

The Pedagogy of Improvisation

A DOUBLE PLAN B PROJECT  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA  
BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

Accepted as a Double Plan B Project:



April 28, 2011

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Project Supervisor

Date

*Language is a process of free creation; its laws and principles are fixed, but the manner in which the principles of generation are used is free and infinitely varied. Even the interpretation and use of words involves a process of free creation (Chomsky, 1973).*

## **Introduction**

This paper is written to address the needs of second-language (L2) teachers who wish to develop their skills in providing free activities for learners' L2 speaking skills. In Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) *free* lies at one end of the controlled/free continuum.<sup>1</sup> I assume for purposes of this paper that I am addressing language teachers who subscribe to the basic premises of CLT, and that classroom instruction will include activities across the controlled / free continuum.

In looking at activities on this continuum, CLT encourages teachers to place a greater emphasis on activities at the free end of the spectrum than was the case with earlier methods. Current methodology in the West leans heavily toward CLT. It has been advocated for more than a generation, and there has been an attempt to transition from earlier form focused (controlled) methods, such as Audiolingual Method (ALM), to a combination of form focused activities and free activities. Nonetheless, teachers still know far more about controlled than free activities. Considerable time and space are allocated to controlled speaking activities in textbooks and methods classes; much less attention is usually paid to speaking activities on the free end of the spectrum. This can result in teachers feeling better prepared to implement controlled speaking

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<sup>1</sup> In his analysis of methods Ellis (2002) distinguishes “Production can be *controlled* or *free*. This distinction reflects a continuum rather than a dichotomy” (p 159).

activities than free ones. My goal in this paper is not to eliminate controlled activities, but to improve teachers' skills for implementing free activities.

Improvisation may be the freest of free activities. Improvisation is part of practice and pedagogy in the arts: performing, literary and visual. Each of these fields has practitioners of improvisation, and teachers who specialize in teaching improvisation. There are principles common to the teaching of improvisation which are shared across these disciplines. This paper defines improvisation and articulates these principles.

Improvisation is also part of speaking any language, including second-languages. Language learners *must* learn to improvise with their new language. The ability to improvise is also a skill needed for teaching, and a teacher's need for this skill is compounded when teaching subjects that *require* improvisation by learners, such as L2 speaking skills. The development of improvisational skills is not adequately addressed in L2 teacher training, nor in L2 teaching methods. This paper examines the intersection of improvisation and second-language acquisition.

How can teacher educators best encourage this teacher growth? Ken Wilber, (2000) philosopher and founder of the Integral Institute, believes that there is a consensus among developmental psychologists, such as Maslow, who ponder how people grow. A number of factors facilitate transformation. Developing humans first need to feel safe and comfortable where they are. Once there, we need to feel that we need more, so a kind of dissonance sets in, resulting in willingness to let go of old or present ways of doing things. (*I believe that some of us are at this point in the language teaching field*). Then we need to develop insight to see what is needed to move forward. (*I hope that this paper will lead to such insight*). This can then lead to an opening to a new way of proceeding, (*I will suggest that here.*) which has the possibility of

allowing for improved results in many dimensions. The perspective I offer may be of no use to a teacher who feels competent, and successful, and does not feel a need to be more effective, or does not feel that their learners have needs that could be better met. My perspective will also be of no use to teachers who believe that memorizing rules and words is the sole path to successful language acquisition. For teachers seeking to be more successful, and more comfortable, in creating and implementing activities on the free end of the continuum in a CLT classroom, the pedagogy of improvisation described here offers a way to proceed.

This paper proposes the application of the principles of the pedagogy of improvisation derived from the arts to the domain of second-language pedagogy, specifically, to effectively enticing learners to improvise with language. Perhaps more importantly, I also propose strategies for developing improvisational skills for L2 teachers. There are many possible ways to begin to learn to improvise, and there is no single best way for teachers to begin. I suggest each teacher start on the path they find most attractive. One can explore improvisation in dance, theater, music, creative writing, and/or the visual arts. One can begin alone, or with a group. Those who feel shy about starting in the arts are presented other options. Learning to improvise benefits teachers in their classrooms and beyond. These skills are helpful, and critical, for teachers cannot teach their learners to improvise if teachers do not know how to improvise.

## **Literature Review**

### **What is *Improvisation*?**

For a definition of *improvisation*, I turn first to Wikipedia, a source rooted more in the spirit of the free end of the continuum than say the Oxford English Dictionary, for a definition of the

term: “*Improvisation* is the practice of acting, singing, talking and reacting, of making and creating, in the moment and in response to the stimulus of one's immediate environment and inner feelings. This can result in the invention of new thought patterns, new practices, new structures or symbols, and/or new ways to act” (Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Improvisation>)

A second definition of improvisation comes from a lecture-demonstration/performance *Dance Talk* by Contactworks Dance Collective,<sup>2</sup> which was performed for elementary school audiences and recorded (1979 citation Scully, Personal papers, Tretter archive, UM), the dancers explain:

dancer a: "What you are seeing now is an unplanned dance, an improvisation. It's our way of having a dance conversation."

dancer b: "When you have a conversation with someone you just make it up as you go along."

dancer a: "Yeah, you don't plan what you're going to say ahead of time."

dancer b: "In dance, we call that improvisation, or improv for short."

dancer a: "There are other dances where every move is planned out ahead of time. That's called choreography."

dancer b: "Choreography is like literature. Once it is created, it stays the same, like words in a book."

It is significant that both of these definitions include improvisation in the arts and in language. Improvisation is part of practice and pedagogy in the arts, performing, literary and

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<sup>2</sup> I have spent over three decades developing expertise in improvisation in the arts, primarily in theater and dance. In the late 1970's I was part of Contactworks, a company that used contact improvisation as the foundation of its movement vocabulary. More on this in the **Personal Background** section.

visual. This will be elaborated on further in the section **How does improvisation function in the arts, and how is it taught?** Improvisation in human language will be considered in the section **What is the role of improvisation in L2 speech production and acquisition?**

Combining the above definitions, our starting point in developing a working definition is: *Improvisation is creating, in the moment and in response to the stimulus of one's immediate environment and inner feelings.*

To move toward a more comprehensive definition of improvisation, let's consider a definition from Georgette Schmeer, professional dance educator: "Improvising is an experience common to all. It has the connotation of putting something together creatively, generally without much warning, in response to an immediate need.....that which is free, spontaneous, unpremeditated, informal, impulsive, unrehearsed, unplanned, not thought-out" (Schmeer, 1994, p. 3). Schmeer's definition is helpful as it expands on the concept of "in the moment" from Wikipedia.

With this consideration, my definition expands to: *Improvisation is creating, in the moment and in response to the stimulus of one's immediate environment and inner feelings, something which is free, spontaneous, unpremeditated, informal, impulsive, unrehearsed, unplanned, not thought-out.*

But Schmeer's definition is limited in that it may not allow us to distinguish between improvisation and other non-improvised creative works. The distinction is crucial here. Let us compare the creative moment in an improvised performance and the creative moment of a performance which is not improvised. The creative moment is the source of all original material, but it operates in a different time relationship in these two performances. Stephen

Nachmanovitch (1990) describes the distinction between these performances clearly in *Free Play*, to my knowledge the only comprehensive examination of improvisation across disciplines by an academic. Nachmanovitch has a PhD in the history of consciousness, and is an historian, educator and musician. In his view, the entire improvised performance is one continuous creative moment, lasting the length of the performance. It is generated by the performers. The intention in an improvisational performance is to create something for that moment alone, that will never happen again, and will not involve a subsequent editing process. It requires the creative moment to be extended for the length of the improvisation.

A performance that does not do this, I will call a refined work. Refined work is generated over time in rehearsals, an interplay between creative moments and time spent editing and reshaping what was created in those moments. The creative moments may involve the performers, but this is not required. The focus of the rehearsals is the establishment and repetition of the specific forms that will be expressed so they become fixed. This distinction is significant and has been articulated by music educators such as Bailey (2007), Schlicht (2007) and Thomson (2007). The intention is to refine the accumulated material into a set form that can endure over time. A refined work requires numerous, generally much briefer, creative moments, which are not required to be generated in one continuous time frame.

Our definition of improvisation needs to be expanded to include the notion that improvisation in performance requires sustaining the creative moment for the length of the performance. It also needs to require the creation of the material by the performers in the moment of performance. Nachmanovitch (1990) regards these as significant differences between an improvised performance and a performance of refined work.

With these considerations, I can now expand my definition to: *Improvisation is creating, in the moment and in response to the stimulus of one's immediate environment and inner feelings, something which is free, spontaneous, unpremeditated, informal, impulsive, unrehearsed, unplanned, not thought-out. The act of creation is synchronous with its performance. The performers of the improvisation are its creators.*

As a final step in defining improvisation it is helpful to consider creativity, a term found in virtually every definition of improvisation. *Novelty* is part of the definition of creativity by Pfenninger, a neuroscientist, and Shubik, a visual artist and writer, in their collection of interdisciplinary essays, *The Origins of Creativity*. "Creativity must be the ability to generate in one's brain (the association cortex), novel contexts and representations that elicit associations with symbols and principles of order. Such symbols or principles of order are innate to the human brain or part of the repertoire of acquired dispositional representations in the brains that form one's culture or society" (Pfenninger, Shubik, & Adolphe, 2001, p. 235). Pfenninger & Shubik include a wide range of human activity in their scope of creativity, including language. They point to new knowledge from neuroscience as they defend this broad range in their final paragraph of the collection: "Remarkably, the views and definitions of creativity presented here are compatible with a great variety of perspectives - of artist, scientist, philosopher, psychologist and neurobiologist. Advances in modern neuroscience have demystified creativity, but they are also reshaping our understanding of creativity. As the principles of how the human brain works are being revealed, the realization and appreciation of this marvel of our biology turns into a new aesthetic experience of its own" (p. 236).

Finally, I would add *divergent thinking* as a part of the definition of creativity. This has been suggested by Bengtsson, Csikszentmihalyi and Ullen (2007), three neurobiologists examining the parts of the brain involved when musicians are improvising. As they define creativity, they consider divergent thinking to be fundamental to creativity. Divergent thinking generates multiple solutions from which one then selects, as opposed to convergent problem-solving which generates a single answer. Divergent thinking as integral to improvisation is articulated by Janice Ross, dance historian, educator, and critic: “the discovery of not a single correct path, but of multiple possibilities; one chose the one among the many that would be the one for that moment” (Albright & Gere, 2003, p. 45 ).

My definition replaces ‘something’ with ‘novel, potentially divergent products’, and is now complete: *Improvisation is creating, in the moment and in response to the stimulus of one's immediate environment and inner feelings, novel, potentially divergent products which are free, spontaneous, unpremeditated, informal, impulsive, unrehearsed, unplanned, not thought-out. The act of creation is synchronous with its performance. The performers of the improvisation are its creators.*

It might be possible to consider everything in life, and hence all language, to be an improvisation. For the sake of clarity, let’s go to this extreme and then pull back. When do we improvise? Nachmanovitch describes a range of contexts, not all requiring the use of language, in which humans improvise. “Whether we are creating high art or a meal, we improvise when we move with the flow of time and with our own evolving consciousness, rather than a preordained script or recipe” (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 17). He goes on to clarify the inevitability of the need to improvise. “An empirical fact about our lives is that we do not and can not know what

will happen a day or a moment in advance. The unexpected awaits us at every turn and every breath. ...When we drop the blinders of our preconceptions, we are virtually propelled by every circumstance into the present time and the present mind: the moment, the whole moment and nothing but the moment. This is the state of mind taught and strengthened by improvisation." (p. 22).

Despite what Nachmanovitch says, most of us, in reality, do not deal with every turn and breath in life as an unexpected moment. This is as true in the classroom as it is in life. We can easily imagine didactic situations in which the desired response is already known. These are not situations in which learners are expected to improvise. Learners are also not improvising when they are in situations which they already know the script. When I am in Greece and someone asks me how I learned Greek, I have a script for an answer in my head, created over time in response to this predictable question. My response is more fluent than most of my Greek, and it is possible for me to abandon improvising, and respond to this question with a script I already have. A similar thing happened the last time I visited an elderly friend who had had a stroke. I left my first visit with him thinking he was not doing as poorly as I had feared. The next day, after my second visit, I realized I had been deceived during the first visit by his answers to questions he had already rehearsed in many visits with other people. During the second visit, as we ventured into territory he had not had as much opportunity to rehearse, speech was much more difficult for him. His stroke had diminished his ability to improvise fluently in his first language. Obviously all language production is not improvisation.

Improvisation is recognized as a significant human activity in the sciences, as well as the arts. Perhaps surprisingly, my first intuition that there might be a scientific basis for

improvisation came from visual art educator Betty Edward's (1979) book for people wanting to learn how to draw, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*. In a later edition of the book Edwards (1999) writes that early criticism of her "folk theories" decreased as modern neuroscience moved to corroborate her basic ideas, that the two sides of the brain process information differently, and that learning to put the brain's editing function on hold can be a valuable skill for enhancing creative production.

Perhaps it is not so surprising that a book on drawing could lead to a link between fields as diverse as the arts and applied linguistics. The father of the uncertainty principle in quantum physics, Werner Heisenberg observed: "It is probably true quite generally that in the history of human thinking the most fruitful developments frequently take place at those points where two different lines of thought meet. These lines may have roots in quite different parts of human culture, in different times or different cultural environments or different religious traditions: hence if they actually meet, that is, if they are at least so much related to each other that a real intersection can take place, then one may hope that new and interesting developments may follow" (Heisenberg, 1958, p. 213).

Heisenberg's statement gave me courage to attempt to answer the questions explored in this paper by examining a range of disciplines, particularly in combination with the interdisciplinary nature of the field of applied linguistics. "Applied Linguistics itself is an interdisciplinary field of inquiry that addresses a broad range of language-related issues... It draws on a wide range of theoretical, methodological, and educational approaches from various disciplines—from the humanities to the social, cognitive, medical, and natural sciences—as it

develops its own knowledge-base about language, its users and uses, and their underlying social and material conditions.” (American Association for Applied Linguistics, n.d.).

Reading in the sciences I found possible evidence indicating a connection between the two realms of improvisation: human language and the arts. The earliest evidence I found of a perceived connection between language and the arts is from biologist Charles Darwin: “language ability is an instinctive tendency to acquire an art” (1874, pp. 101-102). The question I would ask Darwin (and those who have continued his field) to investigate is: “Does the language ability arise from the same structures as the structures that acquire and express art-making ability? If so, what are these structures? If not, are the differing structures related?”

