benefit.

Keywords: Improv, games, listening skills, speaking skills, comedy, acting, spontaneous speech

Introduction

Speaking and listening are difficult skills to master when learning a new language, particularly in a teacher-based learning environment such as that found in Korea. As noted by Rusina (2009), students are generally expected to focus on the teacher who often teaches English grammar in Korean. The students are not expected to spontaneously produce and are thus low in their competency of productive skills. Confucian methods of teaching are based on a receptive student and a giving teacher. The teacher speaks, students take notes about the information without really interacting with it except via rote. As such, this method creates a gap for students. They are not confident with their ability to talk with a native speaker, do not generally exhibit confidence in their language ability, and often have years - even decades-old bad habits which have not been corrected because they have not been heard. In a paper regarding a similar culture, Japan, Nozaki (1993) notes that this quietness and passivity are considered positive traits for learners.

Why Improvisation Practice is Important

The researcher found that most students do not interact with the second language except to translate it into the native Korean and their responses back into English. This creates long pauses and frustration for both the listener and the speaker. For the listener, the pause becomes boring and makes the speaker seem less intelligent as noted by Pavlina (2005). For the speaker, the translation becomes difficult because of the complexity of the mother tongue and its inability to translate well grammatically. Vocabulary differences are also a problem with this method of communication (Cho, 2004).

Students need the opportunity to interact with the material in order to utilize the vast vocabulary they often have but do not know how to use. As educators, it is our duty to not just teach students the facts of the language, but also the skills in using it. This perspective can be likened to a doctor who has no clinical experience but is the top of the class in academic learning. Just as people expect competence in using tools from a surgeon, so too are second

language learners expected to be able to use the language they are learning in a real life situation. That is, they are expected to speak and to write, as well as to understand others who use the language.

Fleming (1995) noted that the three most common methods of student learning are visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. By using those modalities, the teacher facilitates better learning for the student. For example, the teacher writes and draws on the board for the visual learners, speaks for the auditory learners; and for the students who are kinesthetic, actions are the best method of instruction. The researcher has found that using improvisational exercises helps all three types of students to integrate the new material.

Using improvisational exercises, students of all levels were able to practice the language immediately upon learning the material. Although the value of exercises sometimes is questioned, Lee (1979) reminds us that the students themselves engage in using the language rather than thinking about the form of the language. The teacher can demonstrate the usefulness of exercises once or twice in the beginning to build rapport and trust with the students. Calling it an “exercise” can be helpful for resistant classes. These same classes may find it helpful to be told the main goals for practicing a specific improvisational exercise.

Improvisational exercises provide three main goals: student pronunciation improves, proper use of a grammatical structure is reinforced, and vocabulary practice is enhanced. It may be important to share with students these functions in order to engage them in speaking and to build trust so they will not lose face and will not fear making mistakes. Anecdotally, the researcher found that older students (business people and university students) report that they appreciate knowing that the exercise is more than just fun and that it is in fact a method of learning.

Practicing an improvisation exercise generally requires students to utilize a number of skills at once. Students must actively listen to their peers, be aware of body language and other contextual clues, maintain eye contact, and respond quickly, generally using a stem.

Language Activities

To teach students the value of using improvisational exercises, it is important to prepare them for the eventual activity by presenting the material, allowing them to interact with that material on a smaller scale via practice exercises and then finally they integrate a production portion. This portion includes the improvisational exercise.

How-to Teach Improvisational Exercises

Using a typical Presentation / Practice / Production pattern of language instruction (Maurer, 1997), the lesson is taught and then students receive a similar training for the exercise – that is the teacher presents the exercise (Preparation), the students practice with the teacher (Modeling), and then produce (Play). It is easy to integrate an improvisation exercise to the lesson plan. The teacher begins by presenting the necessary basic material, creates the opportunity for schema building and practice with gap fills, matching exercises, etc., and then allows for production exercises individually or in pairs / groups. Finally, the exercise is performed.

When teaching and performing the exercise, the teacher breaks the sequence into a few component parts: explanation, modeling, practice. A few adjustments will be added during the exercise as needed, and a mistake response will be used.

Some students, particularly those who have been brought up in teacher-based learning environments have difficulty with the aftermath of making mistakes (Brown, 1994) and are therefore reluctant to do the exercise for fear of failure. To eliminate the focus on the error, to maintain the rhythm of the exercise, and to keep the students engaged in the activity, it can be helpful to have a specific action that is done by all students in the event a mistake is made. For example, the teacher teaches the entire group of students an “error activity” such as turning around and clapping three times before beginning the exercise again or putting hands out, heads down and calling out a nonsense syllable such as “moo” can create this change of focus.

Examples will follow for using improvisation exercises for grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary.

Grammar

Grammar lends itself well to stem completion exercises which are well

utilized in improvisation exercises and games. Often a simple tweaking of an exercise's guidelines can turn the game into a speaking point for language learners.

Presentation

When teaching present continuous (S + to be + verb -ing), show the students the pattern on the board with a number of examples that are accurate in that moment.

