# Improvisation activities in online language courses

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*This report describes a semester-long project in which two university language instructors applied a variety of improvisation activities in their online classes in the spring of 2021 to facilitate active engagement, foster social community, and heighten oral fluency in the synchronous online learning environment. The authors describe the exercises, as well as their approaches, observations, and recommendations, and reflect on their possible impact on the aforementioned aspects. They show that engagement and community can be promoted through improvisation activities, despite the two-dimensional online experience.*

## 1  Introduction

Technology can provide many advantages to educators and their students. However, during the pandemic, many instructors perceived that despite later research to the contrary (Bergdahl, 2022), a steady diet of online classes seemed to result in low student engagement, alienation, and poor performance. This seemed especially true in language classes, since the essential nature of learning to communicate in a new language requires human interaction, something remarkably difficult to reproduce in a natural way in the online environment. Strasser speaks of the need for "discursive proximity", i.e., the students' need to see and experience their instructors (Strasser, 2021).

Once online teaching became the most viable option in the spring of 2020, questions about methodology, efficacy, access, the potential impact on student learning, their physical and mental health, and other concerns about online language teaching became frequent topics of discussion among faculty and curriculum specialists.

The authors of this article are teaching faculty of German and Spanish, respectively. We teach undergraduate advanced intermediate classes and wanted to look more closely at issues of student motivation and confidence, with the goal of using that information to enhance the learning experience, while accepting the limitations and challenges of teaching classes that were fully online and synchronous.

We soon realized two things: one, for intermediate language students, their main goal is to become more fluent, or at least conversant, in the new language. In an anonymous survey, students in our two courses frequently cited the desire to study abroad, or to be able to communicate with relatives or friends in other countries, or to become proficient for professional purposes. Two, the fear of making mistakes in an online class, with classmates

they might never have met in person, was intimidating and prevented them from taking risks, e.g., trying to use unfamiliar vocabulary and grammar, or expressing opinions based on new content.

Under these circumstances, we began to explore ways to reduce the impersonal and intimidating nature of online language classes. Catherine Nock had previously used interactive games and role-playing in her in-person Spanish courses, and Mona Eikel-Pohen had done substantial work with improvisational activities in her German courses. In the synchronous in-person classroom, we had observed that improvisation-based methods, as holistic forms of instruction, could positively reinforce oral skills, resulting in greater confidence and potentially greater proficiency. They reach the students on a seemingly more intuitive level than traditional single-mode activities (those that address only one mode of communication, e.g., listening *or* speaking) by anchoring their oral communication in concrete, meaningful situations, helping to form deeper neurological pathways through procedural (as opposed to declarative only) pathways (Oakley et al., 2021, p. 121)

We wanted to find out if the improvisation activities used in drama pedagogy in in-person classrooms could help break down some of the barriers caused by inhibition. Could we create an online space in which students would be comfortable taking risks, and speak with more confidence and potentially greater proficiency in the online environment?

## 2 Current research on neuroscience, improv, and learning

Barbara Oakley, Beth Rogowsky, and Terrence Sejnowski (2021) distinguish the declarative pathway (learning through explanations) from the procedural pathway (learning by doing) of learning and state that they complement each other (p. 121). However, it seems that the problem in the online learning environment is the lack of direct human interaction that could hone the procedural pathway practices. We wanted to know if using improvisation activities, even if only online, would at least engage students in holistic activities. In addition, Gunter Lösel theorizes in *The Improviser's Lazy Brain* (2019) that when improvising, the brain "probably uses less neural capacity than [when undertaking] everyday problem solving" (Lösel, 2019, p. 40). The lateral prefrontal cortex that is responsible for critical and analytical thinking decreases activity while the medial prefrontal cortex that processes emotion increases activation (cf. Limb in Lösel, 2019, p. 40, Drinko, 2013, p. 96). Lösel concludes that "improvisation should be more aptly framed as communication, instead of being reduced to problem-solving" (2019, p. 41), and that is precisely what we were seeking to do: our main reasons for using improvisation activities prior *to* the shift to remote teaching were to promote confidence and facilitate communication. Our question now was to determine if they could also facilitate communication in the online environment.

