

Title	“Show, don’t tell!”
Authors	Matthias, Bettina
Publication date	2007
Original Citation	Matthias, B. (2007) “Show, don’t tell!”, Scenario: A Journal of Performative Teaching, Learning, Research, 1(1), pp. 52-65. https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.1.1.3
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://journals.ucc.ie/index.php/scenario/article/view/scenario-1-1-3 - https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.1.1.3
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Download date	2024-06-20 09:31:12
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/13072

“Show, don’t tell!”

Improvisational Theater and the Beginning Foreign Language Curriculum

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Abstract

While the field of drama and theater continues to inspire many foreign language teachers, improvisational theater has not received more than passing attention as a resource providing interesting warm-ups and games to be used periodically in our classroom. This article makes a case for using the format of an improvisational theater workshop in beginning foreign language teaching. The example of a three-week experimental workshop in January 2006 suggests that improvisational theater and systematic work with its basic directive ‘Show, don’t tell!’ encourage students to communicate in a foreign language environment before they may feel prepared to do so in the target language itself. Physical engagement with a situation opens up communicative possibilities, and it eventually enables students to overcome cognitive and psychological barriers to successfully move towards greater linguistic proficiency and communicative freedom.

1 Drama and Theater in Foreign Language Teaching

Drama and theater have long been recognized as powerful tools in foreign language education, and the impressive amount of research literature published on the subject suggests that drama-based education has raised interest beyond the circles of foreign language theater practitioners.¹ Role plays, mimes and charades, dramatic explorations of (literary) situations and problems have become standard approaches for many of us in class, and more and more colleagues in institutions of higher education have started staging scenes and even full plays in the more formal theater setting as part of their departments’ regular curricular or co-curricular offerings as well as recruitment and outreach

¹ Schewe’s survey over the body of scholarly literature on the topic since the 19th century, published in this issue, clearly demonstrates the topic’s significance in and for scholarly debates on foreign language learning and teaching as well as drama-based education in general.

efforts.² All of these approaches work on almost any level of proficiency and have allowed us to make our classrooms more dynamic stages for our students' ventures into a new language and culture. Role-plays and skits encourage students to understand language as a system of communicative choices and have helped them experience interpersonal negotiation, cultural differences, and risk-taking as part of our increasingly globalized reality. Underlying this pedagogical approach seems to be the writer-philosopher Friedrich Schiller's (1759-1805) idealist claim that play is the realm in which the human being experiences him- or herself in the most authentic and liberated manner.³ Making this realm of existential freedom productive for the often intimidating process of expressing oneself in a new idiom may be one of the most promising ways to help our students overcome cognitive and psychological hurdles on their road to mastering a new language.

Whereas many contributions to the ongoing discussion about drama and theater in FL education focus on scripted or at least given situations (dialogues, prose or static situations to be developed and acted out), very few colleagues have taken a closer and more systematic look at the value that improvisational theater could have for foreign language education, especially in the beginning language classroom.⁴ This may not come as a surprise considering that one of the basic principles of improvisational theater is the directive 'Show, don't tell!' Relying on a technique that seems to renounce the spoken word in order

² I am currently conducting a survey on productions of German plays at American colleges and universities, and initial findings suggest that almost every German program has considered staging a play, and that many schools that have staged plays over the past fifteen years have done so on a regular (annual or bi-annual) basis. I expect to make my findings available to the profession within a year.

³ Friedrich Schiller, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (1795): "Denn, um es endlich auf einmal herauszusagen, der Mensch spielt nur, wo er in voller Bedeutung des Wortes Mensch ist, und er ist nur ganz da Mensch, wo er spielt" (Schiller 1965: 63).

