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Improving Language and Interpreting Skills: A Teaching Experience [1]

Serena Cecco and Andrea Masiero

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Abstract

This paper explores the potential of improvisation theatre applied to training, in particular to interpreting studies. A theoretical background on theatre and learning (at an academic and professional level) together with a theoretical background on interpreting skills and qualities provide the basis for the presentation of a small-scale experimental workshop on the use of improvisation techniques. The workshop involved 16 students and was held at the Advanced School for Language Mediation of Ciels University, Campus Padua, Italy.[2]

You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation. – Plato

1 Theatre and learning

1.1 Historical background on Theatre in Language Learning

Literature on Theatre in Language Learning (TiLL) is extensive. In his interesting and wide-ranging historical overview Schewe (2013) mentions the use of drama-related activities in European schools dating back to the 16th century, even though the tradition may be traced back to Plato (427-347 BC) (Coggin in Schewe 2013). The benefits in the use of theatre in learning have been studied both in monolingual contexts and in language teaching and learning. The concept of Theatre in Education (TIE) was established in 1932 by Bertha Waddel (Aita 2009: 66) with the use of performances in primary schools. Since the 1970s, there has been an increase in the use and research in this field in different geographical areas. The approaches range from performative teaching and learning culture in small-scale and large-scale forms (Schewe

[2] Chapters 1.1, 2 and 3.1 of this paper were written by Serena Cecco, chapters 1.2, 1.3, 3.2 were written by Andrea Masiero and translated into English by Serena Cecco, the conclusions were jointly drafted.

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2013, Haack 2010) to the use of *process drama* (Piazzoli 2011) or the use of dramatic performance as an educational tool (Aita 2009). Fonio and Genicot (2011) analysed and found evidence of a compatibility of drama teaching and CEFR objectives.

This is not the place for another article on the importance and effectiveness of the use of theatre in language learning or on the different approaches and their respective advantages and disadvantages, however it is important to highlight some of the common features and benefits that emerged in literature.

Motivation is very important in the learning process and TiLL increases motivation and maintains the students' interest in the language (Aita 2009: 66f). According to Metcalfe (in Piazzoli 2011: 445) *process drama* increases self-confidence and communicative motivation. Its final goal is to foster students' engagement at various levels (Piazzoli 2011: 447). Task engagement relates to problem-solving, the initial frustration at not being able to communicate or perform the task leads the way to the moment of discovery when the situation becomes clear and the motivation is enhanced. The intercultural engagement is another form of participation (ibid. 448): the student can continuously take on a different role and experience the situation from within and without, by playing and leaving the role, to observe it from the outside and experience it from the inside. And finally the aesthetic engagement[3] (ibid. 449), where the student is both actor and audience thus becoming more self-conscious, being involved in the perception, creation and reaction to the creative flow and being part of it.

The use of drama in learning turns the lesson into a sort of performance (Haack 2010: 36), and it is a fact that any student of interpreting studies will always be a performer at work whatever mode of interpreting is used, so it is important for them to train. Haack (ibid. 37), who deals with teachers' training, argues that students will only be successful in applying TiLL when they become teachers themselves, if they have experienced it. The same can be said for future interpreters, who can experience different working situations within the classroom environment, where the "simulation becomes a kind of temporary reality" (Jones in Haack 2010: 38), but for this to work it must be fun and be meaningful.

The use of drama in learning increases social skills, enhancing self-esteem and team work (Haack 2010: 40). Moreover it reduces the fear of making mistakes or failing, which helps concentrate on your work. If a student has already experienced a situation in class, they will be better at facing a real similar situation and applying the appropriate strategies (ibid. 42, 48).

Another interesting aspect of drama in language teaching concerns the verbal and non-verbal aspects, which are both involved in it. Fonio and Genicot (2011) highlight many interesting benefits in the use of drama in language teaching, by

[3] Aesthetic experiences are encouraged by active engagement, sensory experience, connections, imagination, perceptivity, and risk-taking (Uhrmacher 2009: 31-32). Students need to be actively involved in their education, and educators should ensure that situations encourage their growth. To know more about this topic refer to Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934).

analysing and giving evidence of its compatibility with the objectives of CEFR. Among other things, linguistic and socio-linguistic features must be mentioned: phonetic correction and phonetic and phonological variation, prosody and intonation, language registers and genres. The concept of "task", which enhances motivation, the communicative paradigm, which responds to the learners' real needs, and the promotion of universal values (through dialogue and debate) are also common features with the objectives of the CEFR.