We identified three main goals. One: we hoped, simply put, to engage students as much as possible. As DeMichele claims, improvisation activities "that can be integrated with content makes them an easy and useful tool in the academic and vocational classroom, positively impacting teaching and learning" (DeMichele, 2019, p. 10). Two, since the improvisation activities are undertaken in synchronization with classmates, more positive relationships can be expected to form (p. 41), or, as Poeppel (2016) showed, even communal changes based on positive group experiences may evoke changes in the brain (p. 63). Thus, "improvisers enter a specific state of connectedness with their environment" (Lösel, 2019, p. 42) that Chana Halpern et al. (1994) describe as "group mind" (p. 67). Adding to that, Michael Csikszentmihalyi (1990) sees in the deactivation of the prefrontal cortex the precondition for the state of flow that might potentially be connected with verbal fluency (Sambanis & Walter, 2019, pp. 30-32). Although the literature on improvisation activities in online language learning is limited, with only one study of their effects on fluency in English Language Arts (DeMichele, 2015, p. 13), we hypothesized that improvisation activities can lead to lowered stress; higher speaking engagement; a light-hearted acceptance of mistakes that deems them necessary, inevitable and potentially fruitful; and improved fluency in synchronous online language classes at the intermediate level.

## 3   The Approach

One year into the pandemic, in the spring 2021 semester, we chose and adapted a number of improvisation activities that seemed suitable for the online synchronous language classroom at the high intermediate level. These are activities that XXX1 had used, discussed, and evaluated regularly in AIN (Applied Improvisation Network) virtual and global Open Space meetings twice per week.

## 4   The five improvisation activities

The five improvisation activities we chose to discuss here were selected from among those that we both used in our classes. They are taken from a compilation of improv activities that Mona Eikel-Pohen put together at the outset of the pandemic, *Zoomprov* (Eikel-Pohen, 2020): "Yes, and…" , "Giving gifts" (or "Giving presents"), and "Venting" (or "Complaining"), and "Anecdotes" ("American Discussion", Eikel-Pohen, 2020, p. 15, 16, 43, 44). "Sell it!", came to our attention after the publication of *Zoomprov.* We present the five exercises here in order of cognitive complexity, from simple to more complex.

## 4.1   Yes, and…

"Yes, and…" is regarded as the foundation of all improv games (DeMichele, 2019, p. 24, Drinko, 2021, p. 5, XXX1 p. 15). It is often the first activity to be introduced in improvisation courses for beginners and asks participants to respond to a certain prompt (e.g., "We are at a party") and what the previous person said. The "Yes" stands for acceptance of what the previous person said, no matter how ill-fitting or absurd that comment was. The comma gives the speaker time to breathe before adding ("and-ing") the first thing that comes to their mind. This way, each participant has to actively listen to what was said before, acknowledge it ("Yes"), shift perspectives (on the comma), and add ("and…") an additional spontaneous comment. The whole procedure does not allow for preconceived ideas or analytical thinking. Rather, it focuses on what is already there, readily available. For example, one week in German class, the topic was nutrition, and the students used "Yes, and…" when describing what they would cook if they could all be together. They accrued a rather diverse and healthy meal that involved different forms of cooking (boiling, baking, seasoning, mixing, frying), and various uncommon ingredients that reflected their personal backgrounds; the exercise also called for descriptions and explanations among the students.

In the Spanish class, "Yes, and…" was used as a debriefing discussion technique after the students met with a professor from Chile. He had shared his experiences of arrest and incarceration as a university student in the 1980s under the military dictatorship, and it was a very powerful discussion. In class the next day, the students had a lot to say on the topic. Using the technique of "Yes, and…" allowed them to affirm each other's statements and also express their own thoughts, without worrying about having to create connected discourse.