⁴ There are only a few contributions to the discussion about drama techniques in FL teaching that focus specifically on improvisational theater, and the lack of a consistently applied terminology makes it even harder to identify targeted discussions of improvisational theater in FL education (many colleagues tend to blur the lines between role-playing and improvising). Some of these targeted contributions, Ready's *Grammar Wars II: How to Integrate Improvisation and Language Arts* (2002) and Wessels' 'From Improvisation to Publication on an English Through Drama Course' (1996) discuss technical aspects of improvisational theater but do so in order to pursue a different goal, namely suggesting new games for standard classroom use (Ready's collection offers newly devised theater games to teach grammar) and developing student-written texts that serve as course material for further writing exercises. Hodgson, in his contribution "Improvisation and Literature" (Bräuer 2002: 14-41) makes the case for using improvisational theater in the teaching of (foreign language) literature, but his article focuses on FL speakers who are well above the beginning or even intermediate level. Among those contributions listed in my bibliography, only Dufeu's "Techniques de Jeu de Rôle" (1983) and McNeese's "The Uses of Improvisation. Drama in the Foreign Language Classroom" (1983) address improvisational theater as a technique to develop students' socio-cultural linguistic skills, but they seem to focus on more advanced language learners and seem to suggest using improvisational theater as yet another game-like activity among others in class. The one full-length study on the topic that exists, Clark's thesis *Using Improvisational Theater Techniques in the Second Language Classroom* (2002), is not in circulation and, judging from her abstract, also deals with more sophisticated FL users.

to teach a system of sounds called language seems counterintuitive. Secondly, where and when improvisational theater breaks out into spoken exchanges, it requires its participants to be able to respond to a so-called 'problem' (for example the 'who' or 'where' of an improvisational situation to be created) freely, suggesting that linguistic barriers (a struggle for words) could make the whole improvisation break down.

However, it is exactly improvisational theater's emphasis on physical expression that made me curious about its usefulness in a beginning German language sequence. Having used a number of isolated improvisational theater exercises in my regular beginning German classroom – mostly warm ups that lend themselves to being used for work with vocabulary and simple grammatical structures –, I started wondering what would happen if I were to try a full-fledged improvisation theater workshop sequence with my beginning German students, that is, set up a framework that would follow the 'syntax' of an improvisational theater workshop, from work on purely physical expression and reactions to a given (or agreed-upon) 'who,' 'where' or 'what'⁵ to more language-based spontaneous responses. Knowing fully well that this approach could easily fail, I decided not to integrate this workshop into our regular class but instead offer it as a voluntary activity to students who were adventurous and dedicated enough to devote a couple of evenings a week to this experiment.

In what follows, I will introduce the most important premises on which improvisational theater work rests and how it relates to foreign language acquisition and teaching. I will then describe the workshop and its participants as well as the methods used and results perceived. Since the whole workshop was voluntary and one of my goals was to liberate my students as fully as possible from the graded environment of a language class, I had to resist the temptation to conduct more formal assessments such as oral proficiency interviews (OPI) or tests before, during, and after the workshop.⁶ Yet, as a way of assessing informally and dramatically the effectiveness of our work, I introduced a second component to the workshop: after our regular work with improvisational theater only, students were asked at the end of each workshop to develop a small dialogue situation from a short story into a full scene, using all of the techniques for communication and interaction to which our work with improvisational theater had introduced them. I will describe this second part of our workshop in more detail below. Suffice it to say here that the scenes that my students developed proved to me our work's effectiveness in their pursuit of greater communicative proficiency. Consequently, even though my findings could and may be considered anecdotal, they still seem exciting enough to be tested by others – which is all that I wish to accomplish with this

⁵ These terms, as well as that of the 'problem,' will be explained in more detail in the following part of this article.

⁶ Assessing students' progress through oral proficiency interviews and additional written tests before and after their project is an approach that Colleen Ryan-Scheutz and Laura M. Colangelo took in their experiment with theater in the Italian curriculum (Ryan-Scheutz, 2004). Their results are impressive and should be considered by anyone who offers a performance-based FL course.

contribution: inspire readers to engage in creative and rewarding experiments with improvisational theater in foreign language teaching.

2 Improvisational Theater and its Connection to Foreign Language Teaching

Let me start with a disclaimer which, I hope, will convince my readers that one does not have to be a trained improvisational theater professional to employ its methods in the foreign language curriculum. Though relatively experienced in rehearsing and directing plays, stage management and almost all the technical aspects of producing full-scale performances from over four years of doing plays with my German theater company at my school, I did not really know what to do with a book that a friend gave me for my birthday one year: Viola Spolin's *Improvisation for the Theater* (Spolin 1999). His thinking was to provide me with a resource that would help me energize my German student-actors before rehearsals, and I thus opened the volume looking for nice warm-ups that would save me some surfing-time on the internet. Browsing through Spolin's book, jumping from the back to the beginning to the middle of the volume, I was intrigued by the richness of her suggestions. However, I realized that my use of her offerings did not do justice to the potential that I started to see in the method of improvisational theater workshops for learning acting, which was my immediate goal for my group, and for learning communication, which turned out to be the overarching goal. Christmas break came, and I started the book from the start and found myself introduced to a completely new approach to thinking about theater, one in which all the 'walls' of preconceived assumptions about one's presence on stage had been taken away, in which only the creative presence of the one on stage was the determining factor in creating something for the viewer. Neither the 'who' nor the 'when' nor the 'where' had to be given to actors in order for them to engage each other; on the contrary: all of these factors could grow out of human interaction.

