Strengthening Student's Spontaneity: Using the Principles of Improv Comedy to Develop Indonesian EFL Learners' Speaking Ability

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Abstract

Speaking is considered a complicated language skill by many EFL (English as Foreign Language) learners since they could not be able to speak spontaneously. However, spoken language production is a universal problem for Indonesian English teachers which might be caused by the lack of speaking spontaneity training in the classroom. To solve this obstacle, the teachers could use improv comedy as this art has certain principles that might be useful to train the learners' speaking ability. Improv comedy takes its origin from Italian improvisational theatre appeared during the 15th century which performed unscripted drama and the players deliberately improvised their lines and acts. This study aims to illustrate how the improv comedy principles might be useful for English speaking class especially to train the students' ability in speaking spontaneously.
Keywords: Improv; Comedy; Spontaneity; Speaking; EFL classrooms.

1. Introduction

Learning speaking is not easy for some people due to the problem with spontaneity (Crystal, 2005). Speaking is a language productive time-tied skill. While conversing with others, people are demanded to construct their speech and response fast or consequently, their speaking partner would feel neglected and ignored. For foreign language learners, the demands get higher as they need to think and to talk at the same time. They should manage themselves to think about the message they are about to deliver, the suitable vocabulary, and the accurate grammatical construction in a beat. At the same pace, the learners still need to put some efforts in producing proper pronunciation to make sure their spoken remarks are understandable.

According to Nunan (2003), speaking is the language skill that requires instant reception and response. In this case, speaking is quite different from writing, another language productive skill that may not need instant reaction and response. A text could be read more than once and the recipients may have enough time to convey the message. The writer also has sufficient time to prepare the contents and to construct the idea into a properly written text. On the other hand, speaking does not have this luxury as both production and reception need to be done in instant. The speakers are demanded to produce the utterance and the recipients are needed to convey the message fast to keep the verbal exchange running. A long silent gap while speaking could distract the attention of the recipients that could result in their disengagement. To deal with this obstacle, this paper proposes the training of spontaneity in speaking using improv comedy based games.

According to Gladwell (2005), spontaneity is the outcome of well-structured and recurring practice and not merely a random action. It is like when professional players play soccer and all actions they do on the pitch are seemingly spontaneous though, in reality, they have to train themselves to do those actions perfectly through thousands of training hours. Same goes with speaking that after hours of training, the learners are expected to be able to speak proficiently and spontaneously.

A model proposed to train learners speaking spontaneity is improv comedy. It is an art showing the impromptu performance of the players. Improv comedy was derived from Italian improvisational theatrical performance initiated in the 15th century (Kudrowitz, 2010). In this show, the performers were given the liberty to perform an unscripted story and they were able to improvise their acts and speeches as long as they were still following the plot that might be given by the viewers. During the 20th century to date, there have been some American television stations airing game shows that take the principles of improvisational theatre as the fundamental rules of the games. Some of them are very popular. Meanwhile, improv comedy based games were introduced in Indonesia during the 2010s after some standup comics performed the games on their show. There were also some Indonesian television shows performing improv comedy based games on-air.

Improv comedy put games stress on the importance of spontaneity. This paper is about to describe how the principles of improv comedy could be helpful for English teaching and learning process, mainly for Indonesian EFL (English as Foreign Language) learners.

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2. Improv Comedy in a Nutshell

According to Spolin (1963), improv theatrical performance is an art in which the speeches and acts are produced spontaneously on the spot by the performers. In the context of improv comedy games, the performers are playing particular games that are based on the principles of improvisational theatre. At least 305 games fall under the category of improv comedy game. As the original improvisational theatre does, there are some improv comedy based games that use viewers' idea as the plot guideline.

Hodge and Ratten (2015), describe improvisation as when people do something spontaneously and innovate creatively to adapt themselves under the pressure to meet certain objectives. In the context of improv comedy, the main objective is indeed the viewers' laughter. However, the other objectives also could be gained, such as the boost of performers' confidence, the betterment in the performers' comedic sense, etc.

According to Hatcher *et al.* (2018), improv comedy is a theatrical performance performing unscripted and unplanned characters, dialogues, and plots created spontaneously on the spot. As this art relies on spontaneity, the performers might need to face some unanticipated moments they have to deal with. They should innovate and adapt themselves to those pressure to meet the common goals.