"Yes, and…" was also used successfully in small-group conversations about an engaging short film, in which the students described the two very different characters in the film, and their actions. It gave everyone an opportunity to freely add their thoughts to the discussion of personalities, without feeling compelled to follow anyone else's train of thought.

This was a good exercise for days when students seemed tired or distracted. Its simplicity and low pressure to "perform" made it attractive for times when learning on the declarative pathway was not viable.

## 4.2   Sell it

Students choose a nearby object and describe it, highlighting its attributes and trying to sell it in a short sales pitch. This exercise can be performed individually, in small groups, or by all the students simultaneously.

In the German class, it helped students let go of inhibitions because the objects were familiar to them. In earlier versions, all students spoke and did their little sales pitches at the same time to avoid embarrassment. In the latter part of the semester, students praised their objects individually, often with a hint of irony or sarcasm, and several students would even respond and agree to "buy" the objects. Students would even directly offer the object to someone they had become friendly and comfortable with. This playfulness indicates that students acquired a certain level of fluency that allowed them to be creative with the improvisation activity itself.

In the Spanish classes, this was also a popular activity. Students chose a mundane object and were asked to describe it to the class using as many descriptive words as possible, in one minute. As in the German class, initially it was carried out by all students simultaneously, which produced a loud and amusing minute of enthusiastic speech. Later during that same class, the students were divided into small groups. Using the same object, they now created 30-second "infomercials" to try to sell it to the other 2-3 students in their group. Again, they were enthusiastic about describing, promoting, and selling their items. It almost seemed that they were so caught up in what they were selling that they forgot to be nervous, which is the desired outcome.

## 4.3   Giving gifts

In this exercise, the class is divided into pairs, but everyone remains in the main Zoom room. Student A pretends to give a "present" to B, and B responds with as much enthusiasm as possible, no matter how meaningless or absurd the present is. When A gives a present, s*he says something like, "I'm very happy to give this _____ to you" and then B responds with something like, "Thanks! Thanks! I always wanted a _____! I'm going to use it to _____. " Students should be as descriptive as possible.

Variation 1: The gift recipient makes up what the gift is. The giver just says, for example, "Here, a present for you" and mimes the shape of the present. Then the recipient "takes" it and says, for example, "Wow! A button for my button collection. Where did you find it?"

In the German class, this improvisation activity was conducted on two consecutive days. The first day, the students carried out the basic version. One student received the gift of "a man", laughed and responded in the target language: "I do not know what to do with a man, but I am sure he is fluent in German and can do my homework." The second day, students designated a gift for a specific individual student. Of course, students were all ears to hear what their fellow student would be given, and the receiving student would kindly thank them for it.

In one Spanish class, the class had a gift-exchange in which each student chose an object, described it and then "gave it" to someone else in the class (pretending to reach out to the other person through the screen). That person in turn thanked them profusely, saying why they loved it and what they planned to do with it, before giving a different item to another person. This was very popular and provoked a lot of laughter, as some of the interactions were funny and quite exaggerated–which was exactly the point.

## 4.4   Anecdotes

Student A tells student B an anecdote about something that happened to them, and student B tells student A an anecdote from their own life. Then, student A retells Student B's anecdote in the first person to the class, and student B retells student A's anecdote in the first person. The German class used this improvisation activity early in the semester during a lesson focusing on active listening strategies. The instructor was able to listen in on most breakout sessions and noted that the students enjoyed the one-on-one conversations, as they later confirmed in their exit tickets. Moreover, when retelling their partners' anecdotes (with their consent) to the full class, there was a heightened sense of attention, as these stories were original, personal, and authentic. In addition, they revealed something, albeit non-verbally, about the partner relationship in the breakout setting.