The next evidence I found, shifting from biology to psychology, and moving forward a half century came from Carl Jung who wrote about the role of play in creative production: “The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the objects it loves.” (1923, p. 155) I would love to explain Krashen’s (1981) acquisition/learning polarity to Jung and ask whether Jung would include language production in “the creation of something new” and if so, whether the creative mind, as opposed to the intellect, is responsible for the things one says.

Obviously one can not conclude from these statements by Darwin and Jung that humans improvise with language to express themselves, in the same way that humans improvise to express themselves in the arts. Fortunately, however, scientists have continued to engage with this very question, and closely related topics. Recent studies in the field of neuroscience have investigated what is going on in the brain when humans improvise. These studies reveal intersections of the two realms of improvisation that this paper is exploring.

Zeroing in more narrowly on the exact intersection of our realms of improvisation, studies in neuroscience have found that parts of the brain that are highly active in the production of human speech are also active during improvisation in the arts.

Bengtsson, Csikszentmihalyi and Ullen (2007) asked eleven Swedish professional concert pianists to create music in one of four modes of activities while an fMRI was done: 1. Improvise (for 28 seconds) based on a melodic template while trying to remember the improvisation for later reproduction, 2. Reproduce from memory the improvisation in #1, 3. Improvise on a melodic template without having to remember for later reproduction, 4. Rest. They found that there are brain areas that are more active in improvisation (modes 1 or 3) than at other times (modes 2 and 4). These areas appear to also be involved in language activity, particularly the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC) and the SPT, a portion of the posterior superior temporal gyrus (STG) close to the temporo-parietal junction. The DLPFC plays a central role in the “planning and performing of novel or complex behavioral sequences, including language” (Bengtsson et al., p. 839). The DLPFC is involved in divergent thinking, behavioral responses that are freely chosen (as opposed to repetitive behaviors, or determined by external stimuli), and free selection in cognitive tasks, including a number of linguistic tasks, (e.g. generation of words and numbers, completion of word-stems and sentences) (p.837). Bengtsson et al believe that the DLPFC may maintain earlier responses in working memory in order to compare new responses to previous output thereby preventing irregularities. The DLPFC continuously compares consecutive stimuli. If the DLPFC is disrupted the result is more habitual and stereotypical responses, and in improvisation such results are unwanted. Bengtsson et al also found the SPT to be active. The SPT is involved in retrieval from long term memory. In this study Bengtsson et al

assumed that audio musical structures were retrieved. It is known that the SPT plays a similar role in retrieval of lexical structure for linguistic tasks. Although far from conclusive, this work raises suspicion that the DLPFC and the SPT may have controlling functions for improvisation, in both language production and musical production.

While studying jazz musicians, in a slightly different experimental context, Limb and Braun (2008) found different results. Limb and Braun asked six professional jazz musicians to play in one of four modes, 1. Scale control, 2. Scale improv, 3 Jazz control, 4. Jazz improv. They found in improvisational modes (modes 2 and 4) an activation of the medial prefrontal cortex (MPFC), and a deactivation of the DLPFC and the lateral orbital frontal cortex (LOFC). They believe the activation of the MPFC to be connected to the demand for a high level of personal expression, particularly Brodman Area 10, which appears to serve to “adopt and utilize rule sets that guide ongoing behavior, and maintaining an overriding set of intentions while executing a series of diverse behavioral subroutines” (p.7). Limb and Braun believe the deactivation of the DLPFC to suggest the presence of a defocused free floating attention, outside of conscious awareness, as opposed to the self monitoring that an activation of the region would indicate.

Limb and Braun discuss the differences found in their study and Bengtsson et al’s study. They described 3 major differences. First, Limb and Braun found that Bengtsson et al’s study was designed to not see brain deactivations, whereas Limb and Braun sought to discover them. Second, Bengtsson et al used highly trained classical musicians, Limb and Braun used jazz musicians. Third, Bengtsson et al asked the musicians to remember what they improvised, introducing memory to the improvisational process, Limb and Braun sought to eliminate the role

of memory in their experimental design, and did not ask musicians to remember what they were improvising.

I agree with Limb and Braun in questioning whether one of the significant differences between the studies, the use of classically trained versus jazz musicians, did not impact a significant difference in the findings: the activation versus deactivation of the DLPFC. Classically trained musicians are much less likely to regularly engage in improvisation than jazz musicians. (Thomson 2008) Improvisation is intrinsically related to contemporary jazz music, in a way which is no longer true of classical music. The suspension of self monitoring by the jazz musicians, and not by the classical musicians, may indicate a difference in habits of production. This suspension of self monitoring and related processes indicated here may be significant as we consider language production.

In unpublished research from a similar study, Limb (2010) indicates that Broca's region, a major language part of the brain, is engaged in during jazz improvisation, but not during the reproduction of memorized music. Limb informally discusses this research: "What happens when musicians are trading back and forth, something they do normally in a jazz experiment? This is Mike Pope's data. When he was improvising versus memorized, his language areas lit up, his Broca's area, which is inferior frontal gyrus on the left. He actually had it also homologous on the right. This is an area thought to be involved in expressive communication. This whole notion that music is a language, well maybe there's a neurologic basis to it in fact after all, and we can see it when two musicians are having a musical conversation. And so we've done actually this on eight subjects now, and we're just getting all the data together." Limb, 2010).

In additional very preliminary unpublished research Limb has compared brain activity when rap poets are reciting memorized text versus free-style (improvised) production. “When you are free-styling versus memorizing, you've got major visual areas lighting up.... You have heightened brain activity when you're doing a comparable task, when that one task is creative and the other task is memorized.”

Although far from conclusive, Limb’s work raises suspicion that parts of the brain that function in musical and other forms of improvisation may have the same function for improvised language production. Further research into realms of creativity by Limb, Bengtsson, and their colleagues may well shed light on how the brain improvises to produce and acquire language.

Improvisations are the freest of communicative activities, perhaps the gold standard. Indeed, improvisational skills lie at the heart of human language. Elliot Eisner (2002, p. 206), a leading American theorist on art education and aesthetics, articulates the value of improvisation in all learning: “The capacity to improvise to exploit unanticipated possibilities is a substantive cognitive achievement fundamentally different from the lockstep movement of prescribed steps toward a predefined goal.” Language learners may not need to know what improvisation is, but they need to be able to do it.

## **Personal background**

In this section I will describe my personal path to identifying this intersection of applied linguistics and the arts, a nexus I understand as improvisation. I returned to academia after over three decades of professional involvement in the performing arts as both a practitioner and a teacher. I am currently employed half time at a community college teaching 'Advanced Listening

and Speaking Skills' to students whose aim is to pass out of ESOL classes into a range of other curricula. I continue to work in the performing arts, primarily as a practitioner. Most of my art work has had an improvisational base, and much of it was interdisciplinary. As my current graduate school studies led me into the realms of second-language teaching and second-language acquisition, I kept having déjà vu moments. Was I discovering a parallel universe? Who knew that the world of dance education would have so much in common with the world of second-language education? I discovered parallels between many aspects of my old and new worlds, but central to the parallels was a shared duality: an orientation to form existing in tension with an orientation to free expression.

My interest in a cross-disciplinary approach to issues of second-language pedagogy is supported by having worked extensively in cross-disciplinary settings. I co-taught for several years in an elementary school, where I taught dance together with educators teaching several visual art forms: drawing, weaving, painting, film making, sculpture, clay and pottery. I have also co-taught dance in conjunction with teachers of creative writing. Such teaching required me to create lessons in which my students would improvise. Beyond the classroom, I have collaborated in performance with artists in dance, theater, performance art, music, poetry and spoken word. A great deal of this work involved improvisation. I founded and am the artistic director of a performing arts venue, *Patrick's Cabaret*, that has always presented a broad range of performing arts.

The cross disciplinary traditions of applied linguistics, and the encouragement of my professors to make a unique contribution to the field, led me to decide that the potential connections between these worlds were indeed worthy of further investigation. With my

predisposition to working in a cross-disciplinary manner, and my extensive professional experience working with improvisation, I sought to find relevant links between improvisation in human language production, and improvisation in the arts, in order to transfer knowledge from the arts to L2 teaching. I determined a set of questions to examine. The questions frame the next section.

## **Review and analysis**

### **1. How does improvisation function in the arts, and how is it taught?**

#### **1. a) How does improvisation function in the arts?**

Improvisation has multiple functions in the arts, and although improvisation exists in most realms of the contemporary western art world, it generally plays a minor role in comparison to the refined forms of any discipline ((Frost & Yarrow, 2007; Gere, Albright, & Gere, 2003; Mantie, 2008; Thomson, 2008). In the West, in most fields, we are more familiar with what I call refined work. In visual art we have oil paintings on canvas which began as pencil sketches on paper and then go through a process of revision, an often lengthy process involving numerous copies, before finally being rendered with oil on canvas (Edwards 1986). In literature we have novels which have similarly gone through innumerable drafts (Goldberg 1986). In dance we have choreography refined through extensive rehearsals (Nagrin 1994). In theater we have scripts (Spolin 1963), and in music we have scores (Mantie 2008).

We may be less familiar with improvisation than refined work in the arts, but improvisation exists in all of the above fields. Many examples could be given. “In visual art we have improvisation in automatism and spontaneous paintings, time art, and happenings“ (Nachmanovitch 1990). In literature we have "the first thought best thought" school of writing, in

which words flow onto the page and are not later edited (Goldberg 1986) and we also have improvisation in poetry, a tradition documented in the middle ages (Treitler 2008) still thriving today (Bolden, 2004; Hartman, 1990; Wallace, 2010). In dance we have multiple approaches, including contact improvisation in which the movement is generated in the moment, generally sourced in the point of contact between two dancers (Albright Gere, 2003). Contact improvisation has been documented extensively in the *Contact Quarterly Journal* and by Novack (1990). In dance we also have less obvious uses of improvisation such as this approach by Merce Cunningham: “Dancers generally did not see their outfits or the stage furniture until dress rehearsal or even the first performance, introducing an element of whimsy and chance, which Cunningham loved” (Abbe, 2011). In the theater world there are companies, like Second City in Chicago (Libera, 2004; McKnight & Scruggs, 2008), that specialize in creating improvised performances. Of all of these manifestations, improvisation is perhaps best known and most widely respected in jazz music (Aebersold, Reid, & Higgins, 1979). In the rich tradition of jazz improvisation, musicians improvise as they interact with each other. “The real power and innovation of jazz is that a group of people can come together and create art -improvised art- and can negotiate their agendas with each other. And that negotiation is the art. Like, you hear all the time that Bach improvised, and he did improvise. But he wasn’t going to go to the second viola and say ”Okay, let’s play Ein’ feste Burg.”” They were not going to do that whereas in jazz, I could” (Wynton Marsalis interview; Ward & Burns, 2000, p. 116).

The performance of improvisation is its most public and best known function in the arts. Preparation for an improvised performance differs from preparation for performing a refined work. Both require preparation before performance. The rehearsal process for the improvised

performance is not about determining and refining forms which will later be repeated. Rather, it is about playing with processes of discovery, generally with an intention of not repeating material which has been previously generated (Nachmanovitch, 1990; Schlicht, 2008). In improvisation there is generally an intention to avoid re-creating what has been previously created, or of finding new ways to reuse familiar material if it does arise. This is true of improvisation in visual art and literature (Goldberg, 1986; Nachmanovitch, 1990), in dance (Albright & Gere, 2003; Blom & Chapin, 1988; Nagrin, 1994; Schneer, 1994; Zaporah 1995) theater (Frost & Yarrow, 2007; Johnstone & Wardle, 1979; Spolin, 1963) and music (Mantie, 2008; Purcell, 2002; Schlicht, 2008; Thomson, 2008).

Improvisation has functions with a lower public profile in the arts that go beyond performance. For example, improvisation is often used as a tool for training artists to be more creative, to develop and express their unique, personal voices (Schneer, 1994; Spolin, 1963). It is also used as a tool by artists as a process to create refined works; artists often improvise or have others improvise to source new material, which can later be extracted from the improvisation created (Marks, 2003).

As mentioned earlier, there is a strong duality in these areas of the arts, an opposition between an orientation to *form* and an orientation to *free expression*. This polarity manifests frequently in the art world. It's a polarity which has refined work on one end (form), and improvised work on the other end (freedom). It has been my experience that artists creating work on the refined end of the spectrum often find work on the improvised end to be somehow lacking. "Interesting movement, but certainly not *Dance*" (Annette Atwood ballet teacher, personal communication, commenting on her reaction to seeing contact improvisation). On the

other end of the polarity, artists working on the improvised end may find work on the refined end to be lacking in authenticity or originality. Mantie calls refined work “normative conformity and technical execution” (2008, p. 1). Thomson decries that “The dominant musical mode ...[is] repetition” (2008, p. 2). In this polarity, there are also artists who occupy a middle position. Nancy Hauser, one of my early dance teachers in Minneapolis, advised me that improvisation belongs in the rehearsal studio, not on stage. She clearly believed in and used improvisation in training, and in creating work, but not in public performance. In this she was in accord with dance luminaries Martha Graham and Mary Wigman (Albright & Gere, 2003).

A negative attitude toward improvisation, particularly in performance, is held by many, in various fields (Mantie, 2008; Schlicht, 2008). Improvisation is often disparaged (Steele, 1992). Improvisation is often regarded as a source of intense creativity, but may be perceived (or pre-supposed) to be lacking in organized structures. In the art world, people who are most intimately involved with the creation or re-creation of refined works generally hold dominant positions in the field, compared to improvisers, and receive most of the resources available to the field (Albright & Gere, 2003). Critics and funders may be predisposed to refined works over improvised works for any number of reasons. Perhaps improvisation in performance occupies a less privileged position in the arts because of its rejection of the editing and reshaping process that has typified most of western high art.

Serious improvisers have a very different perspective. In the duality of an orientation to form vs freedom, improvisation celebrates freedom (Mazzola, et al., 2009), while proponents contest the pre-supposition that improvisation is lacking in organized structures. “It is sometimes thought that in improvisation we can do just anything. But lack of a conscious plan does not

mean that our work is random or arbitrary. Improvisation always has its rules, even if they are not *a priori* rules. When we are totally faithful to our own individuality, we are actually following a very intricate design. This kind of freedom is the opposite of “just anything”. We carry around rules inherent in our organism .....As our playing, writing, speaking, drawing, or dancing unfolds, the inner, unconscious logic of our being begins to show through and mold the material” (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 26).