Schewe (2013) mentions the importance of the aesthetic dimension which is increasingly being included into Foreign Language Didactics, considering drama-based teaching and learning as an art, not only a science, thus creating new learning opportunities and a new approach to teaching.

The effective action of theatre in second language teaching/learning was specifically investigated within the context of interpreting courses at the Advanced School for Modern Languages for Interpreters and Translators (SSLMIT) of the University of Bologna (Forlì) (Fernández García et al. 2012). The experience of four students participating, on a voluntary basis, in an extra-curricular theatre activity was reported and the benefits were analysed. Again motivation and interest in research were mentioned among the positive results, together with enhanced skills in the ability to pay attention and concentrate for long periods, development of split attention, memory skills, promptness in responding to situations, more objective self-evaluation, enhanced language skills, enhanced creativity, ability to apply psychomotor, cognitive and behavioural competence, enhanced strategic competence (managing verbal and non-verbal processes), self-esteem, and empathic competence, which is very useful and likely to "strengthen compliance with professional codes of conduct" (ibid. 80-84). To conclude, Fernández García et al. (ibid. 85) highlight the flexible and collaborative dimension of this activity, which is particularly suited to meet the challenges of today's higher education, and the key role it played in linking theoretical notions to know-how and real life experience.

Kadrić (2011) mainly explores the dialogical aspect of teaching and learning translation studies, and more specifically interpreting. She starts from the new developments in training and university courses (Bologna Process) and considers the growing and ever changing needs of the labour market coming to the conclusion that an "emancipatory methodology" is the most suited approach. She analyses the issue of social power and interpreting, and determines that students should be taught to recognise its structure so that they can learn to assert themselves in a responsible way and avoid being influenced. Different approaches to interpreters' training all have one thing in common: "Translation ist immmer auf ein entsprechendes Handel sowie dessen Reflexion angelegt" (ibid: 64), which means that theoretical knowledge is not the only important thing, actually what students and trainers *do* is important. According to Kadrić, a useful approach to interpreters' training is to make students aware of problems and be creative in solving them, not to just answer the needs of society and economy, but to leave free room for innovation. That is why

she experimented the techniques of the Theatre of the Oppressed by Boal in training dialogue interpreting, and reported her findings in her interesting work (2011). Thanks to her "szenische Darstellung", students can experiment with their creativity in facing the most diverse situations recreated in the safe environment of the lesson, thus becoming "Mitgestalterinnen und Mitgestalter der kommunikativen Situation" (ibid. 97), freeing themselves from external constraints and not being passive observers of social power relationships. The techniques of the Theatre of the Oppressed are therefore the most adequate methods for students to recognise problems and test different verbal and non-verbal solutions (ibid.).

1.2 Theatre improvisation and training

Not only academic training and education have made use of theatre techniques. Since the 1980s, vocational training has been using them more and more in different contexts, integrating them into its more traditional forms of training.

In the 1980s, Fustier Michel (1996), an expert in human resources, invented and later developed what was then named *Théàtre d'entreprise* (corporate theatre), which has later been spread and made popular by the Canadian actor Poissonneau Christian (Poissonneau & Moisan 2011).

Thirty years on, corporate theatre is still considered as an innovative form of training, because it is an ever evolving method that feeds daily on the experimentation of new projects that are created *ad hoc* to meet the various needs of companies and organisations.

Since 1991 Nantes, in France, has been hosting the *Festival International du Théâtre d'Entreprise (FITE)*, an occasion for European trainers and companies using these training and communicative methods to meet and discuss.

One of the greatest supporters of corporate theatre – and of improvisation theatre in particular – as a corporate training tool is Dick Costolo, former CEO of Twitter and improviser himself (McKeown 2015). He regularly proposed training experiences linked to improvisation to his employees.

The first projects of corporate theatre in Italy start at the end of the 1990s. The first show of corporate theatre goes on stage at the Arena del Sole in Bologna, on 17th July 1997, together with a lesson on corporate creativity held by Paolo Vergnani.

During the academic year 1996/1997, in Triest, corporate theatre becomes a compulsory subject, for the first time, in a Master Degree in Business Administration (MIB), with the professors Maddalena Berlino and Andrea Notarnicola.

In 1999, in Florence, Italy, Roberta Pinzauti gives birth to a very busy activity of corporate theatre with a large network of actors, film-makers, trainers and corporate consultants called *FormAttori* (a pun mixing the Italian words for trainer – *formatore* – and actor – *attore*).