After discussing what an anecdote is, and listening to one modeled by the instructor, the Spanish students were put in pairs and asked to tell each other anecdotes. Afterwards, they shared their partners' anecdotes with the class, using their own Spanish words. There was notable enthusiasm for this exercise. Students narrated some interesting stories that captured everyone's attention, and elicited questions and comments from their classmates. From a communication standpoint, it was a very successful activity. They struggled with the verb tenses needed for narrating in the past, but this is to be expected at the intermediate level. More importantly, they willingly shared their experiences and listened to those of others being retold.

## 4.5   Venting

In this exercise, students vent about something important to them for one minute. When giving feedback, the other students first state what they noticed about the venting person's perspective by saying "I heard that you_____" and "I noticed that you_____".

The German students practiced venting on two consecutive days towards the end of the semester. On the first occasion, 50% of the students vented and the other 50% listened, trying to develop and deliver counter arguments to the venting. Those venting students spoke

remarkably fluently, as they were emotionally engaged in the topic and were speaking authentically, in a group in which they felt safe. It took the responding students some time to both identify the arguments and prepare counter arguments. In addition, the perspectives expressed might not have conformed with their own personal attitudes. That extra mental work would explain why the responses seemed to take more time than expected. We should have discussed what it means, cognitively, to vent "from the heart" (with a deactivated prefrontal cortex), versus arguing from the standpoint of reason (i.e., with an activated prefrontal cortex), and that responding more slowly does not indicate a lack of interest or opinions.

The next day, students who had not vented the previous day took on that role, and the other students had to deduct the venting person's motivations and describe them. Overall, this activity went a bit faster than the previous day, presumably because the format was familiar, and they realized that it was fine to respond more slowly than in their first language. As soon as they got the hang of it, their tongues loosened up.

In Spanish, the whole class did a one-minute rant, simultaneously, in which each person spoke aloud for 60 seconds about their pet peeve. It was funny, silly and raucous. Afterwards, during the debriefing, some people shared what they had been complaining about and why. As always, there was a wide variety of topics. Ironically, one student from a large, boisterous family said that her pet peeve is when too many people talk at the same time—which is precisely what we had been doing. This prompted further conversation on the topic of interrupting and group norms.

## 5 Observations

Each week during the 14-week semester, we conducted interactive oral exercises in class. We kept shared reflective notes taken after class on the execution in the online synchronous classes, and held weekly meetings to compare our observations, reflect, discuss successes and failures, and plan activities for the following week. We refrained from recording the lessons to avoid observer effects. Our notes, we are aware, are subjective, but gave us a somewhat solid platform from which to draw our comparisons.

Our goal was to select at least five of these improvisation activities in both Spanish and German, and review them to determine if they fostered both activity and social community and potentially more oral fluency in a noticeable way, and if and how they should be applied in the future.

We also asked students to fill out short survey questions twice during the semester, in order to see how the students themselves reflected on their progress towards fluency. In addition,

the German class used "exit tickets" (Google Forms at the end of each class) to garner additional feedback (cf. Eikel-Pohen, 2021).

## 5.1   Engagement

We found that the students willingly engaged in the improvisation activities; they did not need to be pushed to do so in exchange for a grade. Engagement, however, while not lower than in the in-person classroom, was somewhat different. For example, students could plan or practice in the greater privacy of the breakout rooms without the instructor overhearing their conversations, as would happen in a physical classroom. It was also noticeable that students developed their own group dynamics in taking turns, passing on the cue for an exercise, or by allowing themselves to occasionally opt out of an exercise.

## 5.2   Class environment

The amount of laughter, spontaneity, and enthusiasm described in the five improvisation activities processes show that indeed a positive group atmosphere was achieved online in both courses, German and Spanish. Students entrusted personal stories to one another, sometimes even to the whole group. They could also apply irony and even sarcasm to a certain degree and without being hurtful, but rather by lightening up the group dynamic in certain moments (German: giving gifts; Spanish: "complaining" about too many people talking at once). The feedback in their evaluations veered into the same direction.

