

Improvisational Games and More

This past April around tax season time, I was fortunate enough to be awarded a travel grant from the CATESOL Education Foundation to attend the San Diego Spring Workshop. Traveling from Los Angeles to San Diego, I was on a mission. My goal? Learn all that I could about how improvisation would enable me to bring rigor, readiness and fun to my ESL classroom comprised of adults from Israel, Russia, Iran, Korea, Mexico, Germany, and Guatemala.

At the onset of the workshop, I learned about the origins of improvisation, and how it organically complements the curriculum espoused by EFL and ESL instructors. During the Great Depression, Viola Spolin (an actress and educator working for the Works Progress Administration) taught immigrant children English. Viola integrated games (used in theatre to build one's stage presence and confidence) all throughout her curriculum. She noted that when non-English speakers (in this case, children of immigrants) played games there was less time for them to be fearful (of interacting socially), less time for them to be judgmental of the other students, and less time for them to harbor either self-doubt or self-criticism. The pedagogical goal entailed building the student's ability to concentrate and focus on the task at hand – namely, the game.

As a departmental chair, I had initiated "improv night" programming on a college campus for aspiring actors, writers, and directors who were native English speakers, and had also frequented comedy clubs and improvisational theatre in Hollywood. Hence, I was no stranger to improvisation and stand-up comedy. As a spectator and workshop participant, I know all too well that laughter is a universal language. As a pedagogue teaching Mass Communication and Public Speaking to native speakers or Advanced English to immigrant adults, I truly relish the act of getting a student to smile. Why? The process of smiling ensures that the student's facial muscles are relaxed and primed for pronunciation exercises, tongue twisters, conversation, role-playing and interactive dialogues. A smile on a student's face lets me know that the student is ready to "play."

Throughout the workshop, all the participants were introduced to a plethora of games for beginners, intermediate and advanced ESL or EFL students. I had three favorite games – "Mingle, Mingle," "What Are You Doing?" and "Taxi." In my eyes, "Mingle, mingle" is a great icebreaker. For this game, the students are adorned with name tags (with only their first names) and walk around the room meeting and greeting their fellow classmates. If I want to have a discussion focusing on global greetings, I might invite the students to extend their hands or arms (depending on their comfort level) and mimic how they would greet their fellow classmates in their respective countries (in accord with social mores). This minor adjustment to the game, I find, empowers the student to simultaneously become a teacher or ambassador or translator of their *own* culture. The game teaches them how to intermingle socially and has them provide valuable cultural insight about social greetings (including non-verbal communication like bowing one's head).

The “What Are You Doing?” game requires a bit of creativity. For example, the ESL or EFL teacher starts the game by engaging in an act of some sort – at the front of the classroom – and the students are lined up. The first student in the line asks the teacher the following question: “what are you doing?” The teacher, for example, might respond “I’m flying a kite.” The first student takes the teacher’s spot – at the front of the classroom – and the second student in line asks the first student the following question: “what are you doing?” and so forth. For my class, I have adapted the game to accommodate the comfort levels of my adult students. I have learned that when I engage in interactive dialogues with them and the book calls for each student to create their own main clause in response to an “if” (or conditional clause), at times there is a brief lapse. In order to pre-empt a lapse of sorts, I simply provide the students with a “walkthrough” of plausible actions and movements (before the game). After a while, the students will gradually gain the confidence to create their own responses for the “What are You Doing Game?” and then the pre-game “walkthrough” would no longer be necessary.

The “Taxi” game of all the games presented at the San Diego workshop was my all-time favorite. Why? It’s truly engaging and allows students to hone their nascent improvisational skills. This game requires four chairs – arranged in two rows of two chairs – to simulate a taxicab environment. At the onset, the taxicab is full. There are three passengers and one driver. When a taxicab passenger decides to end their ride, they provide the taxicab driver and the other passengers with a reason for their departure. Some examples? The passenger might blurt out that they are late for a meeting and forgot their power point presentation at home. Others might announce that they are worried that the traffic might make them late for their social engagements. This game really focused on teaching the students how to communicate – in a verbal and non-verbal sense. It also taught the students empathy and required the student to improvise and explain the underlying rationale for their taxicab departure or entrance. The game teaches students how to interact in social settings and let their guard down so that they may focus on the notion of “being in the (social) moment”.

By the end of my travels from Los Angeles to San Diego, I had learned about various improvisational games to introduce to my class of adult immigrants. As I reflect upon my train ride from San Diego to Los Angeles, I realize that the CATESOL San Diego workshop provided me with a real sense of community. (Figure 1) It was truly awe-inspiring to have the ability to be in a room with sixty-three fellow ESL and EFL teachers (sixty-two other workshop participants and one workshop facilitator) and professionally intermingle, swap lesson plans and share “teachable moments”. As a recipient of the CATESOL travel grant, I was able to partake in professional development with my fellow colleagues on best practices in teaching English as a second and/or foreign language. At the end of the day, it was abundantly clear to me that every workshop participant had a sense of belongingness to the CATESOL community. (Figure 2) I am forever indebted to the CATESOL Education Foundation for sparking my professional development odyssey.

Dr. Nancy Kwang Johnson
CATESOL Education Foundation Travel Grant Recipient (April 2019)



Figure 1 Dr. Johnson with presenter, Linda Hargrove



Figure 2 Dr. Johnson giving her workshop session