

THE IMPROVISATION LEAGUE

Sylvie Normandin

About a decade ago, a group of Québécois actors felt uncomfortable with the constraints that the theatre imposed upon them. They wanted a form of theatre that would allow them to be more creative and spontaneous. To meet these needs, they created the Improvisation League. This innovative idea can be effectively adapted to second language teaching.

The Improvisation League is loosely based on some of the rules and procedures of hockey. The league is divided into teams. The teams participate in scheduled matches. A match consists of three periods of twenty minutes each. What is different about the Improvisation League is that in order to gain points, the players have to improvise on themes.

The theme, which is chosen in advance, is read out loud. Here is an example: You are a shy person talking to an aggressive salesman. Both teams have thirty seconds to choose which players are best suited to improvise on that particular theme. The improvisation may last from two to five minutes. The audience votes for the team they think gave the best performance. At the end of the game, the team which has the most points wins.

The aim of organizing an Improvisation League in the language class is to help the students to lower their inhibitions towards the target language, and to increase their level of interest and motivation. Because this activity encourages students to focus on meaning more than on form and because their errors aren't constantly monitored, they will feel more at ease about expressing themselves in the target language.

The Improvisation League can produce a number of gratifying results. Since it involves a certain amount of competition it increases the students' level of motivation. Furthermore, every student participates (as a player or as a member of the audience). The players use the target language in a creative way and the members of the audience are motivated to listen and understand so that they can vote for the best performances. Consequently, all the students have the opportunity to practise speaking and listening skills. Most important of all, the Improvisation League encourages the students to use realistic language in realistic situations.

In setting up the league, the teacher divides the class into teams of three to five students, making sure no team is too strong or weak. At the beginning the teachers themselves write the themes, but they attempt as soon as possible to involve the students. Each theme should specify the number of players and the time allotted for the performance. A perusal of Duke (1974) and Via (1983) will provide a variety of themes and surely contribute to the success of the activity.

At first, the themes should be kept simple and unambiguous and the improvisations should be short (from thirty seconds to two minutes). Then, you can make this activity more challenging by:

- a) Having students improvise on pictures instead of on written themes.
- b) Requiring the students to use specific structures (e.g., can, may, should) and vocabulary items which were presented in previous lessons.
- c) Increasing the number of participants.
- d) Having the improvisations last longer (three to five minutes).

The rules are fairly straightforward but the referee (probably the teacher) should make sure they are followed. A student reads out the theme and specifies how much time is allowed for the improvisation. A student with a stop-watch keeps the time. The students on both teams have one minute to discuss the theme among themselves and to choose the player(s). The use of the native language is not permitted and the players must respect the theme. When both teams have finished, the audience votes. After each twenty-minute period the score is announced. After three periods, the team with the highest score is the winner.

The rules of the Improvisation League are flexible; they can be modified to suit students' interests and needs. And in this league, being in first place is much less important than enjoying the game.

REFERENCES

- Duke, Richard. (1974). *Creative dramatics*. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English.
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THE AUTHOR

Sylvie Normandin has completed her B.Ed. in Teaching English as a Second Language at McGill University.