At the heart of improvisational theater lies the assumption that "[we] learn through experience and experiencing" (Spolin 1999: 3), no matter whether we strive to become better actors on stage or in our own lives. In order to experience, the actors need to hand themselves over to the situation in which they find themselves; faced with a 'problem,' they need to stay focused on the here and now of the given situation, on the environment and their co-players, allies in their attempt to solve the problem in the most effective and straightforward manner. Rarely is improvisational theater an exercise for an individual player (even the improvised monologue is the result of a special interaction between the player and his or her environment); rather, it is the connection between several players and the players and their environment that leads to the development of an improvised scene, an interaction that results from engaging in the same issue in a focused manner and which leads to communication in the broadest sense.

"[The] techniques of the theater are the techniques of communication" (Spolin 1999: 14); "[i]mprovisation is really just the conscious amplification of strategies people use every day to achieve objectives of varying importance" (McNeece 1983: 830). If these statements are true, it is then easy to see the connection between learning to improvise and learning a foreign language. If we take seriously our goal to get our students ready for communication as early as possible, Spolin's approach applies to using a new language as much as to theater: "The actuality of the communication is far more important than the method used. Methods alter to meet the needs of time and place" (Spolin 1999: 14). The most important mediator in our attempts to communicate thus becomes our body – physicalization, as Spolin calls it, is the "working vocabulary necessary to an objective relationship [between self and Other, teacher and student]" (Spolin 1999: 16). Based on this assumption, the directive 'Show, don't tell!' becomes the first rule in improvising scenes from a given minimal set of information.

As I pointed out at the beginning of this essay, such an emphasis on purely physical expression may be perceived as counter-productive to language learning if we think of language learning as a setup in which students receive structured input in order to generate structured linguistic output. However, spoken output does not have to be the focus in the early stages of language learning, and various approaches to language teaching – such as Total Physical Response (= TPR, whose affinities to improvisational theater will be discussed shortly), Krashen's "input theory" or the lesser practiced methods of Curran's 'counseling learning' or Gattegno's 'silent way'⁷ – have acknowledged the possibility of a silent linguistic gestation phase before students can successfully produce language or structures that they are taught. Yet, physicalization is far from simply being a silent enactment of a given directive. Instead, it enables students early on to respond strongly, personally and in constant collaboration with other players to express themselves in the L2 context and, as I claim, still successfully and kinesthetically acquire language through the input that the presentation with a basic problem, scene preparations, side-coaching, and the debriefing session offer. Not dissimilar to the ideas underlying the method of TPR, improvisational theater rests on the players' abilities to react to a given situation or directive physically and appropriately. However, while TPR simply targets our students' abilities to follow given commands, to act out what is said and translate language into physical behavior, improvisational theater encourages a personal and creative response to whatever the linguistic input may be. It encourages developing an idea and expressing it through the body and responding appropriately to a situation, and would be an ideal scenario for learning cultural behavior. Furthermore, students understand communication in the FL as more than just a set of sounds to which a community of users has assigned certain meanings. Improvisational theater techniques empower our

⁷ Cheryl Brown Mitchell's and Kari Ellingson Vidal's "Weighing the Ways of the Flow: Twentieth Century Language Instruction" (2001) provide a concise description of these methods from the early 1970s.

students to express themselves in a foreign language context before they may feel ready to respond in the target language; by keeping them focused on a limited problem, they concentrate on solving this problem and get absorbed in this collective experience, thus "shutting off fear of approval/disapproval" (Spolin 1999: 22) and set "free from a crippling concern for correct speech while preparing them to use speech in a realistic human context" (McNeece 1983: 834). Under these circumstances, students are then also more open to language acquisition as a kinesthetic experience: listening to preparatory discussions and side-coaching leads to processing linguistic input as meaningful and noteworthy almost automatically, and it is not rare for students to use new linguistic material (vocabulary or structures) that they hear in the early stages of developing a scene in the later phases of problem-solving.