3. The Principles of Improv Comedy

To be called improv comedy, a performance should meet the principles below.

3.1 Spontaneity

Berk and Trieber (2009), propose the principle of spontaneity. This means the improv comedy performers should play the given story spontaneously without any preparation. While performing, the players should give instant feedback towards what the other players do or speak and vice versa. Spending too much time to prepare the response would get the audience disengaged and they would not be entertained. This principle is in agreement with the speaking principle of immediate feedback. According to Nunan (2003), people are expecting immediate response while speaking to others. Making too much silent gap during speaking would leave the speaking partners feel neglected and they would be disengaged. Nunan also suggests that speaking has the characteristics of limited planning, meaning the speakers should understand that they have limited time to plan anything they are about to say. This is why spontaneity in speaking is needed.

Since improv comedy games are mainly played verbally, the performers got limited opportunity to edit what they have uttered. What they could do is just make some reasonable explanation to justify anything they speak or do. Done spontaneously, the professional improv players are demanded to create a proper and logical justification for everything they are made to do. On the other hand, speaking has the temporary characteristic (van Lier, 1995), meaning once a statement is spoken, it is quite difficult to edit. However, the ability to make reasonably spontaneous justification in speaking is also needed. That could be useful to avoid conflict that might happen because of the misunderstanding.

As Gladwell (2005) says that spontaneity is not a random act, when people could speak spontaneously, it means they have trained themselves. However, when having a conversation, people could not prepare everything they are about to speak. The preparation they might do is to train their grammatical ability, their vocabulary mastery, their pronunciation, and related knowledge to widen the conversation. In other words, to make people speak proficiently, they should be willing to train themselves. Since improv comedy trains spontaneity, people could make use of it to train their speaking spontaneity.

3.2. Creative

The next principle is that improv comedy players need to be creative (Hargreaves and MacDonald, 2012). Improv comedy performers are demanded to generate a fresh and unpredicted idea to keep the attention of the viewers. A proof of this principle is an American TV show entitled Whose Line is it Anyway? which during the middle of 2019 has accomplished 327 episodes and currently in its 14 ongoing seasons. To date, the show is rated 8.3 on the TV show and movies database website IMDB.com and it is also rated 8.9 on similar website TV.com. Producing such long seasons and such many episodes while also keeping their audience in the middle of tight competition with other TV shows indeed requires creativity of its players and directors.

Creativity is a work to create something original and meaningful (Sternberg and Sternberg, 2012). When conversing with others, someone is supposed to be able to convey a fresh and interesting idea. Should the idea is dull and boring, their counterparts would feel jaded and the conversation would be uninteresting. Brown (2007), believes that the speaking creativity in a broader context of teaching and learning also supports the student's ability to create a fresh idea, to think creatively, to raise their motivation level, and to boost their self-confidence.

3.3. Acceptance

The next principle of improv comedy is acceptance (Berk and Trieber, 2009). This principle demands the performers to accept all idea given by their partners to unlock every possibility in the story and plot. This could be done by accepting and saying "yes, and..." and then build on the idea given by the other player. Should a player refuse an idea by simply saying "no...", then the story ends right there. In order to get the story keeps flowing, all player should accept the other players' idea and keep adding their own idea. The principle of acceptance would be useful when talking with people as the learners would train themselves to accept different idea and thoughts. Accepting difference would get the learners staying away from unnecessary debate and get them closer to productive

dialogue (Hyde and Bineham, 2000). Dialogue is a two-way communication which enables both parties involved exchange feedback (Nunan and Carter, 2001). This kind of communication is meant to appreciate the other's intention so that all of them connect themselves better to prevent misunderstanding.

3.4. Attentive Listening

According to Berk and Trieber (2009), the good improv comedy performers have the willingness to attentively listen to the others. When a player speaks something, then the other players should listen attentively, therefore, they could respond properly to keep the story flowing and so on. Listening to others means people want to understand others better since the key to effective communication is listening. This principle fits the speaking principle speaking that it relies on hearing (Nunan, 2003). While having a conversation, all people involved should be willing to listen to what the others say to get the idea correctly and to hamper misinterpretation. Having it done, then the response given to would be accurate and effective.

