



A person can acquire knowledge of grammar and syntax, and build vocabulary, but this in itself does not result in functionality. Knowing the mechanics to ride a bicycle or play a piano is insufficient to actually riding or performing. Knowing the mechanics of a language is necessary but insufficient toward its application in real life. Realistic experience develops proficiency between thought and action; the state of doing without thinking about doing. Conversation is fluid; often unpredictable. Improvisational exercises aim to reproduce this fluidity and unpredictability in the classroom, but outside the formality of the classroom. It seeks to reproduce the experience of real-world conversation through an approach both engaging and enjoyable, and where the only wrong answer is not to engage in the atmosphere of teamwork with fellow student. Each set of exercises, published in the four 2019 editions, is built around a theme. The first set lays the foundation through simple story development. The second set employs question and answer situations to develop conversational interplay. The third addresses precision. Finally, the fourth utilizes improvisational role playing to unite everything into an active, conversational format. The ultimate goal is to provide students with the personal confidence in their ability to readily employ the language they are learning in everyday situations anywhere in the world.

# Improvisational Techniques

## Group 4 of 4: Situational Improvisation

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This final group of exercises is the culmination of the prior three groups that explored techniques to build sentences, ask questions, state and understand directions, exchange comments and expand vocabulary. It is time to fully mirror the real world of spontaneous conversation.

A central source for these exercises is situational improvisational comedy, or simply improv comedy, a format created and developed in Chicago at The Second City Theater. Its basic format is to have actors ask the audience to place them in a situation by defining a place, a time, the characters and an initial circumstance from which they improvise and build the story, action and dialogue of the scene. This is pure conversation. Even when you have an idea about where a conversation is leading; in reality one never is certain what the other side of the conversation will say or ask next. It can follow logically, as anticipated, but at any moment it can veer to an entirely unexpected direction or topic.

A great conversationalist is first and foremost a great listener. To be fully engaged, students must focus on listening. Only by listening are they able to interject at any time with continuity and in character. Of course speed, vocabulary, sentence complexity, etc. varies with age and ability, but the first objective is to create a comfortable environment for the give and take of conversation by which to practice and polish ability at any level while building self-confidence through an ungraded, unstructured, fun lesson.

Your role is to observe from the rear to obtain insights about each student that are not reflected on written exams and reading exercises. Your notes reflect the actual application of their level of competence, indicating where they are strong and where they require assistance.

An important part of improv is that no one is alone. At least two, but typically three or four students are “on stage” as an ensemble. They form a team. They assist each other. You are there to guide only when needed by suggesting: *What would you do next? And... Why was that? Take that idea and tell us more.* Students and teachers with whom I have worked are somewhat hesitant at first; however, a couple minutes into the first exercise reveals to them that this can be a fun leaning experience. Let their imagination run. In fact, often it runs so well I must call an end to the exercise.

Improv requires nothing more than the participants, an opening scene and a place to perform. In addition to thin air, students are free to employ anything at hand as props. You are not limited to the classroom. Improv can be conducted on the school grounds, on school outings, even on the bus while traveling. At its best, with improv the classroom and teacher vanish and the students are learning by doing in a lesson of their design.

The following provides a sample of situations shown to be effective. Once familiar with the process, you and your students will begin to create more.

### Radio Sportscasters

This exercise presents the speaking students with the need for fast thinking on a topic that unfolds in front of them in real time. Furthermore, each must listen to coordinate their quick, descriptive reporting with the commentary of the other. Discuss the impressions students have of radio sportscasters:

- Lacking images, how do radio reporting styles, vocal deliveries and vocabularies differ from television?
- Is there a difference in the speed and energy of their delivery?
- Are some announcers recognizable by their characteristic style, voice or other trait? Does this add to your involvement with the action?
- What is the primary role of the “play-by-play” commentator?
- What is the primary role of the “color” commentator?
- How do these two commentators interact and support each other to make the broadcast informative and exciting? Do they sometimes disagree?

Two students are radio announcers. One calls the play-by-play; the other is the color commentator. Seat them in their “broadcast booth” to the side of the front of the class, facing the class. The open area is the field of

competition. Two other students take non-speaking roles as the contending athletes.

Ask the remaining class to suggest a one-on-one sports event:

- Tennis, badminton, hockey, boxing, karate, sumo wrestling, ice dancing, croquet have been interesting.
- The humorous and everyday also work well, such as a husband and wife competing in a household chores pentathlon: washing windows, vacuuming, making the beds, doing the laundry, changing diapers.