In this brief and personal overview of the author, it is clear that after an initial phase of skepticism, theatre has been spreading in the corporate and academic

world thanks to a curious and interested approach towards it, and now it is quite commonly applied to training and at managerial level in Italy. This was a further stimulus for the authors to join forces to assess a possible synergy in offering a training that combines their respective experiences in corporate training and interpreters' training.

1.3 Improvisation: principles, practice and international activities

All our lives are improvisations.

We wake up every morning without knowing what script we are going to play. We may have a plot outline, but the lines are discovered moment by moment.

> It was the beginning of October and, as it often happens, I went to the Treviso Hills with some friends. Giorgio is my trusted supplier of Prosecco. We bought some boxes to keep in the cellar and use later on, during our dinners together.
>
> We also bought some homemade pies. Giorgio's wife makes wonderful pies.
>
> On the way back, we felt like tasting the pies, so we stopped at a rest area. Pies were excellent as usual. After eating we felt like having some drops of wine, so we decided to open one of the bottles we had just bought.
>
> As there were seven of us, a glass each, the bottle was soon empty.
>
> The atmosphere was nice. I felt like having a coffee and so I entered the bar of the rest area.
>
> "A coffee, please."
>
> It's only then, facing the puzzled look of the cashier, that I realised I was at the counter with the empty bottle of Prosecco.
>
> "Ehm. . . I couldn't find the glass bin, can you tell me where to put it?"
>
> It's only then that I realised that I improvised an answer smoothly and naturally, instinctively I reacted to a stimulus.
>
> If it had happened before taking improvisation lessons, I would have turned red and I would have hid the bottle behind my back awkwardly and with a sense of shame. . .

This short story has been recently told during a lesson, by one of the author's students of improvisation, who is a wine lover.

All our lives are improvised, i.e. they are based on our ability to react to external stimuli. We do it unconsciously, without being aware of the techniques we are adopting.

Improvising does not mean being vague or unprepared. There is a large difference between acting as (or improvising) and being an improviser. An improviser, indeed, can listen, accept, empathise, support, react, involve, amaze, inspire, trust and more than anything make mistakes. And then, they can transform any mistake into an opportunity on stage. Therefore there cannot be mistakes on stage, but only decisions and consequences.

By training and developing those attitudes and skills, it is possible to create improvisation shows in theatre, where people on stage can develop stories and characters without having a script or without agreeing on what is going to happen beforehand. This is also possible thanks to the interaction with the audience, who is often an integral part of the show.

Heir of *commedia dell'arte*, theatre improvisation was used at the beginning of the twentieth century as a tool for actors' training; in the mid-70s, it found fertile ground in the United States and Canada, developing and flourishing up to becoming a preparatory tool for a real performance.

Since the 1970s the number of shows, theatre companies, festivals and actors practicing that discipline has increased worldwide. As of today, Italy alone counts, at least, around fifty companies or groups that regularly perform improvised shows in theatres.

In the author's opinion, the growing success of improvisation is mainly due to two factors:

- It is primarily a training technique rather than just a performing one. Every improviser is called upon working on themselves more as a person – rather – than as an actor. Theatre improvisation requires a work on attitude rather than on acting techniques: taking risks, trusting others, and removing judgement on oneself and on the others.

- Its main basic rules can be shifted and applied to any context.

Here are the basic rules of improvisation, as listed by the actress Tina Fey in her speech[4] at the *Ethical Culture Fieldstone School*, in June 2008:

1. Yes, agree on any proposal, which in non-theatre terms means respect and acknowledge everything your partners have created and proposed. Starting an interaction with "YES" can lead to unexpected or even unforeseen paths that you may not have considered initially. Once the "YES" is acknowledged, you then go on to the "Yes and. . . ", which means not to be afraid to contribute, but always make sure to add something to discussions.

2. Make statements, which means avoid just asking questions, whatever the task or problem you are dealing with, but make sure to be part of the solution.

[4] Tina Fey, *Fieldston School Commencement Address*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=43BOG5Vosks.

3. Stay in the present, which means live what is going on in the moment and be focused on that.

4. There are no mistakes, there are only choices and consequences to those choices. Accepting that things may not go as foreseen means questioning yourselves, thus accepting the risks entailed. It is a good way to break mental patterns and habits. And then things can either go as you wanted, or you will have learnt something anyway.