3 Elements of Improvisational Theater Workshops

3.1 The 'Problem'

What is this 'problem' then to which I have referred so often by now? Simply put, a 'problem' in improvisational theater is a very basic task that student-actors are given before walking onto the stage and that they develop for a peer-audience who will closely watch and assess the performance (and who will subsequently come on stage and work on the next problem). In the earliest stages of working with improvisational theater, 'problems' resemble TPR-based tasks, even though the emphasis is on effective expression, reaction and communication: showing 'listening,' 'seeing,' or 'tasting' may be examples of such tasks. In later stages of working with these techniques, student-actors may create scenes in which they physicalize the 'where' or the 'what' or the 'who' of a situation. Examples of such problems are: a group of students is asked to physicalize a bus-stop; a group of prisoners in a war camp; an early afternoon in a bourgeois home. Such more complex acting problems already pose a real challenge for the inexperienced actor, and the more complex the problems get, the less true to the goals of improvisational theater proper can such a workshop in a foreign language become.

However, it is not for the sake of training young actors that these methods are used. Improvisational theater offers powerful insights into the nature of communication, of our being in the world and possibilities for acting upon it and expressing ourselves in it. If our young language students eventually break the rules of improvisational theater to venture into the realm of 'show *and* tell,' they only prove the effectiveness of these theater techniques in liberating their expressive courage. If they then leave behind these techniques, they engage in free play and the collective making of meaning and speech-based communication.

3.2 Side-coaching

One of the more important elements of improvisational theater is so-called side-coaching. Different from true teacher-input which often consists of corrective suggestions or help with problems, side-coaching is not supposed to guide the student-actors in any specific direction nor is it even perceived as teacher-input. The objective of side-coaching is to hold "the player to the focus of an exercise whenever he or she may have wandered away" (Spolin 1999: 28). Stepping out of the situation becomes impossible for a player if a side-coach does his or her job well; manipulating the students' strategies to solve a given problem is equally impossible. It may be the biggest challenge that we, the teachers, who are most likely to assume the role of side-coach in the beginning of such a workshop, face. Used to helping our students out when words fail them and questions do not seem to have an easy answer, we often volunteer information and skills that we deem necessary for them to go on in their academic inquiries and pursuits. Improvisational theater lets students experience their own limits, but it is this experience that allows them to explore everything leading up to this limit more thoroughly and ultimately more successfully. Asking students to stay focused on just listening to each other's breath in a counting game, for example, makes them more sensitive listeners all around, makes them aware of the Other's communicative needs and habits, and helps them physicalize the concept of communication without necessarily even saying a word.⁸ Side-coaching encourages students to be fully aware of their abilities at any given moment without providing input that would tempt them to start using strategies that lie beyond their own (linguistic) reach and beyond the scope of the problem to be solved.⁹

Yet, the side-coach's loud instructions that are directly connected to the situation that the players experience become relevant and comprehensible input that students acquire during a scene and all the work leading up to the improvisation of a scene. Since all side-coaching only refers to whatever is or was just happening in the here and now of the scene, it does not take much for the teacher-side-coach to make sure that instructions remain in the realm of the comprehensible for a beginning language learner. Directives tend to be very short, refer to the immediate environment in which the players find themselves, and stress the most important elements (actions, objects, qualities) on which the actors need to focus. The imperative is the verb form of choice, and constant repetition of similar directives fosters kinesthetic learning, respectively language acquisition in a completely interactive, communicative context.

⁸ Coincidentally, the game to which I refer here, commonly called "Digits," lends itself wonderfully to training counting in a foreign language – but this is simply a side-benefit of the exercise in the context of my argument.

⁹ For specific side-coaching techniques, please refer to Spolin's section on the topic (Spolin 1999: 28-30).

