Improvisation Activities
Workshop: *Improvise! Risk-Taking and Play for Enhanced Language Production*
Presenter: Noella Olson

1. **Finding Cohesive Flow**
Introduction
Begin by demonstrating a common activity such as holding a mixing bowl in one arm and stirring vigorously with the other arm. Ask for two volunteers to add something to your movement. After demonstrating, lead the class in a discussion; what did they observe about the scene you created? Talk about saying "Yes", and adding a new movement that builds cohesion and flow.
Note: If the class in no larger than 16 students, warm-up can be conducted as one group. Only one person should lead out.
Actors must remain committed to their individual movement. Do not change it!

Doing the Scene
 Students will work in groups of 3-4 to complete a scene. (Groups shouldn't be larger than 6 for small group work.)
The rest of the class is the audience. They will observe and give feedback.
Instructions for Actors-
1. You will work in your group to complete a scene.
2. One person steps into a movement/action that you know well.
3. Others add to the movement. Keep it going. Find cohesive flow!
4. Say, "Yes" to one another and add to the scene.
Instructions for Audience-
1. Watch for flow and cohesion.
2. Are they saying yes to one another?
3. Are they adding something new? Is the scene growing and moving? Does it tell a story?
Time Frame: Each scene should take no longer than a minute.
Evaluation: Audience will observe for cohesive flow.
Continue by switching groups.

Variation 1: No Need to Name It- Cohesive Flow
This time students can choose any opening movement. It doesn't have to represent a recognized activity. *This is pure movement for the sake of movement.*
Variation 2: Montage (*A composite picture made by combining several separate pictures.)*
Instruction: In groups of 3 – 4, one person chooses a pose and freezes.
Each subsequent member will add on. The task is to find cohesion in the final scene.
Evaluation: Audience will evaluate for cohesiveness.
Time frame: No more than 1 minute/group.
Rationale: Develops collaboration, risk-taking, awareness of non-verbal communication, group comity and builds trust. This is a proven effective warm-up for subsequent speaking activities.

2. **Gibberish- Converse With a Partner**
Gibberish: an unintelligible language, speech that doesn't represent commonly understood symbols, a made-up language.

Instruction: Direct each student to converse with a partner in gibberish as though making perfect sense to one another.
Keep the Focus: *Use regular speech patterns. Vary your tone, sounds &"words". Use facial expression and body language. Keep the gibberish flowing!*
Time Frame: No more than 2 minutes.

Variation 1: Gibberish Demonstration
Instruction: One person speaking gibberish will sell or demonstrate something to the audience. The player must really *pitch* to the audience. Be convincing!
(As the demonstration develops, the audience may be moved to interact in English at times.)
Keep the Focus: *Focus on your audience. Share your gibberish! Pitch it! Look at your audience; connect!*
Evaluation: Were you moved to buy something? Did you lean in to hear more? Did the speaker connect with you? Draw you in?

Variation 2: Gibberish Interpreter/Interpreting a Lecture
Instruction: Work with a partner. One person is an "expert" on a topic and gives a lecture in gibberish. The second person is the interpreter who delivers the lecture in English. The "expert" must pause for the interpreter's translation. The interpreter reflects the sound and meaning spontaneously in translation. As the lecture develops, both "expert" and interpreter will follow one another's suggestions to make the scene believable.
Keep the Focus: *Interpreter, show confidence that you know what is being said! "Expert", take suggestions from the interpreter and communicate by tone, volume and body language. Be a team!*
Time Frame: No more than two minutes.
Switch roles and repeat the improvisation.
Evaluation: Audience will determine whether the lecture and interpretation seemed authentic. Were they convinced?
Rationale: Speaking in gibberish places communicative focus on body language, intonation, stress and volume. **Variation 2** also places focus on turn taking, and a variation of negotiation for meaning. These exercises invite partner and group collaboration and cooperation. Listening skills are also developed.

Spolin, V. (1999). *Improvisation for the Theater* (Third Edition ed.). Northwestern University Press.

3. **Peter Piper**
Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers,
A peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked.
If Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers,
How many pecks of pickled peppers did Peter Piper pick?

Introduction: Playing with Peter Piper never fails to bring smiles, engagement, group comity and much language production. My students never tire of it! (I first discovered its effectiveness while experimenting in a graduate class.) Once you begin using Peter Piper for improvisation, you will discover ways of playing to meet targeted learning goals. Have fun!
Instruction: 1. This is a whole group activity. Teacher/Director leads out with the verse. (Speed, volume and stress should be altered to suit your class. Instruct students to simply listen to the language to allow initial receptive flow of sounds and rhythm.)
2. Next invite students to repeat after you (or with you depending on language proficiency and familiarity with the verse). You may repeat steps 1 & 2 as many times as interest, enjoyment and need dictate.
3. Now play with the verse: Begin by presenting a list of Wh?'s one at a time. Encourage your students to "not think" but to answer spontaneously. If necessary, give an example, *Who is Peter? He's my uncle/a farmer/a stranger, etc.*
Keep the Focus: *This activity should be conducted at a fast pace. The teacher/director must be high-energy, animated and encouraging while drawing out authentic language; play!*
Time Frame: No more than 5 minutes.
Evaluation: Is authentic language produced? Are students learning to listen and respond for pragmatic comprehension? Are they offering new ideas spontaneously? Are they having fun?