To sum up: A review of relevant literature has shown that improvisation has several shared functions in the arts: it is a vehicle for immediate creative expression which is shared directly with the public in performance; it is a tool for developing an artist’s creative abilities; and it is a tool as part of the creative process for generating new material, which is later refined and reworked before being shared with the public.

### **1.b) How is improvisation in taught in the arts ?**

Imagine teaching the next Keith Jarrett, *student x*, or Glenn Gould, *student y*. Mr. Jarrett improvises. Mr. Gould plays music already composed. They embody the duality: an orientation to free expression as opposed to an orientation to form. What do teachers in the profession say about what they would do differently to teach these two students? Similar examples for *student x* and *student y* could be found to embody this duality in all the arts: dance, theater, writing and spoken word. There are important commonalities across a broad range of art disciplines in the teaching of improvisation which distinguish it from the teaching of refined work. I am not the first to identify principles of teaching improvisation, but to my knowledge, this is the first time anyone has attempted to identify a complete set of principles for teaching improvisation which

would apply across the arts. Simon Purcell, musician and music professor, wrote in 2002, “I am not aware of an informed overview relating to the process and practice and implementation of improvisation as an educational process or tool....a thorough study of improvisation is overdue” (Purcell, 2002, p. 25). In proposing the following principles for teaching improvisation, I hope to contribute to the beginning of such a thorough study. In my review of the literature I have identified six principles; in the section below, I will document in detail the sources in the literature of these principles, which are also validated in my own experience of learning and teaching improvisation.

**i. Teachers have students begin to improvise from where they are, at any level of experience.**

Teachers of improvisation in the arts believe that improvisation can and should begin on day one. There is no need to wait until enough skill or knowledge is acquired. Ruth Zaporah (1995) began a four week workshop, open to participants with any level of experience, with an exercise in which participants repeated what they had done in the studio before the workshop began, changing clothes. An intention behind her choices was to reinforce the notion that everyone already could do everything they needed to be able to do. What they were adding that was new was a consciousness of attention. She added a focus on simple elements as they continued, such as time (speed: fast, slow, medium) and eye focus. The phrase “Use what you have” is described by Barbara Dilley, dance educator, administrator, and practitioner, as part of the language of teachers of improvisation (Zaporah, p. xv). Schneer (1994) directs teachers of dance improvisation to begin with the natural movements already found in students. She explains that improvisation “does not require any previous training because it assumes that we all live by

practicing the recognition and performance of non-verbal cues” (p. 3). Of course, these were the cues Zaporah used in her clothes changing exercise. Schlicht embraces the fact that in her course in music improvisation “each person has a different set of skills,” noting “how at any skill level, one remains on an ongoing musical journey” (2008, p. 3). Students in her course need only to be able to perceive sound, and make it in order to begin improvising on the first day. Edwards writes that drawing “is a skill that can be learned by every normal person with average eyesight and average eye-hand coordination” (1979, p. 3). Goldberg writes to beginners that “all you need is pen, paper and the human mind” (2005, p. xii). Spolin begins her foundational theater improvisation work with the statement, “Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise” (1963, p. 3) and continues with a first exercise, in which the group is divided half on stage, half as audience. They begin with “you look at us, and we’ll look at you,” an activity requiring no prior skills -- only the ability to observe, and be in a line (p. 51). Nachmanovitch makes clear that nothing new is required to begin for improvisation in general. “What we have to express is already with us, is us, so the work of creativity is not a matter of making the material come, but of unblocking the obstacles to its natural flow” (Nachmanovitch, p. 10). This principle is very different from most of the training for the student of refined art, whose goal is to reproduce existing works. Such technical training for artists of the refined generally insists on mastery of certain basic skills before students begin to express themselves (Albright & Gere, 2003; Mantie, 2008; Schlicht, 2008; Thomson, 2008).

## **ii. Improvisation is taught through play.**

Play is a basic human activity, natural to children, and, sadly, often disappearing as children mature into adults. Nachmanovitch (p. 1) begins his book on improvisation by referring to the Sanskrit word *lila*, which he defines as divine play. The return to a more childlike approach is often cited in this way by teachers of improvisation. Schlicht (2008) began her course with students improvising using dowels and plastic buckets, *playing* with making sounds, *playing* music. If I am teaching children to improvise movement, I can ask them to go from one side of the room to the other, any way they choose. I may add, “No walking or running,” to encourage diverse solutions. This is very different from directing children to skip, hop, gallop, run, etc. by imitating my pattern. My activity often feels like a game, or a puzzle to solve.

Improvisation is often taught by playing games, where the play is rule bound, using game structures. “The game is the natural group form providing the involvement and personal freedom necessary for experiencing. Games develop personal techniques and skills necessary for the game itself, through playing” (Spolin 1963, p. 4). “The rules defining the exercises are constraints that isolate components of human behavior. These rules open pathways that lead into unexplored territories where the mind and body rejoin, where there’s no disparity between action and being” (Zaporah, 1995, p. xxi). “Games are a heritage we all share, a language we can remember with a minimum of prompting. Most of all, games are *fun*. ‘Opening the pelvis,’ freeing the pelvic joints to facilitate movement, is very difficult to learn, and painful to practice. But sit the actors in a ring, legs outstretched and wide apart, feet touching those of the people on either side, and let them roll a ball at each others’ feet.... and the exercise is accomplished automatically” (Frost & Yarrow, 2007, p. 125). Books by several authors contain descriptions of many games for improvising. (Blom & Chaplin, 1988; Johnstone, 1999; Johnstone & Wardle,

1979; Libera, 2004; McKnight & Scruggs, 2008; Nagrin, 1994; Schneer, 1994; Spolin, 1963; Zaporah, 1995, 2006).

Optimizing play involves minimizing fear and increasing learning. People are more likely to play if they are not afraid. According to neurobiologist Panksepp (2010, p. 87) attending to fear is crucial to play: “Play serves to practice social, emotional, and cognitive skills, and any environmental change that induces negative affective states decreases play.” An example of a basic fear is expressed simply by an improvisational dancer and performer: “In the beginning I was concerned about how I looked when I was dancing” (Curtis 2003, p. 16). Nachmanovitch (1990) refers to the need to create situations which minimize fear, and describes psychological blocks as both the opposite of creativity, but also inevitable. He believes that removing them is a process that needs to be solved individually, invented by each improviser.

Many teachers suggest specific strategies that may be useful to students in overcoming fear. Aebersold in his series on learning to play jazz music talks about a variety of approaches he uses to help allay student fears. They include intentionally getting lost in the music, which is a conscious attempt to become disoriented. He encourages students to get so far lost as to get laughed at. He also has students practice going up or down a half note anytime they hit what they consider to be a “wrong” note, as a way to reorient students to “wrongness” (Aebersold 1979). The training for *student x* contrasts again with training for *student y*, in how each is asked to play. *Student x*'s play is exploration and fun, while *student y*'s play is characterized by much drill and repetition (Mantie, 2008; Nagrin, 1994; Schlicht, 2008; Thomson, 2008). This parallels the distinction Tarone has made (2001) between ludic play, play as fun, and rehearsal play, which she describes as “preparation for a more public performance”(2001, p. 366).

### iii. Teachers orient students toward perception, and away from judgement.

Mazzola, jazz musician and educator, described the orientation to perception as one of his major objectives, particularly when dealing with classically trained students who want to learn to improvise (Mazzola et al., personal interview, March 10, 2010). In contrast to student *x*, student *y* is oriented by teachers to pre-existing standards, which will be used to judge what student *y* produces (Edwards, 1979; Goldberg, 1986; Thomson, 2008). As we shall see below, the orientation of classically-trained students may be so strongly toward a notion of pre-existing standards, that they seem unable to re-orient to perception, to a sense of “Do I sound true to myself?”

Fred Frith, founder of the graduate program in improvisation at Mills College describes at length the difficulty one student had in changing her orientation from judgment to perception:

I had a student, a few years ago, who came into the MFA Performance program, the chamber music one. We didn't have an improvisation degree then, but she was really interested in improvisation, regarded it as an important thing to learn how to do. She took my graduate seminar on the history and practice of the interface of improvisation with composition in the last fifty years. We studied Indeterminacy, Earle Brown, Pauline Oliveros, Third Stream, Sun Ra, Braxton, Butch Morris, Zorn, Barry Guy, all kinds of different approaches and traditions. She was in my ensemble for two years, in which we tackled many improvisational pieces: Cardew's *Treatise*, Stockhausen's *Aus den Sieben Tagen*, my graphic scores, some Christian Wolff pieces, some pure improvisation, plus, Cecil Taylor came and worked with us, and also Leo Smith. Plus, she had a semester of improvisation workshops with Joëlle Léandre. Plus, she was a member of the informal Monday afternoon sessions that I run in my office, where a small group of regulars comes just to play. Then she wrote her thesis on improvisation pedagogy and, basically, said that she found the lack of improvisation teaching very difficult, that she felt like she hadn't been taught how to improvise. I was fascinated by this; we talked about it a lot while she was writing the paper. And I understood that as a classical

instrumentalist, there are certain practices that you learn and one of them is how to engage in constructive critical dialogue. You play a piece in front of peers, and your teacher and people tell you what they think you did wrong and how you can do better. They're all holding a score, so they have this reference where everyone can see how it's "supposed" to sound, and then they can point to particular deficiencies, either of reading, or interpretation, or of the technique required to realize a particular passage. It makes perfect sense and is a very important part of learning an instrument at a high level. So players get used to the idea that after playing in a pedagogical setting, there will be feedback that will help them understand what to do, feedback based on a more or less universal idea of what is "good" or "acceptable" in a given setting and what is "bad" or "unacceptable." And in the two years of fairly intensive study of improvising at Mills, she was still waiting for someone to tell her what to do, to tell her what was good and bad, and in the absence of that kind of feedback, her assessment was that she hadn't been "taught" anything. Whether she had learned anything is another question, but she hadn't got to that point, she was too busy feeling let down! (Chan, 2008, p. 3)

Frith is describing the difference between perception – simply noticing what one does without evaluating -- and judgement -- labeling or categorizing what one does with a value, such as good or bad. Because classically-oriented students have so much difficulty moving from judgement to perception, Schlicht (2008) did not begin her course on musical improvisation with jazz, because she feared that too many students already had an intellectual, theoretical orientation to jazz, which she feared would interfere with their ability to let go of judgement. Mantie (2008) confirms this tendency for instruction in jazz to move from free to codified forms within the academy.

Edwards (1979, 1999) describes the shift to perception in orientation when one learns to draw as "getting the left brain out of the way". By using the right side of the brain she means observing the actual shape of a book one's eyes perceive, rather than using the left side of the brain, thinking "book" and drawing a stored representation or stereotype of a book from the mind. "The key to learning to draw, therefore, is to set up conditions that cause you to make a

mental shift to a different mode of information processing - the slightly altered state of consciousness - that enables you to see well” (1979, p. 5). One revealing approach she uses for this she calls “upside down drawing” which prevents the left brain from recognizing and categorizing the image it perceives; because the object one is drawing is upside down, the right brain is able to perceive its image more accurately, not filtered or altered by previously accumulated left brain associations or preconceptions (Edwards, 1979, pp. 25-60).

Contact improvisation performer and master teacher Nancy Stark Smith is famous for advising her students to “Replace ambition with curiosity” (Koteen & Stark Smith, 2008, p. 40). The goal is to not have a goal (e.g. a standard against which to be judged), and be drawn to moving into the unknown. Zaporah describes the orientation toward perception as an expanding of awareness: “One objective is to detail perception by expanding awareness” (1995, p. 29) as well as an elimination of judgement: “We all share a common and simple impediment: our judging minds” (p. xx).

The *Ten rules for students and teachers* generally attributed to John Cage, composer and musician, but also attributed by some to Sister Corita, includes two rules that bear directly on this principle:

RULE SIX: Nothing is a mistake. There’s no win and no fail, there’s only make.

...

RULE EIGHT: Don’t try to create and analyze at the same time. They’re different processes.” (<http://goingindifferentdirections.blogspot.com/2010/12/john-cages-some-rules-for-teachers-and.html>, and <https://www.corita.org/component/content/article/21-information-in-education/19-corita-kent-art-rules.html>, both accessed January 5, 2011)

Rule six is clearly an orientation away from judgement based on ‘mistake’, or failure to conform to rules or standards; judgment results in seeing and fearing mistakes. Rule eight recognizes the different roles played by creation and analysis, what I have termed orientation to

freedom and orientation to form. The rule advises against trying to accomplish both at the same time. Creation is about bringing something into being, and relies on an unconscious awareness of possibilities. Analysis is a conscious comparison to existing, known forms.

Foster, choreographer, dancer writer and dance professor, writes of the need for both perception and judgement to be engaged by improvisers in the field of dance. She sees both interacting with each other: “Rather than suppress any functions of the mind, improvisation’s bodily mindfulness summons up a kind of hyperawareness of the relation between immediate action and overall shape, between that which is about to take place or is taking place and that which has and will take place” (Foster, 2003, p. 7). “Improvisation also demands a reflexive awareness of ... becoming a stereotype, a rut instead of a path” (p. 7). Foster appears to propose a Hegelian synthesis of these two poles, judgement and perception. This may contradict what others here have said, or it could be interpreted as a call to include more perception in the training of improvisers, in a world in which judgement dominates in our mental processes.