3.3 Evaluation

In addition to the actual theater work on stage and the preparations needed for it, debriefing, called evaluation in improvisational theater, is an integral part of the workshop. Once a problem is solved – a process that should never take more than five to seven minutes in a foreign language –, those who improvised and those who were the audience discuss what happened. Encouraging the peer-audience to take notes while their fellow actors perform is advisable and adds a very productive written component to the exercise (and should be easy since students tend to base their notes on the side-coach's remarks). While the final evaluation will assess whether or not the strategies employed, the expressions conveyed, and the interactions improvised led to solving the given problem, it is not meant to judge the player. 'Good' or 'bad' are not categories in this evaluation, and 'likelihood', that is, whether or not other people would do what the player did in this situation is not the issue; rather, the question is whether or not the player(s) managed to communicate with each other and the audience, and whether they showed effectively the solution to the problem posed. Making those who did not perform responsible for addressing these issues during the debriefing session makes sure that all members of the workshop stay focused and within the same frame of mind. If done right, the result is an atmosphere of mutual trust, fun, and shared learning.

4 The Experimental Workshop in January 2006

4.1 Description

After I had read and understood the basic premises under which improvisational theater operates and how it could be made productive for language teaching at ab initio level, I invited students from my beginning German class to participate in a workshop. I planned this both as a distinct language acquisition opportunity and as preparatory work for those students who had expressed interest in acting in the German full-length play that my German theater company would produce in the following semester. Linguistically, these beginning students were not up to that task yet, but by introducing them to the concept of theater and dramatic speech in a group setting, I hoped to develop strategies for and with them that would help them act in German and lose their fear of "messing up the text".

When we met for the first time in the framework of our workshop, students had had a little over three months of German and had just finished the seventh out of fifteen chapters in our textbook, Robert DiDonato's *Deutsch – Na Klar!*, published by McGraw-Hill. Grammatically speaking, they had worked through all cases except for the genitive case; they had studied possessive pronouns and special prepositions, and they were about to become proficient in using the present perfect tense. Content-wise, we had covered most of the standard repertoire needed to talk about oneself and one's immediate environment (personal information, time, numbers; furniture and living arrangements,

family and entertainment preferences; clothing, food and drinks and dining out). I thus had a nicely developed repertoire of potential settings and situations into or onto which I could build my special improvisational acting 'problems.'

Eight students responded to my invitation to come to this improvisational theater workshop. Interestingly, over 50% of those who participated were international students (one student was from Chile, one from China, one from Columbia, one student was half French, one student was Mexican), suggesting that this approach to expressing oneself resonated well with those who were already used to intercultural and foreign language communication. Over the course of the next three weeks, we met five times for 75 to 90 minutes each session; roughly 50 minutes of each of these sessions were devoted entirely to improvisational theater exercises. During the remaining 25 to 40 minutes, we worked on a little short story that the students were supposed to develop into a scene, applying newly acquired communicative techniques to the task. This story, Burkhard Lerley's *Das liebe Trinkgeld* that I had found on the internet¹⁰ and slightly adapted for my students,¹¹ served as the topical focus around which I planned every workshop. The story runs as follows: at the end of their vacation in a nice hotel, a couple has their last dinner in the hotel's restaurant. When it is time to leave, they realize that they should leave a tip. The dilemma for the husband: tipping is of course advisable, but he also does not want to spend too much. So, instead of calculating, he tries a trick: he gets up to the counter on the opposite side of the restaurant where a piggy bank for tips is waiting for guests to feed it. He searches his pockets and discreetly pulls out a five Euro bill. Without showing it to anyone, he asks his wife across the room whether she would have a 100 Euro bill since he could only find a 200 Euro bill. When the wife tells him that she has no money, the husband loudly announces to tip 200 Euros since they had been treated so well at this hotel. He quickly deposits his bill – the five Euros – in the money-box and returns to their table, sure to be held in high esteem by the employees for being so generous. However, a suspicious waiter comes up to the counter, gets the bill out of the piggy bank – and uncovers his ploy.

The topic of the story fitted in nicely with a number of discussions that we had had with our students in class about cultural differences between Germany and the United States in tipping, dining out, and approaches to work and entertainment. Vocabulary-wise, the story was relatively easy to understand, and the comic twist at the end sat well with the students. A number of key elements were thus familiar to the workshop participants and could be used productively in our work. As my brief summary suggests, Lerley's story has a clear focus and is rich in emotional facets. I thus decided to work towards developing my students' expressive abilities in the framework of the setting and emotions or moods needed for a dramatic rendition and expansion of the core

¹⁰ This and many other stories that lend themselves well to dramatization or other theater-based uses in the German language classroom can be found at: www.e-stories.de