Overall, the benefit of the improvisation activities seems to be that students can help create a classroom environment (whether in-person or online) that is fun, engaging, and non-judgmental, where students learn to trust each other and make friends. Once that happens, the groundwork is laid for communication to flow more readily, just as it does in the world outside the classroom, and students become more willing to attempt more complex exercises.

## 5.3   Fluency

We could even go so far as to say that the moment the students were able and ready to modify certain improvisation activities (e.g. they turned the "Giving gifts "activities into a "Compliment shower" where the showered student turned off their camera and was showered with compliments of achievement, good character traits, and mutual support throughout the semester), they embraced them fully and could play with them (they "Yes, and-ed" the improvisation activities themselves, so to speak). This might be an indicator for fluency because the students were no longer focused on how to use their declarative knowledge and "perform well", but instead had incorporated the improvisation activity's

structure, content, and context, as well as the linguistic skills (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, intonation) into their long- term memory. In many cases, the activities seemed to lead to real conversations about the content, as the Spanish classes have shown, or about the activities themselves and their impact on the students, as in the German classes. Could these transitions from exercises to real conversations be regarded as one indicator of a newly developed or improved fluency? Is it possible that the moment the students stop worrying about being "correct" (the moment the lateral prefrontal cortex disengages and deactivates), they are able to produce more fluent target language? We could not fully answer these questions, but they would be worth addressing in a separate project.

## 6    Reflections

We found that reflecting on our activities, as we had done in class with the students, was just as crucial for this project as conducting them. We first added comments to the shared document we kept for reflections, and then followed up with discussion. In this section, we focus on three aspects: how to introduce drama activities to students, how to choose and implement activities, and how students responded to the activities.

### 6.1    Laying the groundwork

It is important to start implementing drama activities, such as improv exercises, singing, or using props or costumes, right from the start of the semester or even from the start of course sequences. This gives students the opportunity to become accustomed to them and helps them be less fearful and resistant. It is also a good idea to convey early and often that these activities are intended to be "low stakes", and that students are not being evaluated on their "performance", so that they can relax and feel less pressured.

 We observed that the process of forming relationships and developing trust takes longer online than in the traditional classroom. Throughout this developmental period, students should be encouraged to ask follow-up questions or make comments; if the instructor provides their reflections too readily, then the students tend to wait for their input and will avoid contributing their own.

This phase is also a good time to talk about past mistakes, and the fact that they are an inescapable and even necessary part of the process because they offer the opportunity to learn from one's own errors. We can reframe them as opportunities for successful and sustainable learning, and in so doing, turn them into teachable moments (cf. Müller, 2017, p. 171).

## 6.2   Exercise selection and implementation:

Instructors should select the improvisation activities that they themselves feel most confident in being able to model and teach, because the ability to convey instructions clearly and enthusiastically is essential to the success of the exercise (DeMichele, 2019, p. 19).

Even though DeMichele states that the structural complexity of exercises is not necessarily linked to their quality or their cognitive complexity (p. 30), we found that for language acquisition and increased fluency, exercises sometimes need to be scaffolded to fit a group's abilities. Rather than trying to match them up with specific instructional goals, more value can be derived when complexity is increased very slowly.

Repeating the activities in subsequent classes, or lessons or doing a simpler variation before a more complex one, were successful techniques used in both courses. Building in time for a "Plan B" if a given exercise fails, or conversely, for a second round if it is successful, is recommended. Debriefing afterwards can be helpful, although may not be necessary for every exercise. When time allows for reflection, it provides another opportunity to use the target language authentically, in a contextualized way. It also serves to affirm the students' contributions.