#### **iv. Teachers have students consciously practice ‘doing without planning’.**

Improvisers need to practice doing without planning, and they need to be aware that they are doing this. Because doing without planning is contrary to a general social orientation of having a plan before proceeding, students need to understand that it is likely to feel like a new way of proceeding, and that it is what we are aiming for. Nachmanovitch (1990) describes planning versus doing without planning in the context of traveling to another country to give an improvised performance. Using airline schedules to figure out how to travel there is an appropriate situation for a plan. This is in contrast to what will happen once he begins onstage, which involves letting go of conscious control, letting go of having a plan before proceeding. In

her introduction to Zaporah's first book, Barbara Dilley writes, "'Make it up as you go along,' 'Let go,' 'Don't think' are all common phrases used by improvisation teachers" (Zaporah, 1995, p. xv). Zaporah believes that plans get in the way of students being true to each moment. "We discover that each present moment holds everything we need to meet the next. In this flow of changing phenomena, we see that all the old moments have aided our delivery to this one, one moment falling out of another" (1995: 7). In teaching improvisation, Spolin makes very clear that plans are not desired: "How we do something is the process *of doing* (right now!). Pre-planning How makes process impossible and so becomes resistance, ...and no...spontaneity can take place, making any change or alterations in the student actor impossible. True improvisation re-shapes and alters the student through the act of improvising itself" (1963, p. 37). McKnight (2008, p. 41) also gives specific advice to teachers for using improvisational theater in the k-8 classroom: she advises teachers to trust the process, give direct clear instructions, and resist the temptation to explain how to do an exercise correctly. Her point is to have students figure things out in the process of doing, rather than plan it ahead of time. Nachmanovitch describes improvising as both "surrender" and "planning to engage (not planning the engagement)" (1990, p. 21).

In the performing arts student *y* will, by contrast, have a plan. Student *y* will be repeating pre-planned scenes (theater), choreography (dance), or compositions (music); in literature, student *y* will be revising, rewriting, and in visual art student *y* will be sketching out a plan for what they will later fill in. Plans are a big part of what student *y* does to present refined works. A theater group takes a script, and rehearses it over and over, developing exactly what will become the theater performance. The show is planned, and an audience can even be told how many

minutes it is expected to run (Frost & Yarrow, 2007). Similarly, a dance company practices choreography, the same movements over and over, until the dance can be repeated faithfully. The choreography is a plan (Nagrin, 1994). For musicians, the notes on the page become the plan (Mantie, 2008).

**v. Improvisers learn to attend to and respond to both internal and external stimuli.**

The unique voice of the individual is at the core of improvisation, and as such improvisers work to develop skills to be able to better attend to their own internal sources, while at the same time responding to the world in which they live. In dance and theater the external means the physical environment, including other people. These people can be other dancers as well as the audience. At the same time, the dancer needs to sense internally her own body and impulses. The improvisation is a response to both the internal and external. One learns to attend to both by sometimes attending only to one, or some smaller aspect of one, heightening awareness by narrowing the focus. The teacher guides the students by focussing their attention on those elements that seem to not be getting attention. At other times the teacher widens the focus to include everything, internal and external, all at once.

One important aspect of learning to attend to both internal and external stimuli is to learn to attend to the physical body as the source of the internal world. A first step generally involves relaxation, the elimination of unwanted tension (Frost & Yarrow, 2007). In this more relaxed state, one can more easily attend to internal information on the body. Zaporah (1995, p. 88) has students do an exercise in which they are still as they inhale, and move, as they are inspired to move, on each exhalation. “Experience the movement breath creates as it comes in,

bounces out, and pauses. Watch the sensation of breath for the next five or six breaths. Begin to move just on each exhalation of each breath.” The interruption of constant movement with stillness on the inhalation allows the body to inform the mover how to move next, as opposed to having the mover decide how to move as an intellectual activity. Later in the exercise she links this internal activity to external stimuli: “Within the next few minutes, become aware of somebody else in the room. Slowly begin to connect with them. Continue to move on only the out-breath in relation to one another” (p. 88). This interplay between internal and external is so essential, that it is even understood to be the case in solo improvisation. An improvised theater monologue is actually understood as a dialogue between the artist and the artist’s environment in that moment. That includes the room the artist is in, and that may also include an audience, but need not (Zaporah, 1995). An improvised solo dance is an interplay between the dancer, and the dancer’s environment (Blom & Chaplin, 1988; Nagrin, 1994; Schneer, 1994). When there is an audience, it is an unavoidable external stimulus (Libera, 2004).

In creative writing I may start from a prompt from the teacher, and then dive into my internal world; after some time, I may look up, notice the crow on the tree across the street, and include it in the world I am creating on the page. I hear a siren in the distance, think of the car accident, and write red, red, red blood red on the page. Many writing teachers begin with an external prompt which interacts with a student’s internal world, for example: “Talk about the quality of light coming in through your window...Begin with ‘I remember.’ Write lots of small memories” (Goldberg, 1986, p. 22).

In visual art this could mean following both my impulses to put paint on the wall, and noticing how the paint is going on the wall, and drawing inspiration for what to do next from

how the materials are manifesting before me and/or an internal impulse. The interplay between internal and external stimuli is essentially the same process across different art forms in improvisation.

In contrast, student *y* is taught to focus on external stimuli which direct the student to produce; student *y* is generally taught not to attend to internal stimuli, as these could change what would be produced. Rather than experiencing their internal world, student *y* is likely to learn to disassociate their subjective experience from their production. In extreme cases this can mean manifesting something that is physically excruciating with an aura of great ease. Images come to mind of ballet dancers on *pointe* seeming to float over the stage, ignoring the pain of their bleeding feet. Student *y* is taught to look to a director/teacher for form oriented guidance on revising their production to accord with an external standard. While student *x* has teachers and peers for guidance as to how they are manifesting their internal worlds as well as how they are interacting with the external world, their own internal compass is at least as important as this external feedback (Chan, 2007). The instruction provided to students learning to improvise is more meaning-guided than form-guided, and is likely to be directed ultimately at removing student *x*'s blocks to self expression (Frost & Yarrow, 2007; Zaporah, 1995).

**vi. Teachers support students in their creative growth, and do not only focus on developing technical skills.**

Students who will be improvising need to be both creators and performers, so they need to develop both capacities. Musicians need more than musical technique if they are going to improvise (Schlicht, 2008). Actors need more than acting technique, if they are going to

improvise (Spolin, 1963). In both cases they need to be able to see, smell, touch, and hear more acutely. They need to free their imaginations, enhance their ability to feel emotionally. The same is true for all improvising artists (Nachmanovitch, 1990). Zaporah includes four basic functions as she describes her work as a dance/theater improvisation teacher: “expand awareness, stimulate imagination, strengthen the capacity for feeling and develop skills of expression” (1995, p. xxi). Of these four, only the last could possibly be understood to include traditional dance or theater skills of a technical/performance nature. The other three serve the development of the creator in each student. The four functions allow students to better understand who they are, to perceive the world more richly, and to respond to those perceptions with a greater range of options. Toward that end, Zaporah (1995) and others (Blom & Chapin, 1988; Frost & Yarrow, 2007; Goldberg, 1986) include sensory awakening exercises as part of their instruction in improvisation. For example Zaporah (1995) uses a movement/sound exercise in which the energetic quality of the mover matches that of the person generating sound vocally. Each creator attends to the energetic quality that they are producing, and the quality their partner is producing. This kind of activity develops creative ability as part of improvisation training (Schlicht, 2008).

Eisner believes technique is over-taught in the arts, and suggests to art teachers in general that they strive to develop their students’ creativity, and only focus on developing their students’ technique when those they have prove inadequate to what they need in a situation. He describes this as a kind of paying attention to our feet only when the surface is uneven, and suggests that the rest of the time we should attend to other aspects of artistic activity, particularly creative development (2002, p. 110).

Teachers don't need to teach student y to create or be creative to such an extent if student y is only going to re-create forms that have already been created. They need to teach student y to express existing forms, and this is generally a process of studying and perfecting technique. This is very different from teaching improvisation (Chan, 2008; Mantie, 2008).

In summary, the pedagogy of improvisation is necessarily different from the pedagogy of re-production of refined forms. The principles described above make clear the difference. These principles have been articulated by many teachers of improvisation in many settings, but to my knowledge, these six principles appear together here for the first time, assembled as a set. These principles do not encompass all of what a teacher of improvisation does, rather they describe the essential ways in which the teaching of improvisation differs from the teaching of reproduction of refined works.

Table 1  
Six Principles for the Pedagogy of Improvisation  
*contrasted with the Pedagogy of Refined Works*

Improvisers

***Re-producers of Refined Works***

Principle i

Teachers have students begin to improvise from where they are, at any level of experience.

**2. What is the role of improvisation in L2 speech production and acquisition, how is it taught, and what impediments exist?**

Principle ii

**2. a) What is the role of improvisation in L2 speech production and acquisition?**  
Improvisation is taught through play.

~~Do not repeat the teacher's production.~~ ***Do not repeat the teacher's production.*** of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Principle iii  
have never explicitly discussed the construct of improvisation, although a Venn diagram of the world of applied linguistics and the world of improvisation would show substantial overlap. This ***Teachers orient students to pre-existing standards, by which they will be judged.***

Principle iv  
overlap. Principle iv examined in this section. The field of CLT has concerned itself a great deal with

Teachers have students consciously practice 'doing without planning', which I will show is related, but not identical to improvisation. Indeed, proponents of CLT generally embrace interaction as essential to L2 acquisition. Similarly, there are arguments

Principle v  
made in the broad field of SLA research that intersect with and serve to highlight the role of

***Students focus on external stimuli.*** improvisation in L2 speech production and acquisition. These arguments include Krashen's

Principle vi

Teachers support students in their creative growth, and do not only focus on

monitor filter (1981), Selinker's consideration of what constitutes meaningful performance (1972), Tarone's examination of play (2000), and Swain & Lapkin's descriptions of co-construction of knowledge (1998). Finally, teacher educators like Brown (2007), Lightbown and Spada (2006), and Tarone and Swierzbin (2009) all advocate for an approach to teaching that I would describe as improvisational because it requires that students improvise in their L2s. This section will examine CLT thinking on interaction and its overlap with improvisation, and the intersection of SLA theory with improvisation.

Before I answer the question, "What is the role of improvisation in L2 speech production and acquisition?" I will first demonstrate that improvisation is integral to human speech.

### **Improvisation is integral to human speech**

Stephen Nachmanovitch, in *Free Play*, argues for including language in his list of improvised human activities. "When we think *improvisation*, we tend to think first of improvised music or theater or dance; but beyond their own delights, such art forms are doors into an experience that constitutes the whole of everyday life. We are all improvisers. The most common form of improvisation is ordinary speech. As we talk and listen, we are drawing on a set of building blocks (vocabulary) and rules for combining them (grammar). These have been given to us by our culture. But the sentences we make with them may never have been said before and may never be said again. Every conversation is a form of jazz" (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 17). "Everyday speech is a case of improvisation. More than that, it's a case of shared improvisation. You meet someone new and you create language together" (p. 95).

Of course generative linguists agree with this view that language production is an act of creativity. A definition of ordinary speech as improvisation is entirely congruent with what

Chomsky first pointed out, that everyone has the ability to produce and understand instantly new sentences that "are not similar to those previously heard in any physically defined sense ... nor obtainable from them by any sort of "generalization" known to psychology and philosophy" (1965, p. 58). Chomsky (1957), Pinker (1994) and Nachmanovitch (1990) all encourage me to answer "yes" to the question "When someone speaks in an authentic context, are they improvising?"

### **Improvisation is integral to L2 speech**

A number of applied linguists encourage a positive answer to the next question: "When someone speaks a second-language in an authentic context, are they improvising?" S. P. Corder, writing about learner interlanguage, encourages us to view a learner's production of interlanguage as essentially no different from a native speaker's production of L1 speech: "We must regard the learner as a native speaker of his language, and theoretically, at least, the *only* native speaker" (1981, p. 56). "This is only what one would expect of someone developing a new way of doing something familiar" (p. 56). In other words, learners do with their interlanguage just what they do with their L1, just with more limited resources as they begin. This would include improvising. Selinker (1972) coined the term 'interlanguage' to describe the language system that each learner invents as they progress with learning a second-language. He argued that the clearest window a researcher has into the nature of interlanguage structure is found in improvised speech, and not in rehearsed rule-governed oral practice. Lakshmanan and Selinker (2001) continue Selinker's (1972) earlier emphasis of the importance of considering only spontaneous speech (i.e., improvisation) in SLA research. Vivian Cook (2001) believes that

language is produced through *multicompetence*, a combination of interlanguage and a learner's knowledge of a first language coexisting within one mind. It is difficult to imagine how a combination of two such systems, both of which produce via improvisation, could do other than to produce improvisation. So when someone speaks a second-language in an authentic context, improvisation occurs whenever the L2 production is a novel, instantaneous, spontaneous, L2 verbal expression, responding to an impulse (internal or external) to communicate in a situation in which numerous expressions are possible. The novelty, instantaneity and spontaneity of expression, as well as the possibility for diverse and unexpected responses, are crucial to this improvisation. Improvisation plays a role in L2 production, therefore, in any novel situation requiring spontaneous authentic interaction by the learner using the L2.

Many contexts in daily life require such novel verbal expression: For example, imagine that I am lost, can't find my hotel, and want to ask for directions. Or I want to know what someone is thinking. Or I wonder what just happened. Or I want to talk to someone because I am feeling isolated and alone. Or someone says something to me, and I want to reply. Novel expressions in any of these situations would be improvisations, whether they occur in a native language or in a second-language.

### **The intersection/overlap of improvisation and CLT thinking on interaction**

Improvisation overlaps with, but is not synonymous with what CLT practitioners are talking about when they speak of oral interaction. As we have seen from my personal examples of oral scripts above (page 9), oral interaction does not necessarily entail unpredictability, instantaneity, spontaneity, novelty, or the possibility of diverse and unpredictable responses. In

traditional western theater interaction between the players is based on oral scripts, such scripts are the norm and heart of the tradition.

V. Cook (2001, p. 216) makes the claim that the main difference between ALM and CLT is CLT's "emphasis on spontaneous production and comprehension." I believe that the new emphasis was on the interactive improvised impulse – and thus improvisation was at the very heart of the shift from ALM to CLT. Teachers found that students who had successfully drilled (or recited rehearsed oral segments) for hours were unable to cope with situations they had not previously encountered. Still, it is important not to confuse all interaction with improvisation. Perhaps Lightbown and Spada refer to the role of improvisation in L2 acquisition when they write that "Conversational interaction is an essential, if not sufficient, condition for second-language acquisition" (2006, p. 43). Whether this statement is true depends on how they understand conversational interaction. Lightbown and Spada cite numerous SLA researchers who share their view of the importance of interaction, including Hatch, Long, Pica, Gass, and Lapkin. My question of these researchers is: Do they recognize the essentially unpredictable, improvisational nature of oral interaction? I believe this recognition will lead us to a deeper understanding of what kinds of conversational interaction are most valuable.

