



IMPROVISATIONAL COMEDY FOR TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Grade: High School

Teacher:

Maureen Breen

Artist:

Ralph Covert - Lookingglass Theatre

Academic Content and Learning Skills:

Foreign Language: French

Arts Content:

Drama/Theater

Overview

High school students are taught improvisational sketch comedy skills as a way of developing strong conversational foreign language skills. Students demonstrate their skills through performances that serve as final exams.

Research and Inquiry

How does one "think on one's feet" in a foreign language?

Classroom Goals Addressed by Project

Foreign Language:

Students will perform improvised comedy sketches in French. Students will incorporate specific vocabulary and grammar skills into their scenes, and use their French language skills in a flexible manner. Students will demonstrate the ability to comprehend and respond appropriately using their French, manipulating the language to meet their communication goals.

Theatre:

Students will perform their sketches incorporating appropriate drama skills, such as the use of their Actor's Tools (mind, body, and voice), maintaining an open stage picture, and projecting their voices. Students will incorporate improvisation skills, such as supporting their scene partners, remaining in character, building and heightening their scene partners' ideas, and working as a team to create and perform improvisational comedy scenes.

State Goals Addressed by Project

Foreign Language:

As a result of this unit, students will 1) understand oral communication in French, 2) interact in French in a variety of settings, and 3) use French to present information, concepts and ideas for a variety of purposes and in a variety of settings.

Theatre:

As a result of this unit, students will:

- 1) Analyze a work for technical elements of acting;
- 2) Analyze a work for technical elements of playwriting and scene structure;
- 3) Demonstrate skills used in the creation and performance of theater, and;
- 4) Demonstrate the behavioral skills necessary to learn and contribute productively as individuals and as members of a group.

What Resources were used

- Body
- Mind
- Voice
- Props
- Many of the improvisational theater activities used in this unit are described in more detail in Viola Spolin's very useful book "Improvisation for the Theater"

Key Words/Vocabulary that are most important to this unit

- Improvisation
- Stage picture
- Character
- Concentration
- Focus
- Articulation
- Pronunciation

Brief Step-by-Step daily/weekly lesson plan for this unit

Day One:

Introduction:

Discussion of the relationship between improvisation and foreign language use, and how much more able one is to summon up a foreign language when there is a need for it (for example, when Ralph has been in France and was very hungry, the French needed for getting food was found.)

Warm-up:

Concentration and group responsiveness exercise: "Zip Zap Zop". Students are in a circle, and by using eye contact and clapping their hands towards another player, pass the words "zip," "zap," and "zop" back and forth around the circle.

Key lessons:

Paying attention, being engaged, getting loose, and communicating the idea: "Hey, you're next."

Discussion:

What did this exercise ask of you to do it well? How does this relate to learning a foreign language?

Activity #2:

Mirror exercise. Students pair up, and mirror each others' movements as if in a mirror. Emphasis is placed on being quiet, focused, and on neither student leading or following all the time, but on sharing the process.

Key lessons:

Paying attention, being engaged, knowing your intent, physically listening.

Discussion:

How was this communication? What limits were placed on communication?

Activity #3:

Circle conjugation game. Students return to the circle as in "Zip Zap Zop," and play a similar game using French words. For instance, they may conjugate "avoir" or list colors, or any other vocabulary or grammar category.

Discussion:

How was this harder? Why is it more fun? What level of language knowledge does it require?

Outcome:

Students will understand that language exists to facilitate communication- that there is a difference between learning the French language and communicating in French. Communicating is the goal.

Day Two:

Warm-up:

Students circulate freely through the space, not making any contact with each other. Next step: Students are asked to make eye contact as they pass each other. Next step: Students are asked to each create their own non-verbal signature, and greet each other using their own unique gesture. Next step: Students are asked to exchange gestures, taking on the other person's gesture and letting go of their own, then taking on the next one which is exchanged, and so on.

Discussion:

How many gestures did you go through? How is this communication?

Key lessons:

Loosening up, establishing the expectation of appropriate behavior in a non-desk-bound activity, encouraging create expression.

Activity #2:

Creating an Ideal Space. Ask the students to find their own place on the floor, anywhere in the classroom. Let them know that they need to be comfortable. Dim the lights. Ask the students to close their eyes, and go to their own personal ideal place. Ask them to experience the place in as rich detail as they can, using as many of their senses as they can, and to enjoy being there. After about four minutes, give them a warning that they have a minute or so to come back, and to return to the class and open their eyes when

they're back. Ask students to share the details of their ideal spaces, encouraging them to elaborate on specific details and sense memories. Next, ask the class to choose one of their classmates' ideal places, and create it as a group. Let them know they can be anything they want, be it a breeze, a sound, a person, an object, or whatever they want. Ask them to do the exercise in complete silence, without planning what they intend to be. Repeat this exercise several times- you will find the students becoming capable of pulling a scene together very quickly by the second or third example. Then ask them to add sound effects. The next step is adding a story line- each specific step of the story needs to be suggested by the student, acknowledged by the teacher/artist, then acted by a student within the scene. For instance, the teacher says, "Okay, what happens next?" A student calls out, "The mailman arrives!" The teacher says, "Okay, I need a mailman." Several students volunteer. The teacher says, "Susan is the mailman." Susan stops being a tree, becomes the mailman, and knocks on the door. The teacher says, "Okay, what happens next?" And so on. Even when students make absurd suggestions like "the mailman is hit by an asteroid," incorporate the suggestion, and then ask, "Okay, what happens next?" Students learn very quickly that suggestions that don't move the action forward aren't much fun.

