
Improving Students' Conversational Competence with the Rules of Improvisation

Dawn Kobayashi

Onomichi City University

kobayashi-dawn@onomichi-u.ac.jp

The rules of improvisation, which are derived from improvised drama, have been gaining attention for their transferability to other fields such as business and education. This paper reports on the results of a study into the effects of learning the rules of improvisation to develop Japanese university students' conversational competence. The students at the center of the study were 275 first year general English students. This paper firstly argues for the applicability of the rules of improvisation in EFL classrooms and proceeds to discuss the results of a preliminary analysis of a sample of the whole study's data.

最近、即興演劇の規則はビジネス、教育など他分野への注意を集めています。

本稿は、日本の大学生の会話能力を開発する即興の規則学習の効果に調査の結果について報告します。研究所の学生は、総合英語 1年生275名でした。本稿はまず英語教育でドラマの適用性と主張し、全体研究データのサンプルの予備的な分析の結果について説明します。

Introduction

Recently there has been increased support for the use drama in language education (Anderson, Hughes and Manuel, 2008; Podlozny, 2000; Winston, 2007); however, for many teachers the impracticalities of implementing such an approach are educational requirements, the classroom environment including factors such as student numbers and noise and the teacher's lack of confidence in utilizing what may be unfamiliar drama approaches. Although there have been attempts to introduce drama techniques by language educators (Kawakami, 2012; Kobayashi, 2012; Malay and Duff, 2005; Miccoli, 2003; Wilson,

2008) there is still a long way to go before drama becomes standard accepted practice in the language classroom. This paper suggests how teachers can use the rules of improvisation as a framework for developing conversational competence in their language classrooms.

Much of the speaking practice that occurs in the language classroom consists of artificial language exchanges happening after preparation and practice (Thornbury, 2008). It may involve students reading scripted role-plays or engaging in question and answer exchanges with the teacher that conforms to initiate, respond, and evaluate (Beghetto, 2010 p.450) formula. In this environment students cannot be said to be engaging their creative mind nor stretching their linguistic ability. Additionally, such interactions do not reflect real world language exchanges where interlocutors do not know how their co-interlocutor will respond in advance, nor does natural conversation

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usually adhere to a neat question and answer flow. There will be hesitations, restarts, misunderstandings, rejection of topics and requests for repetition and clarification. Furthermore, classroom exchanges based on textbook conversations are often formulaic; lacking in originality, excitement and the unexpected. Teachers often find that although students need help in managing conversations, merely practicing role-plays more or learning conversational gambits do not result in the students engaging in naturally sounding exchanges. The teaching of explicit strategies and techniques that provide students with a guide or framework could result in more positive results. The rules of improvisation can help to bring these elements back into the classroom and give students the confidence to become successful communicators and engage in spontaneous conversations. This paper reports the results of a preliminary analysis of a sample data set taken from an ongoing larger study to investigate whether the deliberate teaching of rules of improvisation has an effect on students' ability to engage in small talk.

Improvisation

The rules of improvisation come from a type of theatre performance called improvised drama, which is often, but not always comedy based. They have developed from the work of many theater practitioners including but not restricted to Spolin (1999), Maley and Duff (2005) and Wilson (2008). The purpose of the rules of improvisation is to provide actors with guidelines on how to initiate, manage and maintain language exchanges in a cooperative and productive way. The rules of improvisation are of interest to language educators because they can also be applied to conversations in the classroom. In improvisation actors utilize the rules to cooperate with each other, working together to develop a flowing, coherent conversation; the rules act as a framework that facilitates spontaneity and creativity. Since there is no time for preparation, actors have to rely on their instincts and impulse, skills that language educators strive to nurture and develop in students. Additionally, improvisation depends on the actors creating an atmosphere of trust and support; the rules of improvisation also facilitate the

development of this. Recently they have been drawing attention for their applicability to a number of other fields that require effective communication such as business, consulting as well as language education.