I am teaching. / I am standing. / You are studying. / The wind is blowing.

Practice

Show a picture of a number of people / animals that are doing many different activities. Students can identify the verbs and use the pattern via a gap-fill.

Subject + to be + verb -ing

The bird is flying. / The cat is climbing. / The _____ is _____ing.

Production

The students can then in pairs or small groups put together a list of what is happening right then in the classroom or what is happening on the paper.

You are sitting. / The clock is ticking

The teacher teaches the question form for the present progressive including the spoken: What are you doing?

Preparation

Students can make a list of the verbs they know, and write them on the board in teams in the progressive form (I am singing, I am playing a guitar, I am combing my hair.) Being able to see the board allows more visually oriented students to have the support they need.

Modeling

Students are paired with each other. The teacher explains the exercise. The teacher tells students that this exercise is for practicing the grammatical structure.

To play the game / engage in the exercise, one person will begin any activity. For example, brushing your teeth (teacher mimics brushing her/his own teeth). And the next person comes up (teacher waves over one of the students who is more comfortable with speaking) and says, “What are you doing?” The teacher prompts the student to say “What are you doing?” while pointing to the question on the board. The student will generally understand s/he is to say “What are you doing?” If not, the teacher can whisper or further prompt the question. The student says “What are you doing?” The teacher then gives the next part of the activity by saying, “You can say anything EXCEPT what you are doing. NOT what you are doing. Let’s start again.” The teacher then mimics brushing her / his teeth, looks to the student who says “What are you doing?” The teacher says, “I’m reading a book – now you pretend to be reading a book.” The student pretends to be reading a book. The teacher then beckons the next student to approach and the other line up to face the first student and prompts this student to say “What are you doing?”

Play

This sequence continues with the students in pairs and the teacher correcting until students understand the concept and have the ability to practice the stem. Students then begin to practice with their partners, changing partners at different intervals.

To practice other perspectives, the teacher can stop the exercise, instructing one student to continue and ask “What is s/he doing?” The students then can respond individually or as a group, “S/He is verb -ing.”

Variations

This exercise can be used for pronunciation practice or to encourage the use of the target language. It can help develop both good pronunciation and to develop vocabulary proficiency. To assist students who have recently practiced the pronunciation of the letter “I”, students can recycle by only saying verbs that begin with “I”. The examples can be “I’m listening to music,” “I’m laughing at a comedy,” “I’m letting the dog out.” As a secondary benefit, focusing on a beginning sound is one way to minimize translation and to decrease dependence on the primary language. The students

must think in the target language rather than the first language.

Another variation can be the use of particular vocabulary. To recycle vocabulary from a previous lesson on travel, for example, the students can be instructed to use only verbs that are travel related “I’m buying an airplane ticket,” “I’m riding on a train,” “I’m drinking coffee in Paris.”

Pronunciation

At times teachers may need to teach pronunciation. It is helpful to have a basic knowledge of the mechanics of sounds. Teaching the difference between voiced and unvoiced, the teacher can later assist students with different sounds. Initially, teaching the difference between a sigh and an “ah” sound can be as simple as instructing students to place their hands at their throats and feel the difference – with and without vibrations to explain voiced and unvoiced sounds.

Presentation

In the Korean language, the /s/ sound is commonly used while its counterpart, the /z/ sound is unknown. By putting the unfamiliar sound into a familiar framework, it can be easier to remind students how to make the sound. When teaching the /z/ sound, use of the /s/ sound is usually helpful. If students have some difficulty with this, they can be instructed to place the tip of their tongue to almost touch their gum ridge behind their upper teeth and to blow through the hole that is produced (Williamson, 2008). This is an unvoiced sound. As pointed out by Azar (2000), many words in English that end in the letter /s/ actually have a /z/ sound.

Practice

Practice is as simple as the students saying the words “zip, zap, zop”. Teachers can also have a list of commonly used words that would relate to the lesson that can be used. For example, if the lesson is on animals or the teacher wants to recycle material from a former lesson, discuss words like zebra, zoo, zoo keeper, zealous.

Production

Students can read aloud short paragraphs to each other with the target pronunciation pattern using the target pronunciation pattern. Alternatively, students can practice the final –s which is a /z/ sound by pronouncing words that end in the /s/ after voiced sounds (/d/, /b/, /g/, and /i/) such as roads, lobs, rags, and cheese as well as plurals that follow the / /, /t /, /s/, /z/ and /d / sounds which lead to an additional syllable (wishes, riches, blouses, prizes, hedges).

Preparation

It can be helpful for the teacher to pretend to be holding a ball. Sometimes even describing the ball helps the students. “Do you see my ball? I have a red ball.”

Modeling

To teach the exercise, explain to the students how it is done physically by saying it and acting it out. “I throw the ball and say ‘zip’,” and then pretend to throw the ball to one of the students. “Now you throw the ball and say ‘zap’,” and encourage the student to pretend to toss a ball to another student. With the next student, give the instruction to throw the ball and say ‘zop’. The student does so, and then the instruction is given to toss the ball and say ‘zip’ again. Students are encouraged to look at the person they are “throwing the ball to” which encourages eye contact as well as clarity within the exercise.