Variation: Peter Piper - Building Character/Motive/Scene
Instruction: Begin with choral repetition of *Peter Piper* to catch flow and focus. Using Peter go through the Wh?'s to build character/motive/scene.
Let's get our imaginations primed by telling details about Peter Piper. **Build on one another's suggestions say, "Yes, and …".**
   • Who is Peter?
   • What is he doing? (Describe in detail.)
   • What do those pickled peppers look like/taste like/feel like/smell like?
   • How is he picking the pickled peppers?
   • Where is he?
   • Why is he picking pickled peppers?
Keep the Focus: *Don't get bogged down! Don't think; flow! Say, "Yes" and … build a scene together.* (Keep the ideas flowing; don't allow this activity to get stuck.)
Time Frame: 10 minutes
Evaluation: The class will have created a cohesive story based on Peter Piper.
A spontaneous flow of ideas and collaboration should be evident.

Rationale: Repetition of alliteration is an excellent warm-up for further language production. Students develop skills for pragmatic and communicative competence as well as practice with creating authentic language. The **variation** develops basic skills for further improvisations involving scene, character and motive.

Note: There are endless possibilities for using Peter Piper for improvisation. For example, try asking a student to lead out with the first line then others will spontaneously comment until someone moves to the second line. Work through the entire verse in this manner. *This is a challenging activity that requires much practice and scaffolding before true flow is captured.* ***Always keep Peter Piper improvisations fast-paced and high energy!***

4. **Last Word: First word**

Introduction: Demonstration with 2-3 volunteers. "Give me a sentence." Respond by using the last word of the previous sentence to make a new sentence. Repeat with 2nd and 3rd volunteers, always asking the class, "What am I doing?" Often, even more advanced students will miss the pattern because they're focusing on other things.

Instruction: For a less advanced class, begin with a small group or partner warm-up. Students will warm up with a partner or group of 3. The first student will say a short sentence. The next student will begin his/her sentence with the last word of the previous student's sentence. No added words are allowed, only the exact first word though exceptions may be acceptable at first.

Group Exercise

Students stand in a circle. (No more than 12-16 participants in each group.) Follow the instructions above.

Keep the Focus: *Listen carefully! Be sure to use exactly the last word you heard. Don't think; let your sentence flow!*

Time Frame: No more than 8- 10 minutes, depending on the size and proficiency level of the group.

Evaluation: Did we produce sentences that made sense while keeping the flow around the circle?

Rationale: Develops confidence in risk taking and listening skills. Develops flexibility with sentence structure and word form variations. Develops skills for responding coherently.

Note: This improvisation can be quite challenging even for native English speakers. Be sensitive to student needs and confidence levels. It may be appropriate to allow students *to pass* the first few times around. **Be encouraging but insist on sticking to the rules of the game!** Keep it moving; don't get bogged down!

Variation 1: Story Around the Circle

Instruction: Students stand in a full group circle. (The group should be no larger than 12-16.) The group will tell a collaborative story. One person offers the first line. Moving to either left or right, everyone adds a line to the story. The last person in the circle creates the ending.

Keep the Focus: *Remember to speak loudly and clearly. Don't think! Let your ideas flow! Say, "Yes" to the idea that is offered and add to it! Don't get bogged down; keep moving! Only add one sentence at a time.*

Time Frame: No more than 5 minutes, depending on the size and proficiency level of the group.
Evaluation: Did we create a coherent and cohesive story? Did we collaborate effectively?
Rationale: Consideration of different accents, grammar and risk-taking apply, plus student need to negotiate for meaning, listen and add a new idea that moves the story forward. This exercise is an effective preparation for writing tasks requiring coherence and cohesion. Being imaginative in L2 is a challenge!

Variation 2: ABC Around the Circle
Instruction:
 Group stands in a circle. The first person speaks a sentence. The first word must begin with the letter A. The next person (moving to right or left) continues the next sentence with the letter B. This pattern continues around the circle to the end of the alphabet. If someone breaks the ABC pattern, they must drop out. Continue with the remaining players.
Keep the Focus: *Move quickly! Be sure to follow the ABC pattern.*
Time Frame: No more than 5 minutes, depending on size and proficiency level of the group.
Evaluation: Did we create original sentences while following the rules?
Rationale: This exercise develops listening skills, spontaneity, comity and focus.
This is a good foundational exercise for beginning level students and is a challenge for Literacy students. It is often too easy for intermediate- advanced levels but is easily adapted for increased challenge.

Remember to develop trust with your students. They must feel safe. Be encouraging, while challenging them to take risks! Improvisation is about having fun and playing with language. You must also be a risk-taker and willing to play along with your students.

"You learn more about a person in an hour of play than in a lifetime of conversation."
 - Plato

"Just because it's scary, doesn't mean it's dangerous." - Greg Hohn