Implementation

The students at the center of the study were 275 first year undergraduate students at Onomichi City University in Hiroshima prefecture. Their majors were Economics and Fine Art, and they were all required to complete a one-year General English course as part of their studies. It was decided to conduct the study in the second semester, as this would reduce the effects of factors such as unfamiliarity with other students and the teacher, and the university environment. After one semester of lessons with the teacher and the same classmates it was believed that the students would feel relatively secure in the educational setting. A set of rules were selected that had the most relevance to language teaching and learning (see table 1 below). These rules were then actively taught and practiced by students over a period of ten weeks. The rules were introduced as an initial warm-up section of regular lessons with each activity lasting around ten minutes.

At the beginning of the semester a pretest was administered to establish where the students were in terms of conversational competence prior to learning the rules of improvisation. At the end of the second semester, a posttest was administered to see if any changes could be observed in students' conversational competence. Both the pretest and posttest were conducted with the following framework. The students were to 'chat' about a topic for one minute (see table 1). The teacher assigned the topic randomly to students just before the conversation. A ten second pause would mean the conversation was over. The test was videotaped and the teacher neither made notes nor gave feedback on the conversation, the teacher did not participate in the conversation and acted as an observer only.

The Rules of Improvisation

As mentioned above the rules of improvisation are the means by which actors initiate, manage, and maintain improvised drama. Although the exact rules

TABLE 1

List of conversation topic

Topics
Food
Music
Friends
Family
Favorite animal
Hobbies
Books
Sports
Movies
Famous person

may differ slightly depending on the theater group and practitioner, Alger (2013) provides some good examples. As some of the rules are to do with dramatic setting and establishing character they have varying degrees of practicality for the language classroom. For the purposes of this study the following nine rules were selected to be explicitly taught to students as a means for developing conversational competence. The tenth rule; 'establish a location' was not included as it was considered to have limited relevance to the language classroom.

1. Yes and
2. Don't block or deny
3. Avoid questions
4. Bring something
5. Let yourself fail
6. Play, relax have fun
7. Listen, listen, listen, respond
8. Work to the top of your intelligence
9. Make your partner look good

(Adapted from David Alger's first ten rules of Improv)

Rule 1: 'Yes and...'

This is perhaps the guiding principle of improvisation to agree and build on your partner's ideas and suggestions. It builds a positive atmosphere and allows the forward movement of conversation and interaction. Responding to someone's suggestion with a negative comment not only shuts down conversation; but also creates neuro-physical stress in the brain, adversely affecting interpersonal relationships between the interlocutors (Newberg & Waldman, 2010).

Rule 2: 'Don't Block or Deny'

This rule is linked to the 'say yes and' principle, however there are more ways to block someone's ideas or attempts at conversation other than just saying no. For example a speaker could change the topic completely. For example if speaker A opened with 'Wasn't the tennis match yesterday exciting!' And speaker B responded with 'I think tennis is boring,' then speaker B has effectively blocked the conversational start that A has initiated. In improvisation the goal is to work and build on what your partner has said. So even if speaker B has not seen the tennis a preferable response would be 'Oh I didn't get to see it did Murray win?' In this way speaker A can continue the conversation topic of tennis and the positive, forward motion of the conversation is maintained.

Rule 3: 'Avoid questions'

This rule is very challenging, textbook exchanges are often based around 3 or 4 question and answer exchanges. However in authentic conversations nearly half of questions are in fact elliptical: Have you? Don't you?; or question tags :Yes? Right? Don't you think? (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan, 1999)

In improvisation questions are usually avoided for a number of reasons. If the question is a (yes/no) one, then the dialogue becomes monotonous 'Are you hungry?'-'Yes', 'Would you like something to eat?'-'Yes', 'Do you like ham sandwiches?'-'Yes'. And if the questions are open ones 'What do you think of...?' 'What's your favorite...?' then the questioner is automatically in the controlling role, through which they steer the conversation with questions which are often formulaic. Therefore the questioner makes the answerer do all the work and provide all the detail and

information. By removing questions, the interaction becomes much more equal and balanced.