¹¹ Since the story is partly written in the simple past, I had to change the verb forms to the present perfect tense to adjust the text to the linguistic abilities of the workshop participants.

scene in this story. In other words: throughout the workshop, we worked on improvisational techniques to effectively render the 'who', the 'where', and the 'when' of a given situation¹² as well as differentiated expressions of emotions (surprise, embarrassment, annoyance, slyness, happiness, disappointment, anger etc.). After three meetings, when the basic skeleton of this brief scene no longer posed a challenge, we focused on fine-tuning and expanding, again through improvisational techniques. Questions such as 'what happened before?' or 'what will happen next', 'what lies beyond these walls' and 'who sits at the table next to us?' had to be answered by students first before they further developed the scene at the end of our session. Once the purely improvisational exercises were over, that is, after the first 50 minutes of our session, we then applied these new techniques to our scene as we had left it at the end of the last meeting. Since this part of the session was not purely improvisational theater anymore, I handed out written versions of their scenes as they had developed them during the previous meeting and which I had jotted down while they were working. After each meeting, I typed up their scenes, making corrections only on the grammatical level to avoid exposing students to incorrect written input, brief as it may be.¹³ While I allowed the students to read through these scripts before starting their new work on the scene to recall the situation, I took the text away once they started their group work on their scene again. Since there were enough students to have several teams work on the brief dialogue in the story,¹⁴ we developed several, slightly different versions of the first expansion of this dialogue; after the second meeting, we pursued two separate scenes which ultimately grew into exchanges of three pages, involving fellow guests at a neighboring table, two waiters who compete for the guests' favors and little complications such as an upset stomach (in one version) and a quarrel between the frustrated housewife and her overworked husband (in the second version). Much of these developed scenes was based on physical communication between the players, but their verbal exchanges were fully appropriate for the situation and helped guide the scenes towards their climactic end. The fact that beginning German students were able to develop a very short dialogue into very entertaining scenes of four to five minutes proves to me the effectiveness of our work with improvisational theater and its aptness to prepare them to engage in situations in a creative, communicative and focused manner.

¹² Our work with improvisational theater targeted physicalization of these problems in general – in our exercises, different 'whos' and 'wheres' etc. were to be communicated; only the last in a series of targeted exercises would ask students to physicalize the solution to a problem that related directly to our short story.

¹³ Since the workshop was purely voluntary and students had a full schedule already, I decided to write these scenes myself instead of assigning this work to them. If done as a unit in a regular foreign language class, this task certainly provides an additional opportunity to add a written component to the work, one which trains students to take notes and to recall oral input as text and context.

¹⁴ The only dialogue featured in this story starts with the husband's question "Liebling, hast du zufällig noch einen Hunderter?" The wife responds: "Nein, ich habe kein Geld mit" to which the husband responds: "Na ja, egal, die Leute hier waren ja so freundlich. . . ."

4.2 Working in Steps: A Possible Setup for a FL Improvisational Theater Workshop

As I mentioned earlier, improvisational theater workshops move from work on non-verbal expression and communication to more speech-based, structured exchanges, and I found this sequence to work extremely well for my purposes. After I had identified the goal of each individual meeting – that is: after identifying the kind of work that students were supposed to do with the short story at the end of our meeting – , I chose a sequence of exercises that built upon each other and led students to develop a special set of skills and communicative strategies needed for the particular story-based task later in the evening. Every meeting started with two or three purely physical warm-ups that helped them relax, be comfortable with each other, develop awareness of their bodies and the space around them, and with making sounds in this space. Within this first phase, I moved from exercises that would keep the group together in one spot to those that made them roam around freely and improvise with a random partner upon a given signal. Exercises of this type are the so-called mirroring (one actor starts moving, the second one mirrors this movement, either right after the first movement has ended or simultaneously) or moving to music, stopping the music and asking students to engage spontaneously and purely physically whoever happens to stand in front or next to them, thus creating a completely improvised interaction which students subsequently analyzed as typical for either a special 'where' or a special 'when' (this analysis was part of the evaluation).

These latter exercises naturally led to the next phase in our workshop: work involving sound and language. Adding spoken interactions in gibberish to previous exercises was one way of helping them make the transition from purely physical to sound-supported interaction. Another strategy which I have found to work well is to assign one word or expression (a greeting or an expression of a special emotion) to all students. Upon meeting other players, they address each other with this limited verbal repertoire, coloring their utterances emotionally as much as they like in order to communicate a unique personal relationship. Exercises like this one help students recognize the communicative potential in social encounters and engage the other in a personalized manner even if the available linguistic repertoire is limited.