Theatre, and more specifically improvisation theatre, gives "users" the possibility to reflect upon their behaviours light-heartedly, but at the same time very effectively, because it bypasses the defenses that traditional training methods activate more often than not.

Moreover, it makes people able to learn not only through rational thinking, but also - and foremost - **through their own emotions**, because these activities are not theoretical but experiential. In improvisation, in particular, it is fundamental to work without judging: avoid judging oneself and the others. This enables students to freely test themselves. Emotions, once freed, help learning because they release individuals from routine and habits, leaving room for **experimentation and discovery**, hence learning.

This form of training is therefore based on the concept of *Edutainment*, a neologism from the words education and entertainment, which enables people to learn effectively, and through direct experience (Buccolo et al. 2013).

2 Interpreting skills and qualities

Interpreters are

> expected to render a professional service, based on skills and competences they have acquired during the training. [...] in such a way that participants in a multilingual event who do not speak or understand each other's language may nevertheless communicate successfully. (Kalina 2000: 3)

In this definition, three concepts are very important: skills and competences required, which are many and varied; training, which must prepare students to be professionals at high level; and communication, which is the main goal of the job.

Interpreting studies are relatively new, because the profession was officially born after the First World War, with the official use of interpreters participating in the Paris Conference and all the proceedings. The first interpreters were educated bilingual individuals, self-taught and "improvised": they relied on their wide-ranging cultural background and language skills, and amazing personal competence, but they were never trained to be interpreters (Herbert 1978). They mainly worked in the following modes: long consecutive (where they used notes to help themselves remember longer portions of speeches they

listened to, and then reproduced in the target language), short consecutive (where they only relied on their memory), sight translation (where they directly translated into the target language as they were reading a document in the source language), and *chouchotage* (or whispered interpreting, where they whispered the translation into the ear of one or two interlocutors as they listened to the original speech). The real breakthrough for interpreting only came after the Second World War at the Nuremberg Trial, when the need for a quick and fair process to deal with the egregious crimes of the war required the use of a more rapid system, and gave birth to the modern interpreter, working in the simultaneous mode (Gaiba 1998, Kellet-Bidoli 1998). Only then the first university courses were created to train professionals to work at high level in a growing number of international institutions, but their training was mainly based on the experience of the trainers/professionals, and the students were mainly gifted "naturally born" interpreters. The working environment has changed a lot since then; the types of situations and speakers interpreters are confronted with are varied and more numerous, this requires new skills and hence new approaches to training methods (Kalina 2000, Kadrić 2011).

Traditionally, the basic skills required from an interpreter are the linguistic skills together with a thorough knowledge of the culture of the countries concerned, including political, social and ethnic differences, administrative structures and political culture, community life, literature, and arts (Kalina 2000: 3). Communication skills are also a requirement, together with the ability of listening and speaking at the same time, good memory, quick understanding, and public speaking ability (Kalina 2000, Monacelli 2005). However the different contexts and situations characterising today's complex working environment also require "procedural knowledge about linguistic, situational, cultural or other problems" (Kalina 2000: 4). Competence is not only required during the interpreting process, but also in the preparatory phase, before the event, and even after that, when the new linguistic and subject knowledge acquired must be organised for a likely (and wished) future use. To sum up, in Kalina's words (ibid. 5):

> The competence of a professional interpreter can thus be defined as the competence to process texts within the scope of a bi- or multilingual communication situation [...]. It is also the capability of acting and performing in a situation characterised by externally determined constraints.

Much has been written on the processing strategies to utter a target text that produces an equivalent effect on the target audience as that of the source text: understanding the meaning, the implicit information and the speaker's intentions, memorising the relevant elements, and managing external constraints and disturbances. But these strategies are not enough. Interpreting tasks are usually performed at high level, in very formal situations, where high linguistic and procedural standards are required, where interpreters cannot control time and speed at their own will, they therefore need to develop the automatic use of a certain amount of strategies "as to leave cognitive capacity

for [other] complex operations" (ibid. 6), as well as become very confident and take quick decisions. It is therefore fundamental for the student to be able to think creatively and take their own decisions on the best solution to be adopted. In order to do that they need to rely on lateral thinking. All that can be learnt, indeed the creative process requires knowledge and rules (Kadrić 2011: 100). Interpreters must be aware that anything can happen in real interpreting situations, and still customers always require the highest standards of performance, it is impossible to fully anticipate what will be. This implies potentially very stressful situations, where interpreters must take quick decisions based on their experience and instinct, and follow them through, though constantly checking their delivery against the source text and the context. The ability to cope with stress and pressure is therefore essential as well.