Rule 4: ‘Bring something to the conversation’

The fourth rule that was taught to students was ‘Bring something to the conversation.’ This relates to the first rule of ‘say yes and’. If the conversation is to develop, sufficient material must be provided to allow for the natural progression of the language exchange. The more information that is provided, the easier it is for students to respond. Consider the following exchange from the pretest data:

A: ‘My hobby is listening to music’

B: ‘ahh’

In this extract, ‘A’ provided limited information for B to respond to, consequently B soon completes their turn without providing any information for the conversation to progress. Compare with the following from the post test:

A: ‘I like climb a mountain...so mountain view so beautiful...do you like?’

B: ‘Ahh I don’t like but I like ...’

In the second exchange A gives their opinion and then invites B to respond. By adding more detail, colour and information to the initiating turn, student A has made it much easier for their partner to respond in a meaningful way even though they do not agree with student A’s statement.

Rule 5: ‘Let Yourself Fail’, Rule 6: ‘Play, Relax and Have Fun’

The fifth and sixth rules are more to do with students’ attitude to communication. They are ‘Let yourself fail’ and ‘Play relax and have fun’ both related to adopting a positive attitude to conversation, which is essential to the language classroom. There is the obvious disparity of attempting to teach authentic conversation in the artificial setting of the language classroom. This causes the difficulties of creating a relaxed, friendly atmosphere within a formal, institutional setting. The mere fact that it is a classroom and the teacher is watching can make students become nervous and self-conscious. It is therefore useful to explicitly teach students that failure is not a problem and that native

speakers’ speech is marked by restarts, mistakes and ungrammatical statements. Additionally, it is helpful to remind students that conversations are held for fun and enjoyment and to find out more about friends and associates.

Rule 7: ‘Listen, Listen, Listen, Respond’

The seventh rule was ‘Listen, listen, listen, respond’. This is an important issue in conversation classes and students should be encouraged to listen carefully and process what is said to them before responding. It is often tempting for students to interject with their own opinions before fully understanding what has been said. Encouraging students to listen attentively to their partner’s utterances before responding is a valuable communication skill.

Rule 8: ‘Work to the Top of your Intelligence’

The eighth rule was ‘Work to the top of your intelligence’. For improvisation, it is important to be original and interesting; even if there is no audience it is still a performance. It is also important in conversation, and we hope that our conversation partner will be interested in what we have to say. Therefore it is essential to remind students to make their contributions original and interesting and to take the difficult option, to stretch themselves, to make longer, more detailed and stimulating answers. The more students give, the easier it becomes for their partner to make a fitting response.

Rule 9: ‘Make your Partner Look Good’

The final rule was ‘Make your partner look good’. In improvisation, it can be quite daunting to perform with no script. For the actors to perform effectively it is essential that they know that their partner will support and assist them. The same is true in the classroom; students should be encouraged to assist and above all make their partner look and feel good!

Discussion of Results

After the post-tests, the recordings from one class of 35 students were transcribed and analyzed for the emergence of possible points of interest for further study. The table below describes the results of this preliminary analysis (table 2). The first column in each set refers to the pretest, the second to the post-