Importantly, the activity of the athletes is performed in slow motion. Though slow motion, the players need to accentuate their expressions and movements as they compete. Stress to the announcers that because this is radio, no matter how slow and possibly boring the action is on the field they need to employ very descriptive language filled with vivid adjectives and adverbs delivered quickly and energetically to exaggerate the real action before them. Have them think of the tension in announcing the final minutes of a tremendous final playoff of a tied World Cup match. Both must speak in about equal parts, even cutting in to report a fantastic action in the game or noting an important point. They can argue different opinions about the action and the players, plus ask questions of each other. The event usually ends when the athletes tire or the announcers call the game to an end. In some cases you need to call time out. Suggest to the “audience” that they close their eyes from time to time to imagine they are listening to the radio.

Afterward, discuss how well the athletes performed their roles. Did the sportscasters create an exciting atmosphere? Was their use of words descriptive of the action? What could have been added? Etc.

### Fairy Tale TV News Alert

This exercise employs well-known fairy tales to build descriptive and imaginative conversational storytelling through the question/response format of a breaking news alert. Discuss with the class their observations of TV news alerts: style, vocabulary, questioning techniques, energy in their voice, etc. Assemble a list of well-known fairy tales with several main characters:

- Three Little Pigs attacked, Big Bad Wolf in police custody
- Three Bears find home invaded, food eaten, beds disturbed and other damage by the little girl know as Goldilocks
- Sleeping Beauty and Prince Charming announce wedding; Wicked witch has other plans

- At the crash site of Santa's sleigh on Christmas Eve
- Aesop interviews Rabbit, Hare & coaches before the big race

Roles to be filled

- The main characters in the fairy tale
- An "on-the-scene" TV reporter
- Extra characters such as police, fireman, eyewitnesses, attorney can be added to expand dialog opportunities
- To maintain momentum, you need to select the right person to be the reporter
- To assist when needed, your role is that of the news anchor in the television studio that from time to time might add a leading question

Give students a couple minutes to assign roles and establish a starting story line. As in real life, characters can inject comments and opinions at any time. Viewpoints of the events can differ, over which they might argue. The reporter, with a prop for a microphone, opens with a brief description of the scene, the events that led to it and those he will interview. The reporter then begins questioning each participant, eyewitness and victim. The reporter freely moves among them, asking leading as well as factual questions. If the action slows, you step in from the studio with a question. The news alert ends when the reporter finds an excellent place to summarize, or from the television studio you alert the reporter that only 15 seconds are left to sign off.

### Example 1: The Three Little Pigs

Roles:

- Pigs: #1 (straw house), #2 (wood house), #3 (brick house)
- Wolf accused of the destruction
- Policeman who arrived late on the scene
- Attorney for the pigs who will sue the wolf for damages
- Witnesses with slightly different versions of the events

General flow of the news alert:

- The reporter describes the destruction of the straw and wooden houses, survival of the brick house, and those with him at the scene
- One by one the reporter questions the three little pigs about what happened, why they built homes of these materials, how they reacted, etc.
- Next the policeman, who arrived after the damage but apprehended the wolf as a suspect, gives his account

- The wolf is allowed to speak in his defense, how wolves are always the first to be blamed, etc.
- Eyewitnesses give their differing versions
- The attorney for the pigs describes a law suit against the wolf for destruction of property and endangerment
- The reporter moves back and forth between characters asking follow up questions and challenging some statements especially when they conflict
- The reporter returns viewers to the regularly scheduled program

### Example 2: Goldilocks and the Three Bears

Roles:

- Mama, papa and baby bear describe what they found
- Goldilocks describes her actions and tries to defend herself
- Policeman describes the call and apprehending Goldilocks
- Insurance agent details the cost of the damages

### Movie Pitch

The goal is to develop logical thinking in the use of language to create a convincing argument toward a desired result with defense against questions and criticisms. Give two students, a script writer and a director, a few moments to choose a movie idea and develop the sales points that will make the movie a big hit:

- The age and type of movie goer that is their prime target
- Why the plot, action, feel, etc. will draw that audience to see it
- The importance of special effects and camera techniques
- The type of music in the soundtrack to create the mood
- The starring roles and who they will cast
- The location where they want to film
- The amount of financing needed. Etc.

The script writer and director write their "sales points" on the board. Using these points they make their pitch to the group of producers – the remainder of the class. At any time during the sales pitch a producer can ask a question, state an opinion, make a suggestion or disagree. The writer and director immediately defend their vision, agree to the suggestion or try to compromise. After the completion of the pitch, a vote of the producers is taken to determine if they were convinced to support making the movie financially.

## Foreign Film Dubbing

Body language and visual cues are important in conversation. In this exercise advanced students are challenged to be creative, quick and use broad vocabulary to tell a story based only on visual input. Early learners also enjoy and learn from this exercise, doing so at slower pace and in more simplified dialog.

Four students are required at the front of the class.