Interpreters usually work in teams, so they need to be able to collaborate, even when they do not like their colleagues, whom you cannot always choose. In the narrow simultaneous booths, space must be shared for hours and calm and self-control must be kept all the time. But even before that, being able to collaborate can help relieve the preparatory phase, by sharing the tasks of translating documents or preparing glossaries. Even in consecutive and dialogue interpreting interpreters can be working in teams, when assignments are long and complex. Moreover, especially when working in dialogue and consecutive interpreting, the face to face situations or the fact of being in front of the audience may require a further ability to manage stress, anxiety and possible unforeseeable events (missing documents, equipment not working properly, delays, technical problems and much more). The ability to work with the other stakeholders (technicians, customers, speakers etc.) will help solve difficult situations more smoothly.

More recent studies highlight the importance of non-verbal aspects and proxemics[5] as communication resources (Besson et al. 2005), especially in dialogue interpreting (Trovato 2013). A spoken message relies on both the verbal and non-verbal levels, however the non-verbal behaviour is more important, because people tend to believe that non-verbal actions do not lie (Besson et al. 2005). Under this label many different elements can be listed: tone of voice, intonation, pauses, body posture and gesture, facial expression, etc. The non-verbal level is very important for interpreters, especially when they do not understand exactly what the speaker is implying or whether they are making a joke or what their attitude is; at the same time interpreters can use it to express meaning more forcefully or concisely. Being able to master and interpret non-verbal elements can make the difference between a good and an excellent interpreter.

Experience is crucial in managing all the complex tasks involved in interpreting: several studies have highlighted the differences between novices and professionals in terms of automatic strategies and stress-management

[5] Proxemics "deals with the amount of space that people feel it necessary to be set between themselves and others" (Oxford Dictionary).

(Kalina 2000, Riccardi et al. 1998, among others). However, students must be prepared for what awaits them in their early training years, because they will not have much time and training after graduating and before starting their career to test themselves. Interpreting is one of those professions where novices are required to be at experts' level and do not have many possibilities to do internships or mentoring. That is why interpreters' training should be very well planned and properly carried out.

Kadrić (2011) has analysed the recent developments in translation studies and she has highlighted the need for universities to be places where the students can develop the ability to be independent, rely on their judgements to take decisions in an ever-evolving working environment, work autonomously, apply critical thinking, be creative and self-conscious. Together with the traditional skills and competences, they should acquire the ability to understand their role in society and take responsibility for their work. She mentions "Schlüsselqualifikationen" (ibid. 25) including cognitive and emotional competences: strategies, skills, analytical thinking, problem-solving as well as emotional intelligence, perseverance, ability to work in team, and to communicate. She sums it up under four different types of competences: "Fachkompetenz" relating to job-specific skills, "Methodenkompetenz", relating to procedural (problem-solving) issues, "Sozialkompetenz", relating to communication issues, and "Individualkopetenz" relating to emotional-ethical issues (ibid. 28). More recently, Bale (2016) has highlighted the potential of drama-based pedagogy in interpreting studies, by focusing on the interpreter as a "language user and as a *performer*" (ibid. 8). He emphasises the need to equip the students with the skills to deal with an ever more complex and pressured working environment, shifting the focus on aspects of performance, rather than the traditional approach on cognitive process and strategies, more typical of the simultaneous mode. A recent trend in training approaches has focused on "student *learning*" (ibid. 10) and the need to take advantage of the new technologies in interpreter training[6] by using computer-based training material, a need which is shared by novice interpreters, who still need a lot of training after their graduation and find it hard to have opportunities to practice[7]. However, this should not overshadow a more holistic approach that takes into account the performance aspect of the profession (ibid. 13), especially when working in dialogue and consecutive interpreting.