It's a good idea to keep in mind, especially in the early part of the semester before trust and camaraderie have been established, that the instructor may need to help the class or a group get "unstuck" if an exercise proves to be too complex, or if the instructions are unclear. Giving good instructions is difficult but essential, as DeMichele mentions (p. 19). This is especially true in whole-class activities. If several students are confused or tongue-tied, it may be necessary to tweak the instructions or the structure of the activity on the spot in order to encourage further participation.

## 6.3   Student buy-in

For most improvisation activities, it would be highly beneficial to prepare very short example videos in the target language to show the class. Even with the instructor's explanations and modeling, oral comprehension in the target language can still be a challenge for some students at this level. As an alternative, it would make sense to plan enough time for a dry run of the exercises and to incorporate the concept of failure as described above.

As with other improvisation activities, some students had no difficulty coming up with a response, whether it was a silly, over-the-top description of an item, or a profuse expression of thanks for an imaginary gift. In both courses, it was evident that students became quicker in responding over the course of the semester, losing inhibitions (or, neurologically,

deactivating the lateral frontal cortex). A few students, however, would struggle to even say something basic. This seems to be related to personality (the natural tendency of some people to be more reserved or introverted) or what Oakley et al. (2020) describe as "race-car learners" vs. "hiker learners: "Race-car learners" have an easier time switching from applying knowledge from the working memory through the declarative pathway, whereas "hiker learners" need more procedural practice with new language items and content before being able to apply them. Once the hikers have mastered that, however, they have the information embedded more deeply into their long-term memory than the "race-car learners" (p. 70 and 137).

## 7    Practical considerations

We learned over the course of the semester that we should have built in more time for reflection with the students on the improvisation activities, and given them the vocabulary to do so, as well as included the concept of "failure" as an explicit topic. This would have rendered the activities more integral parts of the courses. Students could have improved their reflective skills in the target languages and also provided us with feedback on the activities and their handling, as well as to what degree they found them employable and conducive to their learning progress.

It would have also been helpful to have parallel course sections in the same languages as control groups. However, the organization of our department and respective language programs did not allow for that.

Sambanis and Walter (2019) are among the few researchers who have focused on neuroscience and language acquisition. However, although they conflate Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow (1990) with the physical skill of verbal articulation (Kemmerer, 2015, p. 112), they do not consider the fact that foreign language production takes place in a different part of the brain's Broca's area, at a high rate of speed, whereas the part responsible for oral motor skills slows down considerably (Takukder, 2001). For this kind of research, that means that improvisation activities promote the mental aspect of fluency, but as instructors, we still need to be patient with and pay special or separate attention to students' individual physical articulatory skills.

Another issue is that there are very few detailed studies on how the brain works neurologically when learning an additional language. There are numerous studies that focus on language development in first language acquisition or language loss after brain trauma, but there is little published research on the brain and second language acquisition.

Extricating fluency from other skills developed when improvising in a new target language was outside the scope of this project; yet future research could potentially focus on fluency alone, and seek means to test how to measure it.

# 8   Outlook

We believe that our examples from the five improvisation activities demonstrate that using them does indeed improve interaction in online language learning environments. We were able to engage students with each other in the target language and observe a growing mutual trust, ease, and willingness to speak and learn from mistakes made.

In the future, we will continue to use improvisation activities in our lower division language acquisition classes, but will not try to align two courses in different languages and their syllabi, due to the logistical challenges. Having now returned to in-person teaching, we are able to make use of the flexibility of time, contexts, and space. We plan to model how to use the five activities presented here for other language instructors in departmental workshops.

Going forward, we will also build in more time for reflection on the contents and formats of activities selected, and provide students with the vocabulary needed to help them express themselves in all matters related to improvisation activities.

Overall, based on what we observed, we believe that students benefited on multiple levels from the use of improvisation activities in these two online synchronous intermediate language classes. We saw ample evidence of interactivity, community-building, and improved confidence, and we sensed progress towards fluency. An exciting next step will be to compare these outcomes with those from in-person classrooms, to see if our observations and reflections will also apply to that space, and to then explore any differences and similarities.

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