I would argue that the major value of oral interaction comes from improvisation. CLT has recognized the importance of interaction, and the language used in describing CLT generally includes the following terms: authentic, meaning based, free, focus on meaning, focus on communication (Brown, 2007; Celce-Murcia, 2001; Parrish, 2004). CLT now needs to recognize the value of, and include an explicit reference to, improvisation.

Improvisation in oral interaction can and should begin on the first day of a second-language class. Indeed, some CLT proponents have promoted interaction from the beginning (Parrish 2004; Brown 2007; Celce-Murcia 2001). I would add that not only interaction, but *improvised* oral interaction must begin on the first day. Waiting is counter-productive and contrary to the first principle I have proposed above. One does not learn to improvise in L2 later, after first learning many rules, words and patterns, and then venture out into the unknown to try to improvise with those L2 rules, words and patterns.

### **The intersection of SLA theory and improvisation**

The role of improvisation as a central variable in L2 acquisition has yet to be investigated specifically by SLA researchers. At the same time, existing SLA research has such significant overlap with improvisation, that much of it might be fruitfully re-examined with a clearer understanding of what constitutes improvisation. Areas of such inquiry range widely, including spontaneous speech production, the impact of fear on production, the focus of a speaker's attention, frequency, noticing-the-gap, language play and co-construction of knowledge. SLA research offers multiple possible points of connection between improvisation and second-language acquisition, while SLA theory has implicitly stressed the importance of improvisation in learners' oral production for decades, and continues to do so. When Selinker (1972) first laid out what he considered to be relevant data for the field, he clearly excluded repetition of practiced forms, drills, from the 'attempted meaningful performance' as data that should be used in constructing a theory of interlanguage (pp. 31-32). I believe that all verbal improvisations would fall under his definition of 'attempted meaningful performance'; it is difficult for me to

imagine something that is not improvised that he would not exclude. Three decades later, in a paper with Lakshmanan (2001), Selinker continues to point toward the importance of improvisation in interlanguage development, as he considers the value of analyzing spontaneous speech.

Ellis has reviewed a total of thirteen studies, eight in (2002b) and five in (2008) that examine the role of Form Focused Instruction (FFI) and “free written or oral production” (2008, p. 889). This is a foray into studying oral production that could be improvisation, and the relationship of improvised production to a particular pedagogical methodology, FFI. Ellis concludes that extensive FFI directed at simple structures is “more likely to succeed at developing implicit knowledge. However, limited instruction directed at complex structures also proved effective provided that the target structures are readily available in non-instructional input” (pp. 889-891). Since many researchers have shown that the task can impact production, (Corder, 1976; Long, 1981) a clear understanding of improvisation may lead to greater clarity in understanding the results of various studies, and the tasks they involved, when examining studies at such as those Ellis considered above.

Krashen’s (1985, p. 3) affective filter hypothesis recognizes something that all improvisation teachers recognize: fear gets in the way of learning, it freezes people. This is why improvisation teachers use play (principle 2) and orient learners toward perception, and away from judgement (principle 3). Guiora et al. (1972) may have been pointing to studying this same reduction of fear with their work showing that a limited amount of alcohol improves pronunciation, if indeed the improvement was due to a reduction of fear brought on by consuming a moderate amount of alcohol.

Research on planning and competition for cognitive resources in L2 production should not be confused with the kind of attention one pays to what one is doing in improvisation. Skehan (1996) has looked at the role of planning in various tasks, and its impact on fluency, complexity and accuracy in L2 speech production. Skehan defines two types of planning, *pre-planning* what learners do to plan before they start a task, and *online planning* the planning learners do during a task. Improvisation does not involve pre-planning or planning. Improvisers do rehearse, and this rehearsal is a kind of preparation, but it is not planning as Skehan is considering the term. Rehearsal for improvisers is a practice of doing without planning. Skehan and Foster (1997) found that fluency, complexity and accuracy compete with each other for available processing capacity in the brain. Studies by Kormos (1999; 2000) and Schmidt (1980) point to the role of attention available for monitoring speech while it is being produced and its impact on acquisition. When improvisers track what they are doing it is about perception, not judgement, what Kormos and Schmidt describe as monitoring is about judgement relative to a standard.

Any number of factors might lead to acquisition for a given individual. If a person has to improvise to express herself in unanticipated, novel circumstances, the high frequency of such improvisations in L2 production might increase the likelihood of L2 acquisition. Ellis (2008, p. 246) claims, "There is now sufficient theory and empirical evidence to make the case that input frequency plays a role in L2 acquisition." Perhaps something in the moment, (e.g.. a scent or a strong emotional response) triggers a memory which leads to L2 acquisition. Or perhaps the gap a person experienced between what he wanted to be able to express, and was able to express, created the fertile ground for acquisition to occur in the future. This would create a new form of

gap for SLA to consider, a gap that is about meaning. This is in contrast to the current notion of gap in SLA, such as those Ellis (1993) has examined which involve a focus on form.

Another important area of SLA research that overlaps with improvisation is language play. To determine when improvisation is play, and when it is not, and when play is improvisation, and when it is not, we need a definition of language play. Many have been offered. Tarone (2000) emphasizes the role of unpredictability as she examines language play and second-language acquisition, and calls for more study of language play. She highlights two significant models for understanding language play: “There are models of language in use, particularly those of Bakhtin (1981) and Larsen-Freeman (1997), that can permit us to view language play... as a manifestation of individual creativity and a part of the essential unpredictability of language use by individuals” (p. xx). From this perspective, language play as a manifestation of individual creativity and a part of the essential unpredictability of language is very compatible with our definition of language improvisation as a novel, instantaneous, spontaneous, L2 verbal expression, responding to an impulse (internal or external) to communicate in a situation in which numerous expressions are possible. Is all language improvisation play? Using the model from Tarone (2000), it would be. I can not imagine a situation where language improvisation is not a manifestation of individual creativity and a part of the essential unpredictability of language.

Is then all language play improvisation, or when is language play not improvisation? Let's examine some other models. Depending on the situation, and definition of play, some cases of language play may not be improvisation. Language play has been examined by Warner (2004), Broner and Tarone (2001), Cook (2000), and Lantolf (1997) among others. The distinction in the

art world between the play of improvisation and the work of re-production of forms parallels the distinction made between *ludic play* and *rehearsal play*, two different types of play described by Broner & Tarone (2001). Lantolf (1997, p. 11) treats play in a Vygotskyian framework as a kind of rehearsal, and gives examples, some of which are clearly improvisation, some of which are clearly not, while others are ambiguous. His example of making up sentences or words in Spanish clearly holds the potential to be improvisation, but might not turn out to be. His example of having random snatches of Spanish pop into your head is also ambiguous with regard to whether it is improvisation. If this is a matter of repeating exactly only what has been heard, then it is not improvisation – it fails to be creative. But if imagination can also be a source for random snatches of Spanish then this could be improvisation. His example of repeating phrases silently to yourself, assuming one is attempting to repeat phrases identically each time, is clearly not a case of improvisation: it is not ludic play, it is rehearsal (Lantolf 1997, p. 11) .

Paraphrasing Broner and Tarone's (2001) study, we have language play as “creative freedom playfully expressed”, or in Leonard's words “ I can say whatever I want to.” Broner and Tarone describe an example in which Leonard sings rhyming words he has made up in Spanish; when he introduces a variation on a well-known cough drop commercial, and a classmate tries to correct him, his response evokes the spirit of creative language play:

- (#) a) Leonard (singing):            Ricola. Tricola.  
       b) Dave:                                No es tricola. Es Ricola.  
   It isn't tricola. It's ricola.  
       c) Leonard:                         I know but I can say whatever I want to.

Indeed, improvisation in speech IS saying whatever you want to.

Leonard's examples of language play are novel, instantaneous, spontaneous, L2 verbal expressions, responding to an internal impulse to communicate in a situation in which numerous expressions are possible. *Ludic play* would not be improvisation if it were repetitive, and not novel. If Leonard repeated the same song, word for word, several days in a row, with no variation, this kind of continued play as rehearsal would not be improvisation. Cook (2000, p. 109) acknowledges that "play is a particularly difficult term to define", and goes on to provide frameworks for understanding it. Perhaps the most insightful for my purposes here is his summary of French play theorist Roger Callois. Callois establishes a polarity from *paedia* to *ludus* which overlays each category in his four part taxonomy of play, where improvisation is possible within any of the four categories. *Paedia* is play's "primary power of improvisation and gaiety" (p. 115). It is exuberant, and extroverted, at its extreme it might be called a rollicking good time. *Ludus* is play's "rules...institutional existence...civilizing power and the taste for gratuitous difficulty" (p. 115). At the far extreme from *paedia*, *ludus* is quiet enjoyment, calm pleasure. Verbal duels might be ruthlessly fought on the *paedia* end of the polarity, and crossword puzzles tranquilly completed on the *ludus* end. The *ludus* end of the polarity generally has room for the benefits of planning: chess, theater, mountain climbing, and the *paedia* end is much less likely to allow room for planning: unregulated combat, children making masks, swinging on a rope.

Warner (2004) differentiates between play with the form, the content/concept, and the frame. Warner builds on the work of Cook (2000) in many ways, as Cook examined play with form, semantics and pragmatics. Examples of language play as considered by Warner and Cook need to be examined in terms of the novelty, instantaneity and spontaneity of each example to

determine if the play is improvisation. In sum, L2 improvisation may always be language play, but language play may not always be improvisation.

Swain and Lapkin's (1998) description of a learning setting in which students are involved in what she calls co-construction of knowledge at times involves improvisation, and at other times does not. She analyses "the dialogue that occurs between two learners as they attempt to solve the linguistic problems they face while writing a short narrative" (p. 321) It is illuminating to look for examples of improvisation as we examine three different aspects of this activity: the dialogue between the learners, the learners' problem solving, and the learners writing a short narrative. The dialogue between the learners generally appears to be improvised, involving the creative use of the L1 and L2 of the learners. The learners' problem-solving could have a divergent focus (if there are several ways to solve the problem), or a convergent focus (if there's only one solution). An approach that favors divergence and creativity is more in line with improvisation, e.g.. "How might we start this section?" An approach that favors a single correct answer does not foster improvisation, e.g.. "Is it *der* Kind or *das* Kind?" While that question may be improvised, the response is not likely to be. The writing of a short narrative is likely to involve improvisation at first in the generation of material, followed by form focused activity in its editing and shaping, which is clearly not improvisation. If a narrative is memorized, its representation will not be an improvisation. If the writing of the narrative is, as Swain describes from Donato's research, an integral part of planning for a skit which is to be presented later without notes, and without being memorized, it could be a form oriented activity leading to an improvisation oriented activity.

In summary, many aspects of SLA research investigate activities that entail various sorts of improvisation in a second-language as learners produce oral language. Differentiating between second-language activities that are improvised, and ones that are not, may prove useful to the field. The concept of improvisation in L2 production and acquisition also provides new understanding of the differentiated nature of oral interaction as it might be understood by both SLA researchers and CLT proponents. In the next subsection, I shift the focus from the intersection of second-language acquisition and improvisation, to the intersection of second-language pedagogy and improvisation.

## **2. b) How is improvisation taught in L2 contexts?**

Do language teacher educators advocate for learner improvisation in the classroom? If so, do they teach teachers how to successfully teach learners to improvise? I have found that all language teacher education methods textbooks encourage oral interaction, at least in theory. Some specifically promote improvisation in that oral interaction. Communicative language teacher educators all advocate for an approach to teaching which involves having students interact orally using their L2s. How much learner oral interaction is free enough to qualify as improvisation is another matter. Among CLT teacher educators there is substantial variance as to which end of the continuum of activities, from controlled to free, receives the most emphasis. Actual guidance on how to successfully implement learners' oral improvisation is rare and limited.

I examined language teaching methods books by seven authors: Ur (1991), Lee and Vanpatten (1995), Nunan (1999), Celce-Murcia (2001), Hadley (2001), Parrish (2004), and

Brown (2007), as well as two books on SLA research written for language teachers: Lightbown and Spada (2006), and Tarone and Swierzbin (2009).

Lee and Vanpatten (1995), do not believe that improvisation can occur before certain forms and structures are taught, contradicting the first of my principles of teaching improvisation, **Teachers have students begin to improvise from where they are, at any level of experience.** “No matter what the oral communication task might be, the learners will need certain linguistic forms and structures in order to carry out the task. ...these should be taught before the communication task is presented ...and reviewed before starting the communication task” (p. 161). In this model, the purpose of oral communication activities is to practice previously-learned L2 forms.

Hadley (2001), like Lee and Vanpatten, would have us believe that improvisation has to wait until learners develop to a certain proficiency level. She proposes three corollaries for teaching speaking: “Corollary 1, Students should be encouraged to express their own meaning as early as possible after productive skills have been introduced (p. 237). ... Corollary 2, Opportunities must be provided for active communicative interaction among students (p. 243). ... Corollary 3, Creative language practice (as opposed to exclusively manipulative or convergent practice) must be encouraged in the proficiency-oriented classroom“ (p. 244). Not only does the first corollary advise waiting until after certain productive skills have been introduced, it is made clear after the third corollary that ‘creative language practice’ is for intermediate level and beyond, not beginners. Activity suggestions are primarily controlled: crossword puzzles (a *ludus* form of play, but not an improvisation, as it does not strive for divergent solutions), paraphrasing ideas, asking questions, pooling information in order to solve a problem, make a decision, or

complete an activity sheet. As would be expected from the corollaries, paraphrasing requires pre-teaching of forms; ‘something you use to...’, ‘the same as...’, ‘the opposite of...’. The remaining activities presented involve a significant degree of control; consulting set calendars to find a free date for everyone to meet, and discussing family relationships in order to fill in forms.

Nunan (1999) advocates for a mix of activities: “In addition to reproductive exercises, learners need opportunities of creative language use. ...the opportunity to recombine familiar language in new and unfamiliar ways...learners should be given the maximum number or opportunities to practice the target language in meaningful contexts and situations” (p. 241). However, when it comes to specifics, Nunan provides a minimal number. In his only sample speaking lesson he proceeds from a brain storming activity to create definitions of three terms; *culture*, *culture shock*, *cultural identity*, to a controlled activity sorting the list from the brainstorm, to two controlled listening activities to complete a worksheet on who said what, to pair work (brainstorming what people would say who visit your culture followed by what people visiting here would say), followed by an interview of a guest, concluding with a brainstorm of ideas for meeting new people in a new country after moving there. Depending on how the brainstorming and pair work are conducted, the activities could end up anywhere from controlled to free, but there is an overall direction provided to the teacher, with an intent to guide the flow of the content of the lesson. In the hands of a teacher who lacks improvisational skills, this intent to guide the flow is likely to move the activity away from Nunan’s desire for ‘creative language use. ...the opportunity to recombine familiar language in new and unfamiliar ways’ and toward student generation of predictable, familiar language output. The same is true of the interview activity. Nunan, like Hadley, and Lee & Vanpatten provides no specific advice for teachers on how to successfully get L2 students to produce creative language.