To recapitulate, interpreting students need to possess a very good mastery of language and culture – both their mother tongue and the foreign language(s), a thorough knowledge of current affairs and cultural issues, be curious people, be confident speakers, be able to manage stress and anxiety, work in team, master non-verbal elements, have presentation skills, have problem-solving abilities, have good memory, listening and speaking skills, and be creative in coping with

[6] For more information on Computer Assisted Interpreter Training resources see Bale (2016), as well as Andreas Drechsel's blog and his *Tablet Interpreting Manual.*

[7] See also bibliography for some interesting videos on that: Tiselius, InterpretimeBank, ORCIT, among others.

the most diverse situations and problems. That makes teaching methodology crucial in the training of interpreters-to-be. More and more authors and professional interpreters are suggesting innovative techniques (Falbo et. all 1999, Kalina 2000, Monacelli 2005, Nolan 2005, Gillies 2005, 2013 and his many videos on YouTube, Kadrić 2011, Cecco 2016 and 2017, ORCIT and many others), but the use of theatre techniques has only been suggested or partially applied (Kadric 2011, Fernandez Sanchez et al. 2012, Bale 2016). Considering the main features of improvisation theatre and its very positive results in professional training, the authors of this paper had the idea of carrying out a joint workshop exploring the use of improvisation exercises with interpreting students, combined with exercises that were specifically targeted at interpreting activities, involving the use of a diadic communication, and some theoretical background. Unfortunately it was not possible to carry out the original project because of budget restraints, so a four-hour workshop with a small group of 16 students of interpreting and translation was proposed, to assess how it would be received by the students, and whether it would be advisable to plan a larger-scale project, the following chapter is a brief report of this experience.

3 Improvisation and interpreting: a good synergy

3.1 Shared features

Before describing this workshop that used some targeted exercises of improvisation with interpreting students, it may be useful to briefly recapitulate some of the common features of interpreting and improvisation theatre. They both involve a performance by an actor / interpreter in front of an audience, in both cases the actor / interpreter cannot predict for sure what will occur, even though in the case of an interpreting assignment most of the key elements will be known; however the interpreter will never be able to be 100 per cent sure of the content (the speaker may want to change something, the audience may ask an unforeseeable question etc.). They must be both very responsive and context-focused, they must be able to respond to unpredictable situations quickly, and without panicking. They must give – at least – the impression of feeling at ease with the situation, and in case of 'mistakes' they must be able to respond (correct themselves without highlighting the mistakes, or – in the case of improvisation – incorporating the mistakes as integral part of the performance). They must be very concentrated and be able to focus on various elements: the content (or story), the situation, the context, the speakers, and the audience, having a very developed ability to listen and pay attention while doing something else. They need creativity and quick thinking in order to respond to situations, and find adequate solutions very rapidly.

3.2 The workshop

Overview — This is a brief report of the short workshop *Interpret-AZIONE* held at Campus Ciels in Padua by Andrea Masiero with 16 students of the course for Language Mediators.

The workshop was planned by the two authors: an interpreter and interpreters' trainer, and a professional actor and improviser, as well as improvisers' trainer. Based on the theoretical background (1.1, 1.2 and 1.3), they had developed a twelve-hour workshop including practical and improvisation activities and theory on interpreting studies. However, considering the short time available for the workshop (Ciels only granted 4 hours for this activity), they decided to eliminate the theoretical part and only dedicate the workshop to improvisation exercises. The interpreters' trainer is also a professor at Ciels and she already teaches a certain amount of theory in her practical courses of consecutive interpreting, so she thought it best to concentrate on the most innovative part of the workshop.

The 16 students were attending different years of the three-year course of Language Mediation, mixing students from the second and third year, thus presenting different levels in terms of language knowledge and communication ability. No students of the first year enrolled in this workshop, probably because they are new to the university course, and still inexperienced, and they do not have a clear idea of their academic interests. Out of the 16 students, 3 were male and 13 were female (this kind of courses is usually predominantely attended by women, the ratio men to women was very well represented in this course). Some of them had never met nor had they had lessons together. At Ciels students are trained in language mediation with a focus on written translation, dialogue and consecutive interpreting from and into the foreign languages (at least two foreign languages are compulsory), and they can choose from five different specialisations: diplomacy, criminology, marketing, tourism, and intercultural studies. As far as their specialisations are concerned, 5 students out of 16 attended the marketing specialisation, 4 the diplomatic, 3 the criminological, 3 the tourist, and 2 the intercultural.

They have a common study plan for each of the three years, including foreign language, civilisation and culture, linguistics and Italian literature, written translation, and oral mediation (dialogue and consecutive interpreting). According to their specialisation they attend a specific course every year, focusing on a different aspect of diplomacy, criminology, marketing, tourism or intercultural studies. To complement their training, every year they are offered a number of extracurricular activities to choose from, which range from conferences on their fields of specialisation to short (four to six-hours) workshops, which are held by their professors or external experts. Every year they can choose one or two workshops among the five or six which are on offer for the year, Ciels tends to change the activities from year to year in order to offer the widest range of topics. Workshops are not compulsory, but they are necessary to achieve the number of university credits, which are required to apply for the final exam. So students had to apply for the workshop as an

extracurricular activity, but they could have chosen a different activity among the four available in the second term (public speaking, *français pour les affaires*, TermCoord IATE: Terminology project, and speakers' training with a radio DJ).