Play

Generally, students pick this exercise up quickly. They practice tossing the ball and saying the target words. At times, the teacher may need to stop the exercise and remind the students of the /z/ pronunciation. Because this exercise can get very slow or very messy depending on the class, it is helpful to make sure to keep the energy up and to utilize the mistake response.

Variations

The zip-zap-zop format can also be used to practice vocabulary lists – months of the year, the periodic table, lists of presidents, etc. Any list can readily be used for this exercise. Alternatively, creating a verbal “web” of words can be

done with this exercise. One student says a word and the next student uses that word to begin another word – the last letter for example such as bent, truck, kite, everybody, yellow, when, and new. Specific vocabulary can be practiced as well. If a lesson was just given on hygiene products, each student has to say a new term and not repeat – such as shampoo, soap, conditioner, lotion, hairspray, perfume, etc.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary is another area where a number of improvisation games can be utilized. In particular, expressions of emotions can be practiced, action verbs, verb tenses, and modifiers are well suited for improvisation.

Presentation

As an adjective exercise, “My Grandmother’s Cat” can be used with almost any level and with a mixture of levels. It can be used to reinforce new vocabulary or to recycle old vocabulary. It is also helpful when teaching a new pattern such as how to add certain suffixes like “-less” or “-ic” to reinforce the lesson.

Practice

Having pictures of different nouns can be helpful with this exercise. Upon teaching the target vocabulary, the teacher can write or have a student write the alphabet as a list on the board. Students then practice calling out adjectives that describe a person, place, or thing. Because this exercise presumes a certain level of vocabulary, it is not appropriate until the students have mastered that level. However, the level does not need be very high. With lower level students, even opposites and colors can provide a fairly good resource from which to draw.

Production

Students can be grouped together and asked to make an alphabetical list of the new vocabulary and can use some words used in previous lessons. With lower level students, it is helpful to remind them of colors, opposites, and synonyms so that they can complete their lists. For higher level students, it can help

them to teach something like this pattern:

Good Great Wonderful Amazing Mindboggling.

Pretty Beautiful Gorgeous Breathtaking

Sad Depressed Despondent Desperate Suicidal

They can be encouraged to go to at least the third level for their words. If they write “old”, the teacher can guide them to use a thesaurus or to think of other words for “old” – ancient, seasoned, elderly, etc.

Some letters have few adjectives that begin with them. These particular letters, such as x and z, can be the models the teacher uses by providing words like xenophobic, zealous, and zany. This can help keep students from getting stumped. For higher level students, the teacher can remind them of prefixes (dis-, pre-, un-, ir-) to help with their lists.

Preparation

It can be helpful to have a few of the words up on the board to assist the students in following the pattern. By writing the first few words that are used, the teacher can reinforce visually the pattern of this speaking / listening exercise.

Modeling

First, the teacher explains that the first student will fill in the blank and say something like, “My grandmother’s cat is an active cat” The next student will repeat and add a “b” letter like this. “My grandmother’s cat is an active and beautiful cat.” And so on.

Play

The teacher can guide the first few students to use the pattern, and once the direction is clear, the game is begun again. Words can be left on the board to encourage reading, to assist visual students, and a student can be assigned to write the words on the board.

Students may sometimes forget that the pattern is alphabetical and may need to be reminded. It can be helpful for students to act out the adjectives – spreading their hands wide to indicate “big” or smiling to indicate “joyous” or scratching the face to suggest “confused” for example.

There may be times that a student may say a word that others don’t know.

In that case, writing the word on the board and eliciting understanding from the students is an important part of keeping students engaged. A known synonym can be given, or the student or teacher can act it out. With a large class, it can help to keep everyone engaged by on occasion – perhaps every 5th person – have the entire class say the phrase with the adjectives. The teacher can also have them say the words as fast as possible. The teacher can also divide the class into smaller groups and have several rounds going at once.

Conclusion

This paper has shown a number of ways students can be engaged in speaking exercises that allow them to interact with the material using improvisational exercises. Many students do not know how to use vocabulary and grammatical structures they understand intellectually but which they do not actually use. Improvisational exercises can be a fun and rewarding way to engage students. Not only does it give them a grammatical stem that they can use, but it also allows them to interact with each other and to practice listening, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Improvisational exercises reinforce grammatical structures, and when students understand the reason for the exercise, they will usually participate well.

The researcher has found that in all classes she has taught that students – from elementary students to business people – generally enjoy the use of these types of exercises. Anecdotally, some of the shyer students report that it takes the pressure off of them while some of the more outgoing students have spoken of an appreciation for having the opportunity to express themselves. Improvisation is an easy way to create an environment for students to interact with the language.

Improvisation exercises are a rewarding way to practice the lessons taught. Finally, improvisation is fun, and that is always a win!

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