Despite a sincere stated commitment to an interactive classroom, Brown (2007) seems to have an orientation away from the end of the spectrum with the freest activities. It is possible he reserves these until learners are more advanced (though as we have seen, this violates the first principle of teaching improvisation). Brown's focus on the controlled end of the activity spectrum recalls the old fear of learner mistakes so common among ALM teachers. In chapter 14 Brown strongly advocates for interaction, and advises on ways to create group work to sustain interaction. Brown lists ten group techniques, and seven pair techniques for sustaining interaction. He also provides a brief guide for leading students into discussions. Of the ten group techniques, I found only four that had a primary orientation allowing for improvisation: role plays and simulations, brainstorming, problem solving and decision making, and opinion exchange. The others were games, drama, projects, interviews, information gap, and jigsaw activities. Only one of the seven pair techniques, quick brainstorming, required improvisation. The others (practicing dialogs, simple question and answer exercises, substitution drills, checking written work, preparing for merging with a large group, and brief activities that try to keep logistics simpler in pairs because of moving furniture or forming groups) do not require improvisation. Even in Brown's comments on promoting classroom discussions, his primary orientation is toward having the teacher provide learners with the classroom language they will need to carry out the discourse, as opposed to asking the teacher to allow learners to discover this and/or co-create it on their own. He provides no specific advice for how teachers should organize the most free activities.

Parrish (2004) acknowledges in her introduction to teaching ESL that communicative activities can be anywhere along the continuum from controlled to free, and explicitly advocates for a balance (p.73). She clarifies that the amount of language a teacher provides the learners

determines where a given activity falls on the controlled-free continuum: the more language provided by the teacher, the more controlled the activity. Parrish presents seven types of interactive speaking activities, of which four, as she describes them, can be construed as improvisation: role plays, problem solving, discussions, and picture stories. The others (information gap activities, creating groups among objects, and mingle activities to gather information) are much more controlled activities. Parrish provides no specific advice for teachers on how to successfully administer free activities.

In her chapter, *Teaching Oral Skills* (in Celce-Murcia, 2001), Lazaraton presents six types of speaking activities: discussions, speeches, role plays, conversations, recorded oral dialogue journals, and other accuracy-based activities. Lazaraton's presentation of four of these activities includes improvisation among the many possibilities: discussion can be something without a predicted ending, impromptu speeches are included in the larger group of speeches, role plays range from controlled (with prepared scripts) to free (based on prompts), audio journals include extemporaneous speech. As presented, conversations were part of conversational analysis, involving interviews, transcriptions, and subsequent analysis, not likely the stuff of improvisation, at least at a beginning level. In the accuracy-based activities, such as an interview using yes/no and *wh*- questions, she advocates for using these to lead to more communicative activity. Lazaraton provides teachers with no specific strategies for implementing the free, or more improvisational, activities successfully.

Ur (1991) suggests six types of speaking activities to teachers, ranging from very controlled, such as presenting dialogs and plays, to very free, such as role plays. With the most controlled activities, dialogs and plays, Ur suggests loosening tight structures, which would create more room for improvisation. She is clearly an advocate for improvisation in theory, but

in practice she offers no specifics on how to proceed to free up activities. Similarly, Ur encourages role plays, but offers no advice to teachers on how to successfully administer role plays in such a way that they promote improvised speech. “[Role play] is virtually the only way we can give our learners the opportunity to practice improvising a range of real-life spoken language in the classroom.... [It is] effective if the students are confident and cooperative...inhibited or anxious [students] find role play difficult or embarrassing” (p.133). She recognizes that inhibition and anxiousness will be impediments, but offers no solutions for their removal.

Lightbown and Spada (2006) aim to educate teachers about SLA research. They claim to advocate for a balance between focus on form and focus on meaning (p. 180) but even as researchers hoping to enlighten teachers, I detect a bias toward a form focus in their summary of the chapter entitled ‘second-language learning in the classroom.’ In this chapter they highlight five questions for future research. Three of their five questions refer to a balance between focus on form and meaning, and two focus only on form. The three questions concerning balance are: “How can classroom instruction provide the right balance of meaning-based and form-focused instruction? Which features of language will respond best to form-focused instruction, and which will be acquired without explicit focus if learners have adequate access to the language? How should corrective feedback be offered and when should learners be allowed to focus their attention on the content of their utterances?” (Are Lightbown and Spada implying with the last question that learners know how to focus on content if we don’t get in the way?) The two questions focused exclusively on form issues are: “Which learners will respond well to metalinguistic information and which will require some other way of focusing attention on language form? When is it best to draw learners’ attention to form - before, after, or during

communicative practice?” No question is asked which is specifically oriented toward helping learners operate on the free end of the spectrum. I believe the imbalance in these questions supports a tendency which will have researchers continue to believe that the key to better learning lies primarily in better understanding issues related to form-focus. This will impact teachers, as these researchers are also involved in teacher education.

Tarone and Swierzbina (2009) are concerned with providing language teachers the tools of SLA researchers to enable them to explore the structure of learner language in their classrooms. Following the assumptions of Selinker (1972) cited above, they assume that this structure is best seen when learners are focused on meaning rather than form. They present six speaking tasks for learners in their book, all of which are unrehearsed and require learners to improvise. The first task is an interview, in which the questions asked of learners become increasingly more open ended, and less likely to have been previously asked of the learner, as the interview proceeds. The second task encourages the learner to ask questions regarding a series of never-before-seen pictures, as they are presented. This task clearly requires improvisation. The third task has the learners retell the story of the pictures from task two. This task entails both rehearsal and innovation; it creates an opportunity to improvise, for which they have already in some ways rehearsed when they improvised in activity two. The last two tasks involve descriptions and hypothesis-formation about two never-before-seen photos of houses. The construction of the tasks deliberately does not provide the learners with any language ahead of time, coaxing them into improvising with their L2. This is done by providing them with support, sometimes with verbal, but often with visual scaffolding, to enable them to produce language in the L2, in a context where stress/fear is minimized. These activities clearly adhere to the first principle (from

section 2b of this paper) of having students improvise from where they are, whatever their level of experience.

Let's return to the questions from the beginning of this section: Do language teacher educators advocate for improvisation in the classroom? In theory, there is general support for improvisation, in the form of speech production at the free end of the continuum. However, in conflict with the first principle of teaching improvisation, free speech production by learners is often assumed to require some kind of pre-teaching. Do language teacher educators teach teachers how to successfully implement improvisational learning activities? No. When it comes down to how to administer free activities successfully, there is little information provided to teachers as to how to proceed. In basic methods courses and in practica, while some attention may be paid to developing a teacher's familiarity and skill with improvisation as a tool for the classroom, it was certainly not consistently emphasized as a part of my teacher training.

Is it presumed that everyone knows intuitively how to successfully conduct free, or improvisational, activities? Or is it presumed that this can not be taught? How can language teachers learn to create successful speaking activities on the free end of the continuum?<sup>3</sup> I hope that my answers to questions **3. a)** and **3. b)** of this paper will shed some light on that.

## **2. c) What impediments exist to the teaching of improvisation in L2 speech production and acquisition?**

Impediments to successfully administering the free activities encouraged by CLT appear practically everywhere a teacher looks. We have seen a less than ideal picture of how

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to decades of teaching experience, they used Yule's (1997, p. 30) principles for referential communication as a guide. (personal communication, March 29, 2011)

improvisation is taught in the last section looking at methods books for teachers, where free activities are more theoretically valued than they are practically supported. The list of impediments goes on to include textbook publishers and teaching materials, school administration and assessment, teacher training, and ultimately human nature.

### **Textbook publishers**

Some of the resistance to implementation of free activities comes from the textbook industry, which gives much more space to controlled than to free activities. I examined ten textbooks on ESL speaking skills, looking for free activities (see Appendix A). I examined the first ten activities in each of the books, asking the following questions, based on the definition of improvisation, to find truly free speaking activities: Is the activity novel? Is the language produced novel? Is the language produced instantaneous? Is the language produced spontaneous? Does the activity lead to the generation of L2 verbal expression? Is the activity authentic? Is the language produced responding to internal and/or external impulses? In the activity, can learners communicate using numerous possible language expressions?

I examined a total of one hundred activities in the ten ESL textbooks. The books did not categorize where the activities fell on the controlled/free continuum. I found sixteen that potentially could be presented so as to be considered free; in these activities, no support was provided to teachers to ensure that learners improvised. Perhaps, as I have suggested earlier, it is presumed that teachers know how to get learners to improvise. Each textbook contained from zero to four potentially free activities. The most common approach in such free activities was to have the students discuss questions presented in the book. Ten of the 16 were examples of this. But such activities are only *potentially* “free”. It can be problematic to lead a truly “free”

discussion based on a series of questions presented for discussion, because there are often a set of predictable or expected responses. Spontaneous unexpected responses can lead a discussion in a direction which does not follow the expectations of the series, and these improvised discussions risk being squelched if the teacher adheres too strictly to the proposed questions. Having a series of questions listed in the book for learners to read implies an expected direction for the discussion to the learners as well, which again could kill a truly improvised discussion. For example, Blass and Hartmann (2007, p. 4) propose for discussion :”What was the basic design of a house in your culture [100 years ago]? Is it different from houses today? Why do you think houses have changed? “ An answer of ‘no’ to the second question would derail the planned discussion. When considering the direction a discussion can take, teachers need to replace ambition (a goal) with curiosity, as Stark Smith (2008) advises; if they don’t, the discussion will not truly be as free as it can be, i.e., it will not entail improvisation. It may be possible for a teacher in large group discussion to abandon the second and third questions, and follow the discussion on its own evolution. It is perhaps less likely that learners in small groups or pairs will allow themselves the freedom to abandon questions posed for discussion when faced with the questions on the page.

I began my search in each book with the first unit of the book. Seven of the sixteen free activities I found were the very first activity in the unit and the book. They were presented in the context of brainstorming, picture prompts, or warm-up discussions for a later activity. Two of these seven used pictures as prompts. It is encouraging to see so many books start with free activity. However, it may be deceptive, since the trend did not continue in the rest of the chapter.

The level of support for teachers in carrying out the freer activities was inconsistent. For example, Hanreddy and Whalley (2002) suggested a language learning autobiography, which seemed approachable and likely to be of interest to learners. But no advice was provided to ensure that learners improvised in creating their autobiographies. Solomon and Shelley (2006) presented one activity which posed hypothetical, but imaginable, problems for college students, and asked the learners to give advice for the situations. Even with the long list of problems the author provided for which advice could be given, this too seemed approachable and likely to be of interest to learners. But again, no advice was provided to ensure that learners improvised in coming up with original solutions for the problems they were presented with. Kozyrev (1998) was the only author in the sample who suggested using a free write activity, but gave no further support for how to successfully elicit improvisation in carrying out this activity.

Some textbooks were notably unhelpful for teachers interested in delivering truly free activities. Two authors presented activities which might easily have been mistaken for free but were not. Thrush, Blass, and Baldwin (2002) called one activity a role play (p.7) which was actually an information-gap activity. Solórzano and Schmidt (2004, p. 1) used a picture to ask learners to predict, but the textbook follow-up makes it clear that they actually were seeking specific answers to closed questions, such as “What product is it selling?” The textbooks by Madden and Rholck (1997) and Jones (2002) included no free activities at all in the sample of ten I examined. Jones was targeting high beginning to high intermediate learners, and probably would use this lower learner proficiency level as an excuse for heavily scaffolding of every production attempt. Madden and Rholck also seemed to want to preclude errors by having everything highly practiced before anyone was allowed to speak. Speaking was viewed as

rehearsal and practice of material to be learned. Speaking was not viewed as an opportunity to improvise.

Sixteen out of one hundred activities is only 16% free activities. Even when (or perhaps

Table 2 Summary of potentially free activities	
<u>Author</u>	<u>potentially improvised free activities</u>
Blass	4x small group/partner discussion
Hanreddy	2x small group/partner discussion 1 autobiography
Jones	none
Kozyrev	free write
Madden	none
Solomon	1 give advice                      1 brainstorm
Solórzano	1 small group/partner discussion
Teske	2x small group/partner discussion
Thrush	1 picture prompt in small groups/partner
Wong	1 picture prompt in small groups/partner, 1 discussion in small groups/partner

because) there are so few opportunities for free oral language use in these second-language classrooms, discussion activities have to be skillfully conducted by the teacher, who must be

prepared to depart from the script of the textbook to permit at least some discussions to remain authentic and spontaneous. The random sample of ten speaking skills textbooks that I examined suggests that there is little support from the publishing industry for teachers interested in carrying out free communication activities in their classrooms.

Of course, in second-language classrooms, it is not only the speaking teachers who should conduct free activities. CLT proponents would have all language teachers, including grammar teachers, implement free activities. Rod Ellis documents evidence of resistance to real movement toward free activities in his chapter in Hinkel and Fotos' *New Perspectives in Grammar Teaching in Second-Language Classrooms* (2002). Ellis' survey of a large number of grammar textbooks found that "grammar teaching is still characterized as (1) explaining/describing grammar points and (2) providing opportunity for controlled production practice" (Ellis, 2002: 176). While most texts make some movement toward activities that potentially involve free production of language, Ellis sees this movement as limited.

### **School administration**

In my teaching experience I find that there is pressure coming from program administration to codify educational processes. The thinking of those producing the pressure to codify is likely to be in step with the thinking of some leaders in the education field, as well as those advocating for standardized proficiency tests. Contrast the expectation of codified educational processes (stated learning goals, a detailed syllabus and a textbook) with how Ruth Zaporah (1995) describes the way she approaches teaching: "Each class builds from what I see happening or not happening, combined with basic work I intend to cover. The order is haphazard and immediate. I make up new exercises, veer off on tangents if need be. I watch the students

and observe details. They teach me what to teach” (p. xxii). I suspect that many teachers feel pressure to not acknowledge how much they do exactly what Zaporah is describing – they spontaneously adjust their syllabus to meet the changing learning needs of the students in their class. Some of the pressure to do otherwise, and follow standardized goals and procedures is reinforced by sources other than administration.