3.5. Trust

Improv comedy also has the principle of trust (Berk and Trieber, 2009). When playing, each performer needs to be aware that the performance is done together, therefore everyone involved should give their best. However, each performer should trust all of their partners that when one of the performers responds inaccurately, the others would still accept and cover it up to keep the conversation on. In a real conversation, making mistakes while speaking is quite acceptable due to its nature of limited planning and time. According to Sato (2003), the most important thing in speaking is the deliverance of the message. Producing speaking mistakes is not a big problem if the message is conveyed clearly. Brown (2007), remarks that someone does speaking mistake when he or she could not correctly utilize a known system relates to verbal utterance. The mistake might happen due to the anxiety, the grammatical incompetence, the inability to find suitable vocabulary, etc. In some cases, most English learners rarely speak in English swiftly without delay and they rely on the responses from the others to buy themselves some time to think about the content of the next turn. In other words, most of the beginners would rather have a conversation than a public speech since in conversation they would have response and feedback from the others they might need to speak further. Their partners should also bring up a new topic and idea that would make the conversation keeps flowing.

Hanulíková et al. (2012), performed an experimental study that proved that the native speakers of English had the ability to understand the verbal message transmitted by the English learners even when they did mistakes. As the native speakers have spoken English since they were able to speak, they would have certain anticipation that could help them to infer the message. While speaking, both parties also could make use of the context to help them understand the message better. According to Morett (2017), the learners could also exploit their body language and gesture to get the message delivered. This means, having a spoken mistake is not a big problem for the learners as long as they live in an accommodating environment at which the inhabitants would try their best to learn and to develop their English ability.

Improv comedy is a performing art deliberately created to entertain the audience in a comical way. This means that its main objective is the audience's laughter. This would be tricky for the teachers since there would be some of the students that do not want to be laughed at. Should this happen, the teachers should enlighten the students that the laughter is not intended to make someone look bad and feel embarrassed as the fundamental idea of the game is comedy. The teachers also need to clarify that the basic objective of the application of improv comedy in the classroom is to train the classroom members' ability in speaking spontaneously.

3.6. Social

According to Hargreaves and MacDonald (2012), the other principle of improv comedy is social since this art cannot be played alone and it needs players, moderator, and audience. By this principle, the performers should work hand in hand with the others in order to perform the best. This could be a good opportunity to reinforce the social bonding between the performers or, in the case of EFL class setting, between the classroom members. The bonding would be useful for each learner in order to earn themselves a better place to learn with a supportive environment.

Steitzer (2011), argues that learning improv comedy lifts the performers social awareness and also enhances their ability to tolerate differences. In improv comedy, the performers are trained to speak in turn so the others would have the opportunity to listen clearly. This is also good for their social awareness as they are trained not to dominate the conversation. According to Huang et al. (2017), taking too much speaking portion in a conversation would make someone end up least-favored.

An experiment conducted by Hurst et al. (2013) discovered that the social interaction between the learners provided a positive effect on the teaching and learning process. Social interaction also opened the possibility for the students to learn from their friends and to do collaborative learning.

4. Improv Comedy in Education

The implementation of improv comedy games for educational purposes is common in some countries, such as United States Stewart (2016), Australia Stevens (2016), and Canada Gallagher (2010). All of them are English speaking countries and yet, the study that records the use of improv comedy in non-English speaking countries is infrequently found, let alone in Asian nations. Recently, we could only find two published articles that record the implementation of improv comedy in Asia, as follows.

4.1. Improv Comedy in South Korea

The first one is an experiment done by Florea (2011) in South Korean EFL students. The researcher tried to employ an improv comedy based learning model to train the students' speaking spontaneity. The researcher used improv comedy based learning to train basic skills of speaking, listening, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary mastery. The experimented students were reported had the ability to speak more proficient and they trained themselves to speak decisively. The introvert students believed that improv comedy based learning made them speak bravely for a while. On the other hand, improv comedy got the outspoken students expressing themselves and it was reported that they enjoyed the learning better.