The workshop was held in Italian, as the short amount of time made available did not allow the authors the possibility to experiment the same work in English as well. So they decided to dedicate that time to focus on the main objectives of the workshop: management of multiple simultaneous stimuli, reaction and problem-solving.

The story of an experience — In April 2018, the author had the opportunity to teach a four-hour experiential workshop where the participants worked on the qualities and skills needed to be an interpreter, through simple theatre and improvisation exercises.

More specifically, the workshop was meant for students to experiment some improvisation exercises, so that they could become more aware of their expressive potential.

The workshop consisted of two lessons, of two hours each, where he worked with the students on the following topics:

- 1st meeting: management of multiple simultaneous stimuli
- 2nd meeting: training on reaction and problem-solving

The idea underlying this choice was based on the fact that an interpreter must be able to perform various tasks simultaneously and take decisions very rapidly (see section 2 in this article), so those seemed to be the most useful abilities to develop and test with the use of improvisation, as the short amount of time available did not allow us to apply a wider range of exercises, neither to pursue a larger number of objectives.

More specifically, the workshop foresaw a first part with icebreaker exercises, in each lesson: very amusing, challenging, and exciting short exercises, which are meant to remove self-judgement and prejudice. They help students to disconnect from their thoughts and everyday worries, in order to concentrate on the moment, to be in the moment. After the initial warm-up, the real work began. The first day focused on listening, concentration, and attention towards oneself and the partners. On the second day, the students had to perform improvisation exercises that led them to make rapid decisions under stressful conditions. After each exercise, and more in depth at the end of the workshop, the group reflected on the activities. This enabled them to find similarities between the exercises and the real situations where the trained attitudes may be applied.

Even though the very limited amount of time did not allow the author to really develop the subject (it usually takes sixty hours to start applying these techniques consciously), the result was very rewarding.

Feedback was gathered through a questionnaire[8] at the end of the workshop, with both open questions and statements, where the students could give a score according to their opinion. The instructions were: "Mark the following statements from 5 to 1, with 5 meaning "highly satisfied" and 1 "not satisfied":

- Useful contents;
- Clarity of explanations;
- Management of the workshop;
- Personal involvement;
- General opinion on the workshop.

The second part presented three open questions:

- Have you learnt anything new from this workshop? If the answer is yes, could you be more specific?
- Is there any topic you would have liked to explore in more details?
- Is there any further comment you would like to leave?

The students liked the workshop very much, 6 out of 16 marked 5 (the highest score) in all statements, the minimum score was 4, and the majority of them wrote a mix of 4s and 5s, only one student wrote 4 in each of the statements. Not all students wrote down their scores, but all of them answered the open questions with very positive feedback.

In only four hours the author could see concrete results, which the students themselves recognised, as reported in their feedback at the end of the workshop.

Here are some of the statements of the participants[9].

- "I have learnt to be more spontaneous and open."
- "Useful games to be able to improve one's awareness and ability to listen and react."
- "Engaging and clear course. For the first time ever I have been able to speak in public without feeling embarrassed."

It was interesting for the author to see, in such a few hours, how people, who were practically strangers to each other and so diverse, were able to connect.

Moreover, there were students, visibly very shy or discreet, who were able to challenge themselves, and tried to come out of their comfort zone. Some

[8] For the original Italian questionnaire see appendix.

[9] Statements were originally in Italian, as the workshop was held in Italian. They have been translated as faithfully as possible for the readers' understanding.

girls, who, on the first day, performed with a low tone of voice and looking down, performed in an unexpectedly determined and very strong attitude in the last exercises of the second day. More specifically, all the group burst out laughing when one of them performed an arrogant old lady who was mad at anyone who tried to help her cross the street, while she only wanted to watch the cars passing by. The spontaneous and energetic attitude that came out was surprising both for the audience and for the actress, who did not know she could react in such a way.

There was a general initial stiffness, a slight fear, and some resistance at first, due to the fact of having to perform an unusual activity within a place where students usually study "traditional" subjects. The question of a girl after the warm-up, who asked with surprise "Do we really have to do that thing?", is a clear example of that. Then it all gradually melted away, leaving room for the will to experiment, test oneself and therefore learn. Some of the bravest students started realising that the activities proposed left room for enjoyment and fun, so the volume of their voices increased, smiles appeared on their faces, and all looked at each other with eyes wide open.