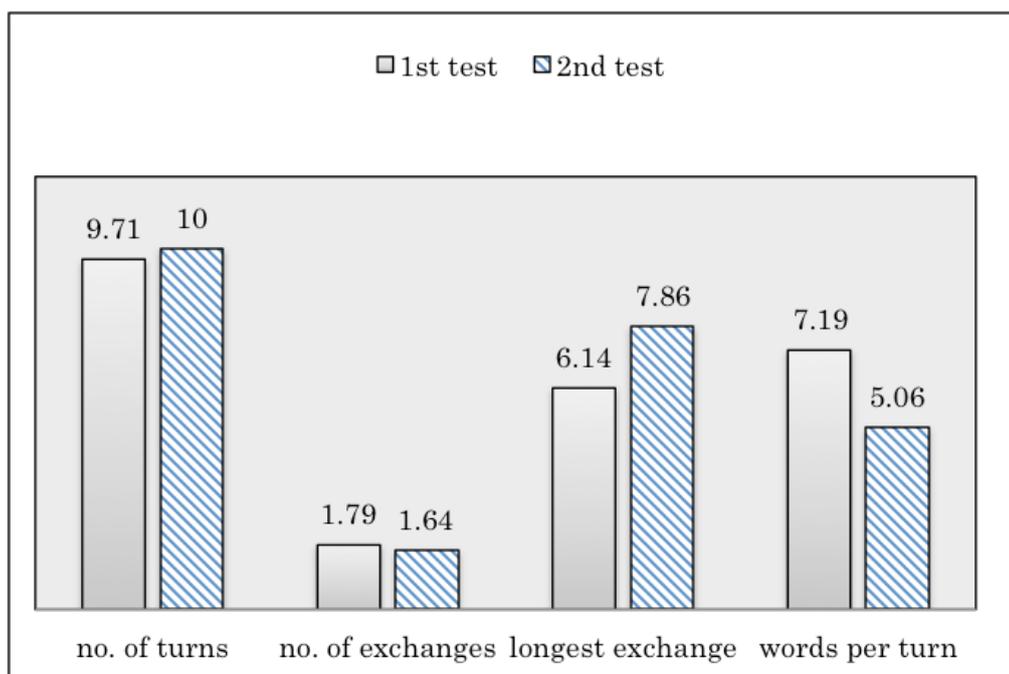


FIGURE 1. Comparison of pretest and post-test

test. The first set refers to the average number of conversational turns taken within each conversation. The second set denotes the number of exchanges within each conversation; by this I mean the number of discrete topics that were discussed. The third set describes the longest exchange; this means the number of conversational turns within the longest exchange of the conversation. The final set denotes the average number of words spoken within each turn.

The results for the pretest revealed some common issues such as students not helping each other to communicate. For example, no rephrasing comments, no using gestures and displaying unfriendly body language. There were also frequent pauses and attempts by students to directly assign turns to their partner. In addition, unnatural conversational techniques were observed. For example some students decided to make a short speech with first one student giving their thoughts on the designated topic and then the second student giving their opinion. Another frequent technique was for one student to take the role of interviewer and the other student to reply to their questions. This resulted in a power imbalance with the 'interviewer' having control of the conversation and the other student being forced to provide all the information.

When the results of the pretest and post-test were

compared some interesting findings were revealed. The number of turns that were taken in the conversation showed little change with just a slight increase observed (see figure 1), moving from an average of 9.71 in the first test to 10 in the second. Additionally, the number of exchanges or sub-topics (a topic within the topic) that were discussed showed no real change, a slight decrease from 1.79 to 1.64. The first main difference was in the number of turns within the longest exchange; this showed an increase from 6.41 to 7.86. This means that once both students had settled on the sub-topic, they used an increased number of turns to discuss that topic. Also the number of actual words that students used within each turn decreased from 7.19 in the first conversation to 5.06 in the second. There were also differences in the openings of the conversations with fewer pairs beginning conversations with questions, choosing to provide information instead of requesting it.

Conclusions

From this initial analysis of a small sample of the data, it can be seen that once students had decided on a sub-topic, they could maintain that sub-topic for longer. For example, if the main topic was famous people then the sub-topic might be talking about Ichiro. Additionally,

students actually spoke less within their own turn; this means that they dominated the conversation less and were more ready to switch turns back and forth in a much more balanced conversational style.

There are many possible areas to study in these data sets such as the repetition of phrases, how students designate turns, students use of body language and gestures, the function of laughter in the conversation and also the comments that students made for evaluating their own performance after the tests. However, it is the two factors that define the choppiness of the conversation, i.e. the number of turns in the sub-topic and the number of words within each turn in that sub-topic, that the author intends to focus on for the remaining data sets.

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Author's Biography:

Dawn Kobayashi is a specially appointed lecturer at Onomichi City University. Her research interests include the use of drama and literature in language teaching.