4.2. Hong Kong

Another study is a quantitative study done by Sio and Wee (2012) at the English department of the University of Hong Kong. Both researchers were teaching linguistics and they invited their students to perform improv comedy based drama with stories related to the learning topics. The students were asked to play a short impromptu drama with a story taken randomly from the suggestions pool made by their friends. Next, the students should perform the conversation using certain linguistics feature that became the topic of the day. This method was reported lifted the students' understanding of linguistics as some students said that through playing improv comedy based drama they finally could comprehend the theoretical concepts of linguistics which at first felt abstract for them and now they could translate those concepts into simple explanations and they were able to carry out and to recognize those features in their daily life.

5. An Opportunity to Apply Improv Comedy in English Learning in Indonesia

To date, we could not find any published article and journal on the application of improv comedy for educational purposes especially for EFL in Indonesia. After learning about two flourishing stories in South Korea and Hong Kong, we believe that improv comedy based learning would fit Indonesian EFL learners in general since the three Asian countries share some resemblances.

5.1. All Three Nations Identify English as a Foreign Language

The first resemblance is that Indonesia, Hong Kong, and South Korea identify English as a foreign language. In fact, there was a period of time when English was considered the official language of Hong Kong when the United Kingdom occupied it. This changed in 1998 when Hong Kong returned to China and later the government identified English as a foreign language. This resemblance means that all three nations learners have a small opportunity to practice and to train their English outside the classroom. They spend most of their time speaking in their first language while two or four academic hours in a week would not be sufficient for them to train their English.

5.2. The Three Nations like Entertainment so Much

Being one of the most famous countries in the world right now, South Korea is the home of Korean pop culture that happens to be a global trend. Even many people across the globe who do not understand the Korean language at all are still able to enjoy Korean songs, movies, and dramas. This is quite comparable with Hong Kong which is famous for its movies business. Some actors and actresses from Hong Kong are also going to Hollywood and making themselves a global movie star. Indonesia has the resemblance of liking entertainment and it could be hinted from its people ancestors who once mostly worked as farmers. According to Harari (2014), people who became the part of farming societies would have a specialized ability that guided to the development of both written and verbal language, to the invention of tools, and the improvement of art. Indonesian was rich with traditional arts such as a lot of traditional dances and some kinds of traditional theatrical performances.

Considering the fact that the fundamental of improv comedy is entertainment and performing art, there is a good possibility the Indonesian EFL students make benefit from the application of improv comedy based games in teaching and learning process as explained below.

Firstly, most of the traditional theatrical performances in Indonesia free the performers to act and to improvise spontaneously to trigger laughter (Hanan and Koesasi, 2011; Weix, 1995). Those traditional theatrical performances have a definite plot and the performers are allowed to make some improvisations and impromptu acts as long as the plot is followed. This indicates that most Indonesians are not foreign with the notion of improvisation and spontaneous performance.

Secondly, Indonesian youngsters in common are described have the tendency to do something spontaneously (Sarwono, 2014). While some teachers consider this bad, improv comedy might offer a good possibility to make use of the students' tendency to do something spontaneously for something good. Having the tendency, the Indonesian EFL learners, in general, have already owned the capability to play improv comedy.

Lastly, it is found that the majority of Indonesian students have a better level of motivation when the class is funny (Nurhayati and Saenab, 2016). This result finding fits with the strongest feature of improv comedy since from beginning it is designed to be funny.

Third, most Indonesian students are more motivated if the teaching and learning process is humorous (Nurhayati and Saenab, 2016). The nature of improv comedy, as the name implies, is to trigger laughter. However, there could be a possibility when a joke is delivered in English, the speakers of Bahasa Indonesia might find it unfunny due to the cultural difference. To bridge the cultural difference in telling jokes, Keller (2016) suggests the use of code-

switching. Based on the improv comedy principle of spontaneity, using code switching during playing improv comedy games is not forbidden as long as it is really spontaneous. Even, it could be a strong trigger for laughter.

6. Conclusions

Many EFL learners consider speaking is difficult since they have problems with their ability to speak spontaneously. To solve the problem, improv comedy could be an answer as this method offers the opportunity to train the learners' ability in speaking spontaneously. Indonesian EFL learners could make use of improv comedy as an unconventional approach to deal with speaking problems they face.

Acknowledgments

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