Discussion:

What actor's tools did you use to create these scenes? (Mind, body, voice) How do these relate to foreign language use?

Key lessons:

A deeper understanding of the students as people from the ideal spaces they share, a reinforcement of the idea that this is a very different by very fun way of concentrating on schoolwork, and an awareness of the actor's tools.

Day Three:

Warm up:

Bouncing the voice off the walls. Each student says their name loudly and quietly, listening for the very quiet slap-back from the walls which tells them their voice is loud enough to fill the room.

Discussion:

The volume you would project your voice at in a conversational situation is different than the volume you would use in front of a group. Bouncing your voice off the walls gives you a helpful measure of whether your voice is loud enough to fill a room.

Outcome:

Understanding of the importance of projecting your voice, and how to measure when you are doing so.

Activity #2:

Basic improv in English. The class plays a game of "freeze tag," where two students act out an improvised scene, and when another student says "freeze," they freeze. The new student taps one of the other two on the shoulder, and starts a new scene based only on the body positions of the students. For instance, the first scene be a guy buying a car, and reaching out his hand to take the car-keys, and the new scene may start with him

reaching out his hand to shake hands.

Discussion:

When did the scenes work best? When did the scenes not work so well? What could you do to improve your scenes? Question both the students doing the scenes as well as the students who do the scenes. This encourages them to both analyze their scenes as well as to put their observations into practice.

Outcome:

Understanding of the fundamental principles of improv: supporting your partners, paying attention, flexibility.

Day Four:

Activity:

Improv in English: Call the students up in groups of two and have them create improvised scenes in English. Discuss with them the basic rules of improv, using examples from scenes they are creating.

Key lessons:

Cheat your body to the audience (keeping an open stage picture,) bounce your voice off the walls (proper volume for performance), match and heighten the absurdity and imagination of your partner (students need to be encouraged to support each others' ideas, and flourish when allowed to), always support your stage partner (this builds deep teamwork as they realize that when they are on stage with a partner they have only each other to rely on), never say "no" to your stage partner's choices, and do not use pre-conceived ideas, but be open to what actually happens.

Discussion:

What worked in this scene, and why? What limited it? What could you/they have done differently?

Madame Breen created the following reminders to reinforce theatre skills:

1) Using the acrostic "C-O-M-E-D-Y":

- Cheat your body to the audience!
- Off the wall your voice must bounce!
- Match and heighten the absurdity & imagination of your partner!
- Everyone needs a supportive partner, be one!
- Do not use pre-conceived ideas.
- Yes, not No, is the word to use!

2) Use the phrase "Be Very Marvelous" to remember the actor's tools:

- Body
- Voice
- Mind

Days Five and Six:

Same as Day Four, making sure all the students get a chance to participate and learn.

Day Seven:

Transition into doing improvisations in French. Students will be intimidated at first, but will gain confidence as they succeed.

Discussion:

What makes this more difficult? The lack of fluency in French makes the ideas less creative, the students are forced to think about what they can say, not what they want to say. The rhythm of the scenes is slower and less spontaneous, etc.

Outcomes:

Students learn that when improvising in French, the basic improv skills are even more important (very instance, it is very important for your scene partner to speak clearly and loudly.) Students gain confidence in their ability to combine improv and French, but realize it is a big challenge.

Assessments Used for this project

Day Eight:

The test. Students are assigned general outlines of scenes, specific usage requirements, and are allowed five minutes to review or research the vocabulary and grammar they will use, and to sketch out a general outline of their scene. Students do not have time to script or memorize their scene, and so are forced to do it using their improv skills and using their internalized French knowledge. Being allowed to prepare a general outline and specific vocabulary and grammar allows them to enter the scene confident of where they are going, and to focus on having fun, being creative, and using their French in an active and flexible manner.

Students are graded using the following rubric created by Madame Breen and Ralph Covert:

- Excellent-3
- Good-2
- Need Improvement-1
- No Effort-0

DRAMA SKILLS:

1. Focus, Concentration, Staying in Character
2. Supporting Partner/s
3. Sufficient Volume
4. Facing Audience, Open Stage Picture
5. Starting Performance within 30 seconds of being called
6. Fun factor

FRENCH SKILLS:

1. Language easy to understand: articulation, pronunciation
2. Use of new vocabulary
3. Six full sentences in French per actor
4. Scene performed in French from start to finish
5. Appropriate level of difficulty (grammar, etc.)

6. Grammar (correctness)
7. Title given in French
8. Scene ending dramatic and clear ("La Fin")

SCORING GUIDE:

38-36 = A

35-34 = B

33-32 = C

31-29 = D

28 and below = F

Comments/Reflections from Teachers, Artists, Students, Parents

"I was surprise and delighted to see that many students who normally do not actively participate in class shone during this unit, and demonstrated real incorporation of conversational French skills. Who'd have thought I'd have students actually looking forward to their final French exam?"

-Teacher