- On one side, two “Actors” perform an expressive scene in a movie: an argument, a romance, spectators at a sports event, other. Speaking softly in gibberish, they use exaggerated movement, emotive voices and overstressed facial expressions to convey the message as in a melodramatic silent movie.
- On the other side two “Translators” do not act. They convert the action transpiring on the “silver screen” into dialog with their words and tones of voice transmitting the meaning and mood the scene.

Alternative Version: Search YouTube for short films or cartoons with two or three characters that are active and expressive. Assign a student to each character as a “Translator”. Provide information to each student to understand the personality and relationship of their character in the scene plus the time and situation. Place the “Translators” at a location where they and the class are able to see the projection screen. If the film is with sound, turn off the audio or disconnect the speakers. Play the scene and let them translate.

## TV Infomercial

This exercise stimulates imaginative use of language, idiom and metaphor to arouse interest in something, with a focus on communicating an idea toward taking action. Discuss with the class the goals and attributes of TV infomercials.

- TV infomercials are not simple advertising but are fast paced, energetic sales pitches designed to motivate someone to buy right then by calling “the number on your screen”
- The pitch highlights a particular, usually everyday home, garden, kitchen, cleaning, cosmetic or other problem
- It demonstrates how the product, with its unique features, brings a rapid and complete solution
- There are the famous lines “but wait, there’s more!” and “You must act now!” because this “special offer” is available “for a limited time only!”
- Try to locate an example on YouTube to show and discuss

Roles:

- Pitch-person: This is the host and primary sales person. This person generates excitement and maintains momentum
- Demonstrator: This person works with the Pitch-person by demonstrating the product, touting how easy it is to use and how amazingly it works
- Testimonials: One or two people who relate their story of woe by exaggerating the problem, then provide glowing reports about the success of product
- Live studio audience... the class: During the program they are free to inject oohs, ahs, wows and comments like “tell me more!”, “how did it do that!” and “what else can it do!”

The goal is to deliver an exciting television ad for a fantastic new product to drive a large volume of calls to purchase.

Write a few product suggestions on the board:

- Self-pedaling and steering bicycle
- School books that do their own homework
- Glasses that prevent the teacher from calling on you
- Money-generating wallet

Ask students for additional product ideas, adding them to the list on the board. Choose students to form a team. They choose or suggest a product. Give them some time to assign roles, develop ideas and scout the room for props. Stress that this is live television. They must add their lines quickly – there is no “dead time” on TV. When a stoppage occurs, as a member of the live audience you can coach them forward with phrases like...

- “Does it have something else to offer?” “What else can it do?”
- “Is it easy to use?” “Is it really that inexpensive?”
- “What is the number to call?”

## Story From a Bag

During a typical conversation, new topics, pieces of information or redirections of thought arise at any time. This exercise uses random insertions of unknown props to test the ability of students to react quickly to changes during a conversation.

In an opaque bag assemble a collection of highly varied, unusual items that are open to a range of interpretation in a story. They should not be too large because all must fit loosely within the bag. A minimum of 10 to 15 is recommended. Suggestions: comb, toothbrush, roll of toilet paper, sock, pen, deck of cards, flashlight, ring of keys, bar of chocolate, can of soup. Alternatively, draw one image on each of 15 to 30 small cards: Insects,

animals, flowers, plants, buildings, vehicles, astronomical objects, tools, business logos, etc. These cards are either pulled from a bag or placed face down on a table to be selected randomly by the participants.

Three to five students form a conversational group at the front of the class with the bag or cards within easy reach of all.

Describe the rules of the exercise:

- Ask the class to suggest the characters, the relationships between them, a time, a place, and an opening topic of conversation
- Explain that the players will engage in active conversation based on this scenario, then as new information drawn from the bag or by flip of a card is revealed, that speaker must incorporate it immediately into the dialog
- New information is added when you randomly call the name of the next student to reach in the bag or pick a card for an item that they show the class
- The new item can change the direction of the conversation, but it must somehow relate to what preceded
- Once the person who drew the item has entered it to the conversation, all the other players can use it to further develop the story
- The conversation continues until they run out of items

## Summary

Within its few and simple rules, no need for a specific place to perform, the use of anything at hand as a prop, and an open imagination, improv is able to create a vast array of lessons of differing levels of ease or complexity to challenge the student plus assist you in gauging their proficiency and progress.

These well-tested examples illustrate the variety of scenarios to be utilized, upon which you have no limit to devise additional situations and plots. The flexibility and adjustability of improve allows you to meet alternative needs or objectives. As the students perform at the front and forget they are in class, you fade into the rear to observe them in their more natural condition of working with the language they are learning. The notes you take are a strong adjunct to their formal lessons and exams.

Finally, it is a fun experience – for you as well as the students. And there is no better learning experience than one that is enjoyable.

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