Two other teachers where I am now teaching teach the same course I currently teach, at the same level. From my conversations with them about what they are teaching, I understand that their classes are much more oriented to covering the stated goals of the textbook, and they spend less time than I do with activities on the free end of the continuum. I try to resist a pressure to conform my teaching to theirs, but I feel it.

Improvisation may also be resisted because it can be harder to assess. According to Brown (2004), L2 output from controlled activities is generally more predictable and easier to assess, while L2 output from improvisation is more unpredictable, and more challenging to assess. Administration may be most interested in summative, standardized assessment instruments. These are likely to impact classroom goals, i.e. they encourage teachers to teach to the test. If the test does not require improvisation, teachers are not likely to have their learners improvise.

### **Language teacher education**

The system of language teacher education does not prepare teachers to have their learners improvise. This system includes coursework on methodology, as well as methods books for teachers. If teachers are left on their own to figure out how to successfully improvise, it seems likely that they may fail, and become more hesitant to engage learners with free activities.

Resistance to offering activities that encourage learners to improvise may also come from an inherent difficulty creating and implementing activities on the free end of the continuum. Two examples illustrate both these challenges.

A classic example, albeit now quite dated, comes from Paulston and Bruder's (1976) taxonomy of communicative interaction activities. They include on the free end of the continuum what they call 'community oriented tasks'. They advise teachers that these are easy to create: "Simply look around you, think of what your students need to know, and then write out the questions for them to find out; that's all, and you have yourself a perfectly good community centered task" (p. 66). Something that is actually quite complex is being paraded as something quite simple. As a result, I am disinclined to approach trying it. It is also possible that a teacher who is averse to improvising may actually create very closed, controlled questions for the students to find out in the community (e.g., what is the name of the street our building is located on?).

A second example is role plays. Many texts encourage the use of role plays, calling them free activities. It is my experience that many people, frequently including myself, have an ingrained negative response to such role plays. My response is similar to my response to the first example: something quite complex is being paraded as something very simple. "Do role plays" might also be paraphrased: "Create improvised theater." Theater arts professionals have gone through years of training to do what they do; they may make it seem easy, but it is not. Of the theater arts professionals who teach theater, only a subset know how to teach their students to improvise theater. Teaching improvisation is a particular skill.

A move in the right direction would be to have published materials that advocate role plays show teachers how to set up and support role plays so they result in true improvisation on the part of students. For example, they might do as Zaporah has done with both of her books on Action Theater (1995; 2006), and describe an actual case of an improvisation after it happened, as well as her thinking about what was happening, and the choices she made as things progressed. This approach provides a great source of material that one might possibly use to generate future improvisations, but it still relies on a teacher's intuition for where to start in their own classroom, and how to build a sequence from there. Too often teacher materials present themselves more as a recipe of directions to be followed than as a source of ideas that a teacher can modify to fit her own students' needs and abilities.

At the 2011 TESOL conference in New Orleans I attended two sessions for language teachers (Ackermann, 2011; Davis, 2011) in which the presenters sought to encourage teachers to use improvisation in the classroom. The sessions were similar in that they both provided pedagogical rationale for the use of improvisation in language classrooms, and numerous examples of specific improvisations that could be tried. The sessions were also similar in what they did not provide, which was specific support for how to successfully manifest such activities in the classroom. Both presenters failed to acknowledge that even in a room full of language teaching practitioners who had come to enhance their practice, there was a reluctance on the part of the learners to engage in improvisation. Language teachers need help from such presenters to learn how to get learners to improvise. Both presenters also failed to acknowledge in the public part of their presentations that their engagement with improvisation outside the field of language teaching had played a role in preparing them to know how to get their learners to improvise.

One exception is Ladousse (1987), writing specifically about the use of role play in the language classroom takes a step in the right direction by providing teachers with points to remember when setting up and carrying out a role play:

- 1 Distinguish between noise and chaos
- 2 Move from pairs to groups
- 3 Move from short to longer
- 4 Be able to vary the number of participants involved
- 5 Have clarity on situation and roles before starting
- 6 Don't worry about non-participants unless they make trouble
- 7 Move from easy to difficult/emotional
- 8 If learners default to L1, simplify
- 9 Have a follow up ready
- 10 Set and use time limits

Like Zaporah's books (1995; 2006) this is a step in the right direction, but truly successful implementation of improvisation by language teachers is going to require their own involvement in improvisation in order to comprehend its pedagogy. Without adequate pre-service and in-service support teachers falter. Even teachers who want to rise to the challenge of engaging in more free activities may try and give up; they yield to the more tried-and-true controlled approaches. Examples are easy to find. Ennser-Kananen, Godfrey and Martel (2010) describe a teacher of French at a US public university who habitually led classroom discussions using a pattern of beginning with open ended questions in order to elicit free responses. However, upon getting no immediate learner response to her questions, she would funnel rapidly to closed

questions requiring one word answers. In a second case, Dicks and LeBlanc (2009) describe a project in a French L2 context in Canadian high schools. They chose to abandon their original plan to use improvisation in the classroom project, because "[the students'] level of French, particularly their vocabulary, was so low that complete improvisation became very difficult. This added a high level of frustration" (p. 13) for the researchers, who were obviously not prepared to improvise with beginners. The researchers recognized that their substitution of script writing for improvisation was a significant deviation from the original goals of the project to encourage students to improvise in their L2. Martin Dobie, an ESL instructor at Eurocentres UK in London describes in his own classroom how "from the beginning...I observed that the students had unusual difficulties..in free speaking activities ...I abandoned less controlled speaking activities in the first stages of the course in favor of highly controlled" (Dobie, 2001, p. 302).

These examples illustrate how well-intentioned teachers, left to their own devices, defaulted to more controlled activities when their free activities met resistance, possibly because more structured activities were simpler for them to create and orchestrate in the classroom – but more likely because they have been taught how to do the more structured activities, but not the free-end activities. They needed additional skills to know how to adapt, design and implement the free activities they wanted to use. Adaptation of existing materials, design of new materials, and implementation of materials in class all require significant intuitive and thinking skills of a teacher. Without these skills the challenges can easily overwhelm the teacher, who is then likely to return to the old, familiar controlled activities.

Good teacher education will help teachers overcome their own resistance to improvisation based on fear of loss of power or control in the midst of freer activities. Form focused activities

provide the teacher with authority: the teacher gets to judge when a rule has been violated.

Teachers may be consciously or subconsciously reluctant to relinquish this authority. Not all teachers share dancer/improviser Anna Halpern's attitude toward teaching: "If a certain level of chaos didn't bother the children, why should it bother me?" (Ross, 2003, p. 51)

A teacher's personal learning style preference might also predispose that teacher toward using activities on one end of the spectrum (Cohen & Weaver, 2005). Cognitive style preferences that are concrete-sequential as opposed to abstract-intuitive, or particular as opposed to global, or analytic as opposed to synthesizing, or field dependent as opposed to field independent, might cause a teacher to shy away from trying to use free activities. The opposite preference might incline a teacher toward free activities. Similarly, a teacher with a personality related style preference that is open, as opposed to closure-oriented, might be more inclined to engage in free activities. Good teacher education will help teachers to recognize and transcend their style preferences.

It is perhaps human nature to favor a more closed, prescribed and prescriptive process when dealing with the unknown. This tendency may be even more pronounced when a closed process is the more familiar path. In the classic balance between *tapas* and *spanda* (from the classical Indian tradition, the balance of restraint and spontaneity or discipline and freedom) it seems intuitively obvious that promoting *tapas* is easier to figure out than promoting *spanda*. To return to the dance metaphor, it may be more familiar to teach a dancer to repeat a standard choreography than to teach a dancer to improvise.

But it is possible to teach learners to improvise. Even with all of the impediments discussed above, it is possible for language teachers to learn how to get their learners to improvise in using L2.

### **What can language teachers learn from the pedagogy of improvisation in the arts?**

Language teachers stand to benefit significantly by examining the pedagogy of improvisation and taking steps to expand their own skills as improvisers. Understanding improvisation will allow language teachers to develop skills for adapting, designing and implementing activities on the free end of the continuum. In this section I break the question into two sub-questions, and present answers to both: How can L2 teachers get their L2 learners to improvise? and, How can L2 teachers learn to improvise?

#### **3. a) How can L2 teachers get their L2 learners to improvise?**

There is no formula for successfully getting any learner to improvise. The creation of such a formula may be a priori impossible, one person's entry point being another's block. The six principles I've identified as common to improvisation in the arts, however, can begin to shed light on ways to proceed to improvise language use in the classroom. They are guides which may be of help to teachers. I believe that the use of improvisational "free" activities will lead to better language teaching and learning. I will present three model activities that foster improvisation by L2 learners. I then reflect on insights that each of the principles provides for the language classroom. Finally I consider applying the definition of improvisation as a guide for making our speaking activities freer.

### **Three model activities**

The first L2 activity we will consider is for the first day of a beginning language class. In this class, although learners have little or no knowledge of the L2, they can still improvise given a communicative situation. In the hallway outside the classroom, using L1, I propose a scenario to the class: they are hungry, and they get to go to our cafe to get something to eat, but in the room, the cafe, there is no one who understands a word of their L1, including me, as I step through the door. Inside I have the tables set up like a cafe, to accommodate 4-6 students per table. I have L2 menus on the tables. I have a service counter and display case, and a kitchen area. I am ready to serve actual tea, coffee, soft drinks and pastries. In the kitchen I have real food, if that is impossible, I have pictures of real food. I make the whole scene as true to life as energy and resources allow. If I am fortunate, perhaps I have more advanced students who can help as cafe staff. If not, I am the cafe staff as the sole employee of the establishment, and use gesture to organize the customers into manageable groups, as the others wait, watch, and learn. The cafe staff do not understand any of their L1. Students have no L2. I greet my customers with the L2, and the scene unfolds. What happens? Who knows? Possibly a lot of mime, maybe a search for cognates, maybe just a lot of shouting or pointing at menus or food in the kitchen. If learners point, the staff will respond with L2 words for the objects they point at, sometimes the word alone, sometimes embedded in an L2 context, as might happen in a real L2 setting. If they repeat the words for what they point at, I/we will respond with L2 encouragement. One hopes that ingenuity will prevail. Whether it does or not, some learners may leave the situation with a sense of some of the language that they would like to have had; maybe the word for banana, or

coffee, or sandwich. Maybe it will be the word for thank you, good-bye, or a word for money. Some may have even picked up a word or two of L2 that the cafe staff used. Other learners may observe the improvisations of their peers, and learn through them. I am prepared to be outraged that they try to pay with US dollars at the end of the scene, setting up a unit on money and numbers.

In this activity, I have scaffolded nothing, provided no prior L2 forms, but this does not mean that the learners have no knowledge. They will discover non-verbal, and other skills that they already have that will allow them to begin to acquire the L2. This is potentially a very complex role play, and may have a greater chance for success if it is preceded with a few simple activities that orient the learners to improvising as a group. I can scaffold for improvising, by improvising. One such activity could orient students to space and time. This entire activity could be done in the L2 with lots of non-verbal illustration. In preparation for the cafe activity, I might have the learners walk through the room, noticing as spaces in the room get crowded, and other spaces open up. I ask the learners to keep moving into spaces that are more open, less crowded. I then add the instruction to keep moving in the room, continuing to walk to open spaces, and to non-verbally choose a person to shadow, and stay as close to that person as possible without ever touching. As the activity continues, I can shrink and or expand the room, to change the density of the space, and get the learners used to working in different densities. As I am doing this it may occur to me that slow motion might come in handy in the L2 activity we are getting ready for, so I introduce another layer. 'Continue the activity, but on this signal, (a medium pitched 'ah' sound) everyone move in slow motion.' We do that several times. I introduce another layer, 'On this signal, (a low pitched 'oh' sound), everyone move in super slow motion (barely detectable

motion, but not still).’ We do this several times. I introduce a final layer, ‘On this signal, (a high pitched ‘ee’ sound), everyone move at regular speed.

After playing with these structures for a few minutes, I have my learners oriented to looking at each other, noticing how fast they are moving, and listening for sounds, as well as getting used to moving around the room. I have them ready to work alone, and as part of a group, and I have some control mechanisms in place if I need to slow things down. This will all be valuable when I have them improvise the cafe role play.

Each of the principles has been implemented in the activities described above.

Principle i **Teachers have students begin to improvise from where they are, at any level of experience.** We are clearly doing this, no pre-teaching of L2 is required. For the movement, no pre-teaching of the movement is required.

Principle ii **Improvisation is taught through play.** The movement structures and the cafe activity are playful. The improvised cafe role play has a relative in reality TV. The scaffolding movement improvisations appeal to the kinaesthetic learner in everyone.

Principle iii **Teachers orient students toward perception, and away from judgement.** The terms near/far, crowded/open, and the speeds regular, slow, and super slow motion, are all relative, and require each learner to find an internal compass. Learners will determine how they are doing in the cafe as they see whether they get anything to eat, not when they hear: “Good!” (or nothing) from the teacher.

Principle iv **Teachers have students consciously practice ‘doing without planning’.** By preparing for the cafe role play with the movement improvisations, students implicitly learn to

do without planning, repeatedly, as preparation for improvising. This can later be pointed out to be made explicit.

Principle v **Improvisers learn to attend to and respond to internal and external stimuli.** In the movement activities, learners decide where they want to go (internal), balanced by factors such as ‘Where is there room?’ and shadowing their partner (external). In the cafe, learners will have to figure out how to express themselves (internal) in order to succeed in the cafe (external).

Principle vi **Teachers support students in their creative growth, and do not only focus on developing technical skills.** In addition to preparing the learners to want to have vocabulary for food (technical skills) their creative skills are developing as they become more astute observers of their environment, and develop movement group and communication skills.

This activity can be repeated later in the year, and learners will recognize how much L2 they have acquired. It will be less novel, but repeating it with some L2 skills could prove valuable.

I have developed a second L2 activity by modifying a type of dialogue for two learners. In the usual controlled activity manifestation of this dialog the words for A are already written, and the words for B are not given. A reads, and B makes up responses as they go along. A is not improvising at all, and B is improvising, but within within very narrow and quite artificial constraints, because each response by B needs to follow logically from what A has just said, as well as lead logically to what A is about to say.