The next phase of the workshop consisted of exercises that asked students to use a broader variety of verbal utterances, first in a controlled way, then more freely. Asking students to physicalize certain emotions not only by responding with their bodies but also with their voices is one way of giving them more language to work with. Upon commands by the side-coach (after the first workshop, I was able to ask students to side-coach shorter activities), students had to express mental states such as 'sad,' 'happy,' 'tired,' 'sly,' 'angry' etc. and repeat the words for these states loudly, coloring their speech with exactly the emotion that they pronounced (that is act out 'sad' while saying 'sad' sadly). To keep them interested in and focused on the exercise and to

train emotional responsiveness and subtlety, we accelerated the succession of the various commands, going from one extreme emotion to another with rapid speed. In a variation of this exercise, the side-coach asks players to physicalize with just one part of their body (asking them to physicalize with their back facing the audience is an especially fun and effective assignment).

After these stages in liberating the students' abilities to express themselves in a special situation, we moved to exercises involving the creation of a mini-scene with language while never losing out of sight the first imperative of improvisational theater 'Show, don't tell!' It is in this phase that we started working on physicalization-exercises to communicate the 'who,' 'where' or 'when' of a scene as well as on problems such as 'what lies beyond?' or 'what happens next?' Asking students to develop a very specific stage set, ruling out any other purpose than the one assigned to them, was a great way to develop vocabulary and physical awareness for a space. Acting in slow motion or backwards, repeating scenes and identifying sub-scenes (which students marked by saying 'begin' and 'end') that needed further development were then complex and intricate problems on which we worked at the end of each workshop and before starting our work on the short story-based little restaurant scene.¹⁵

5 Challenges

As I pointed out earlier, an improvisational theater-based approach to working with beginning language students presents a wonderful opportunity to work towards communicative courage and the development of communicative strategies that step in when language fails the language user – and that help recall and employ linguistic structures in situations that often make those who wish to speak freeze up and forget even the most basic linguistic repertoire. However, this emphasis on communication, no matter the medium, may neither always foster successful language acquisition nor increase L2 proficiency. In extreme (even if unlikely) cases, physicalization could be perceived as an alternative to speech-based communication, and it is therefore important to balance workshops well between encouraging non-verbal expression and risk-taking in a speech-based interaction. The sequence in each workshop should be planned well in order to support kinesthetic language acquisition and subsequent speech-based output. One of the biggest challenges thus consists of balancing our goals as language instructors and those of the side-coach who, even though responsible for keeping the students on track, should never

¹⁵ To list all of the possible exercises for each phase of this workshop would be near impossible, given the number of possibilities, and take away from my reader's own creative imagination and approach to this kind of work with theater. Viola Spolin's *Improvisation for the Theater* as well as other manuals of this kind (especially Augusto Boal's *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, who proposes a very special approach to theater in his *Theater of the Oppressed*) offer a vast array of suggestions and exercises that one can sequence according to the specific goals of a given workshop.

interfere with the actors' problem-solving strategies. Developing a sensitivity for what students can do at any given stage during a bigger improvisational theater project is thus the most important task for us as planners of such workshops. Giving them problems that are either too easy or too hard to solve leads to subversion of and frustration with the basic premises of the workshop, and the pedagogical benefits of improvisational theater for communicative language learning are lost. Inexperienced as I was in improvisational theater, I could not have come up with a productive, streamlined and successful structure for our workshop had it not been for the short story that I initially only added as a fun cool down activity and not as a backdrop that would help me stay focused. Following Spolin's or any other theater practitioner's suggestions for improvisational theater work in projects the goal of which is the context of L2 teaching and learning, requires a rethinking of the purpose of each exercise and a redefinition of some of the goals that these manuals propose. The final shape and results from this particular workshop – its setup, the articulation of an improvisational theater 'problem,' the students' execution of a given task, and the criteria applied to the evaluation – suggest that improvisational theater provides a rich source of inspiration. As a wonderfully creative and liberating framework even for beginning FL students, improvisational theater allows them to start experimenting with communicating in a new language and to practice how to make the most out of any new, unknown (social) encounter.

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