In this type of training the main obstacle students have to face, especially at the beginning when they do no not know each other very well, is not the fact of trying to do things they cannot do, but of risking to "make mistakes" and be judged by strangers. Especially within the walls of an official and dignified place – such as a university.

The author would like to highlight that element again to stress how traditional training risks to restrain the potential of growth and learning in the students. The playful elements enable students to jump without a safety net, making things that they would never do in other contexts. The quote mentioned above of the student that said she could talk in public without feeling embarrassed for the first time proves this.

The experiential mode and the light-hearted approach make this type of work interesting for a number of reasons. The students participate and are focused throughout the lesson as they are directly involved in the activities. They are called upon testing themselves and are willing to do so.

The concrete experience in using these techniques leads students to communicate at a deeper and more instinctive level, developing reaction and intuition. Moreover, once the students discover capacities in them, they have never or hardly ever used before, they have the possibility to experiment and improve those skills, even in non-playful contexts, because they are aware that they can make it. This enables them to grow as a person and as a professional.

This mode of interaction helps fine tune with your interlocutors, because good improvisers use their heads but they choose using their guts.

4 Conclusions

Similarities between improvisation and interpreting are clear, as well as the benefits of improvisation techniques in training.

There is a great need for new innovative approaches in training to meet the demands of the market and the profession. We think they require, among others, the development of a new personal attitude (towards themselves and the others), the ability to adapt to new situations, creativity, and responsibility, in order to make informed and professional choices.

The students' response to this workshop was very encouraging. As far as the response of the academic world is concerned, the coordinator and the tutors of the course were extremely satisfied with the workshop, but they did not enquire about the results in depth, they only read the students' feedbacks, as they do with any workshop offered at Ciels. This is probably the most problematic issue in this kind of workshops, they need a strong and convinced support by the staff and administration, as they are extracurricular activities and require financing and planning into the traditional curricula.

We believe that the very short experience in the workshop has shown that there is a great potential for the development of a new synergy between interpreting and improvisation. However, we are aware that the workshop was shorter than originally planned, and data were insufficient and not efficiently collected in order to analyse the real positive impact of improvisation on interpreters' training. We must admit that this was not our primary purpose in organising this workshop, as we just wanted to see the reaction of the students and the reception of the academic world to this innovative proposal. We honestly feel lucky and privileged to have had this opportunity.

The students' answers have encouraged us to go on with this project and enrich our original twelve-hour workshop with new ideas that require further experimenting on the field. In 2019, we will organise a new workshop and start gathering data in a more organised and efficient way, to create a large-scale study that will probably last one or two years. The revised design of the workshop will comprise a minimum of 12 hours, which will be divided into: 6 hours with the professional improviser, who will introduce the students into the world of improvisation with ice-breaking exercises and some other improvisation exercises, to start getting acquintated with this drama practice; 2 hours with the improviser and the interpreters' trainer working together, starting to introduce the use of foreign language and of diadic / bilingual communication into the workshop; 4 hours with the interpreters' trainer, who will work on role plays simulating realistic work situations facing critical issues and inspired to real events occurred to professional interpreters on the job, thus testing their problem-solving skills and reaction. The effectiveness of the workshop will be tested with a mixed method, combining reflective practice and assessment of the perfomances. This will hopefully provide the basis for a codified and effective new form of training for interpreters and communicators in general.

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Video Clips

A
Appendix

QUESTIONARIO di GRADIMENTO

Dai un voto da 1 a 5 alle seguenti componenti del corso dove

1= molto insoddisfatto; 2= insoddisfatto; 3= indifferente; 4= soddisfatto; 5= molto soddisfatto

Se lo ritieni utile puoi dare una motivazione al tuo voto

- UTILITA' DEI CONTENUTI PROPOSTI
- CHIAREZZA ESPOSITIVA
- MODALITA' DI SVOLGIMENTO
- COINVOLGIMENTO PERSONALE
- GIUDIZIO COMPLESSIVO

Ti sei portato/a a casa qualcosa di utile da questo corso? Se si, cosa nello specifico?

C'è qualche argomento che avresti voluto fosse presente o maggiormente approfondito?

Ti va di lasciare un commento generale?

Grazie per aver partecipato a questo seminario!