Let’s modify this activity from the format where A always has a text to deliver, and B is always inventing something to fit into A’s text to a format where A has only one line of text to deliver at the beginning, and then A and B go back and forth until they finally get to the last line,

also given, which is B's line. There are 2 given lines, the opening line, and the final line. The complexity of the lines can increase with the learners' L2 development. For beginners an opening line might be "Watch out!" and a final line "I don't think so." Advanced learners might begin with an opening line of "I just got fired!" and conclude with "There's more, but I've gotta run." The rest is improvised, including the number of exchanges. The exchange could be very brief, or epic. The goal is to have the ending be as logical as each of the other exchanges. This activity could be physicalized by writing A's first line on one side of a yard stick, and B's last line on the other. The yard stick is then passed back and forth until the final line is delivered. Alternately, the first and last lines could be on two different yard sticks, and the sticks could be swords in a duel, paralleling the energy of the verbal duel.

For later reflection and feedback the teacher could video the exchanges and play them back later for the two players, or for the larger group for reflection on form.

Let's examine how this manifests each of the principles.

Principle i **Teachers have students begin to improvise from where they are, at any level of experience.** The opening and closing lines can be tailored to the level of the learners, the rest of the lines they will create. No preparation is needed, other than to explain the structure, for which a book metaphor may be helpful.

Principle ii **Improvisation is taught through play.** The game like nature of this activity can be enhanced by focussing on the logical quality of the ending. The duel can be constructed to be boisterous play, *paedia* by using foam swords, or depending on the personalities of the learners, toned down to be calmer play, *ludus*, and played more like a card game for two.

Principles iii and iv **Teachers orient students toward perception, and away from judgement.**

**Teachers have students consciously practice ‘doing without planning’.** Learners will learn to be patient, and allow an ending to present itself, rather than trying to force things to work.

Whatever path they create, they will have created it as the activity progresses.

Principle v **Improvisers learn to attend to and respond to internal and external stimuli.** The dialogical nature of this activity requires both internal and external attention.

Principle vi **Teachers support students in their creative growth, and do not only focus on developing technical skills.** The physicalization of this exercise may allow learners to realize not only language, but the quality of language.

A third L2 activity I modified from what is sometimes called a ‘running dialog.’ As it is normally done, this controlled activity is for pairs. It proceeds as follows: A runs out into the hall, and reads a line of dialog from the A script (posted in the hall), and returns, to recite the line to B. This continues for each pair, line by line as fast as they can, until B has written down all of A’s lines. Then B and A reverse roles with B running out to get lines one by one until A has written down B’s lines. B and A then rearrange their lines until they make a dialog that makes sense.

I transformed this controlled dialog activity into a dialog for the whole class, which was divided into 2 teams, A and B. The two roles are clarified (e.g. A is a city bus driver, and B is a passenger, sitting alone in the front of the bus) and the dialog is built by team A and team B. One team is given a communication goal, a reason for interacting. Some possibilities for team A include: the driver is lonely, still new in town and looking to make friends, the driver would love

to have a cigarette, and wonders if they might both have an illegal smoke on the bus, or the driver is also a college student, and conducting an informal survey on moods and weather. Some possibilities for team B include: the rider is trying to ride without paying, the rider thinks the driver is cute, and would be a good blind date for the rider's best friend, or the rider wants the driver to stop at a non-designated stop. Learners can get involved in creating communication goals if this activity is returned to in later lessons. It may be possible to stipulate communication goals for both teams in subsequent rounds.

Team A lines up in a row, each learner waiting for their turn in the driver's seat. Team B is in line waiting to sit alone, one by one, as they get their turn in front of the bus. The dialog gets built, line by line, each line contributed by the next learner in line. After speaking their line, each learner sits down and writes down the line to record it. It concludes with the last learner's contribution. The recorded lines can be combined and shared, and a scripted dialog written collectively by the class is available for further activities, including reflections on the language forms used. After the first playing, learners might be freed in subsequent iterations of this activity to jump into the role of A or B without having to wait in line. This will change the dynamics, as the more extroverted will likely jump in first, but it will still leave space for the quieter learners to step in once their more vociferous classmates have taken their turns. In some groups this might help to jump start the activity.

How does this activity fit with the 6 principles?

Principle i **Teachers have students begin to improvise from where they are, at any level of experience.** This has happened. No scaffolding is done to get learners ready for bus driver or

passenger talk. If this is a class of learners who have never ridden a bus, the role of bus driver can be switched to cab driver.

Principle ii **Improvisation is taught through play.** This mini-drama is a ‘play’ created in the moment, and may or may not be humorous. Alternate scenarios can be sought from learners for the A and B roles. Playfulness comes from the act of creating a dialog spontaneously as a group, and even competing to be the first to sit in the chair to deliver a line, ala musical chairs.

Principle iii **Teachers orient students toward perception, and away from judgement.**

Responses are not about having correct answers (judgement), but about continuing the conversation (perception).

Principle iv **Teachers have students consciously practice ‘doing without planning’.** No line of the script can be created until the moment in which it is uttered. Learners see each other do without planning.

Principle v **Improvisers learn to attend to and respond to internal and external stimuli.** The external is the dialog up until a learner contributes, the internal is the learner’s contribution.

Principle vi **Teachers support students in their creative growth, and do not only focus on developing technical skills.** The generation of new roles as the activity is repeated creates opportunities for students to “become’ other characters, expanding their creative horizons. This can be easily fostered by the teacher.

### **Reflections on each of the principles**

Principle i **Teachers should have language learner students begin to improvise from where they are, at any level of experience.** Our learners are not required to know any more language

than they now know in order to begin to improvise. The default in CLT is often that learners require an exposure to a certain amount of form-based language input before they can enter into free language use activities. This is not true. It is the equivalent of requiring a music student to do scale practice before allowing her to create a four note melody.

The job of teaching students to improvise requires one to figure out a way and a place for them to begin to improvise with what they already have. If we fail to do that, we may never find enough forms for them to consider for it to be “safe” or “ready” to begin. Once I know what my objective is, I can begin to create communicative activities for my students to improvise within.

I believe it is best to start to improvise on day one in this way. Waiting until learners have rehearsed L2 rules and segments in order to begin to improvise may create the opposite of a “safe” environment or “ready” learners; it may make improvising too threatening. The longer one waits, the more threatening improvisation may seem to learners who have grown used to producing secure, predictable, “correct” forms, and the greater the fear will be when a learner faces her first free improvisational speaking activity. The longer one waits, the more it reinforces the idea that you have to read the whole book about the bicycle before you get on it and start to move the pedals. In fact, free activities may give controlled activities greater meaning by providing knowledge that a learner sensed was missing.

The challenge is to create a space within which learners can improvise. This space needs to be both motivating and narrow enough that learners feel safe to enter it. The teacher must limit the variables. In the activity with the cafe, for example, I assumed the learners all understood the variables of how to go into a cafe to get food; the unknown was how to do this without sharing the same language with the cafe staff. If the learners are unfamiliar with going into a cafe, then I

have to create a different scenario. A teacher's intuition is required to figure out what the variables are: what variables in the communication situation are to be played with, and what the restricting variables are, the known limits that frame the experience. This intuition can be developed in many ways, as discussed in a later section.

Principle ii **Improvisation is taught through play**. This principle draws our attention to the importance of having fun in doing communication activities. I once asked my mentor, Remy Charlip, as I arrived to work in his office, if he was hard at work. He replied, "No, I'm soft at play." He was having too much fun to consider what he was doing work. With this principle we are talking about ludic play: play that is fun (Broner & Tarone, 2001). This fun can range from quiet enjoyment to exuberance (Callois). When improvisation is taught, it is in a ludically playful context, one in which learners are encouraged to have fun, to enjoy themselves, even to laugh. Fun is important because it can allow adults to return to a time and space they knew as children, one that they may not access as easily as adults, a time and space where they were less worried about judgement (internal or external) of how they were doing, and where they were more able to just dive into the doing. "A creature that plays is more readily adaptable to changing contexts and conditions. Play as free improvisation sharpens our capacity to deal with a changing world" (Nachmanovitch, 1990. p. 45). Each of the three model activities was created to include playfulness.

Play as an approach helps us to overcome fear. Fear can freeze anyone in their tracks. Every teacher of improvisation is aware of their students' fears, and has strategies for dealing with them. If fear is not successfully overcome, an activity, game or otherwise, may seem

threatening, and the invitation to play may not be accepted by some or even all of the learners. One strategy is to take a big fear, and break it into smaller parts. Many of my learners have great fear of speaking in front of the class, a fear so great that it precludes any sense that this could be something enjoyable or fun. This fear can be broken down into lesser fears: fear of speaking in class, fear of presenting a monologue, and fear of being in front of class. Each of these fears can then be approached to increase a learner's prospects for enjoyment or fun. Fear of speaking in class can be reduced by speaking first in small groups, and then speaking to the whole group. After small groups, I regularly have large group discussions with all of us in a circle. Everyone speaks from where they are sitting, and the level of nervousness remains pretty low. I guide the learners toward making their presentations interactive, and not monologues. This keeps them calmer, and helps them get used to talking back and forth in class. Eventually everyone does a monologue presentation sitting down, with the desks in a circle, and time for questions, usually at the end. This physical arrangement helps them stay calm during the monologue because it is familiar. The presentation after that, they stand next to their desk, with the desks still in a circle, eventually they build up to a final monologue presentation standing in front of the class. Questions are allowed, at the speaker's discretion, to retain interactivity, which the learners generally enjoy.

It may be challenging for some adults to play and let go of being serious, but well structured activities can subversively guide them to play. Sometimes this is accomplished by having the fun be irresistible, *paedia*. The dialog with yardsticks/swords described above attempts this by taking the focus off of language, and placing it on the duel. The group dialog activity described above can evoke the feeling of a game of musical chairs. At other times, or for

other learners, it helps if the activity can be presented as a calmer problem solving activity, quiet enjoyment instead of a game, *ludus*. People who are averse to playing games may embrace problem solving, and enjoy the challenge. This enjoyment can be a doorway into having fun. It may just be a matter of terminology as things are presented, and/or it may be a matter of having a range of activities, from *paedia* to *ludus*, from pillow fights to constructing crossword puzzles.

Nachmanovitch offers helpful advice in constructing structures for improvising: “One rule that I have found to be useful is that *two rules are more than enough*” (1990, p. 83). If the number of rules gets too high, learners get distracted from the activity and focus on the rules, and whether they and others are following the rules. The role of focus on rules is better left to the teacher, who acts as referee.

The application of this principle will orient us away from creating situations where learners are concerned with whether they have said or done something correctly and toward situations where they are enjoying themselves. Play allows for repetition, mistakes, even failure with the hope of future redemption. The application of this principle allows me to take a controlled activity, such as either of the initial dialog activities above, in a different direction, and add an element of play.

Principle iii **Teachers orient students toward perception, and away from judgement.** This may be the trickiest of the principles to implement, because for many learners it involves a major re-orientation, an unlearning of how they are used to doing things. Most of us as learners are oriented to right and wrong, and we want to be right. This is what school typically has been all about. We turn that on its head when we teach improvisation. We have to. Miles Davis put it

radically: “Do not fear mistakes. There are none” (Nachmanovitch, p. 88). One of the best examples I know for demonstrating what I mean by this is in Edward’s drawing book (1979, p. 58). She takes a simple Picasso line drawing of Igor Stravinski, *a man sitting in a chair*, and turns it upside down. In this position the brain does not readily recognize *a man sitting in a chair*, and instead sees many abstract lines. This is especially true if the head, now at the bottom of the picture, is covered until later in the exercise. These abstract lines are then much less threatening to copy, because the orientation to getting it right has disappeared once the recognizable form has vanished. This exercise creates an opportunity for the eye to see, the hand to draw, and the mind to let go of judgement about what the lines OUGHT to look like.

The successful application of this principle, too, requires strategies for dealing with fear. An orientation to judgement is usually coupled with a fear of failing, or of appearing foolish. It is not easy for many learners, conditioned for years to be oriented to judgement, to let go of this orientation. I often wonder whether my many friends who tell me “I’m not good at languages” haven’t really just fallen victim to their own fears. Nachmanovitch describes this: “Fear of foolishness and fear of mistakes tap into that very primal feeling we all learned as children: shame...fear of judgement, fear of failure and frustration, these are society's defenses against creativity.....our automatic internalization of the parental and judging voices ...throw doubt on whether we are good enough, smart enough” (p.137-8). We need to make language classrooms as free of fear as we can, orienting away from judgement, and toward perception moves our classrooms in this direction.

This means a focus on meaning, a focus on what is getting communicated, and letting go of a desire to judge how well an utterance fits prescribed formal norms. This does not mean that

there is no room for form, but it does mean that it is not the focus during free activity time, when learners are supposed to be focused on expression of meaning. John Cage (n.d.) addresses this in rule #8 of his rules for teachers and students: “Don’t try to create and analyze at the same time. They’re different processes.” Nachmanovitch echoes this “If the editor precedes, rather than follows the muse, we have trouble...this produces a blockage or paralysis (p. 133). Goldberg, in her book on how to write gets more explicit. She lists two rules, “Don’t cross out,” and “Don’t worry about spelling punctuation and grammar” (1986, p. 8).

This principle of orienting us toward perception can also guide us toward observation and noticing in our classrooms. We can notice difference and similarity of sounds, accents, words, or any of a number of things that we as language teachers want our learners to be aware of, because ultimately we want them to have access to choices. Orienting ourselves away from judgement makes us avoid activities that involve learners doing something “right” or “wrong”. Instead of saying “Divide the things you brainstormed into these two groups based on these criteria” we might instead have learners sort the things into two groups, and explain how and why they did the sorting they did. Instead of having learners answer a question in complete sentences, we could have them write any words that come to mind when they hear a question.

Combining the first three principles, we set our learners up to improvise from where they are and create an atmosphere of play oriented to perception and observation and relatively free of judgement. Then we keep doing this, to normalize improvising, because that is what happens with language in everyday life.

Principle iv **Teachers have students consciously practice ‘doing without planning’**. Many teachers scaffold too much for learners, seeking to provide them with the tools they will need for every possible situation, because they care, and want them to do well. But as an exclusive way of proceeding, this is counterproductive. Learners need opportunities to speak L2 without pre-planning to prepare themselves for using the second-language in authentic situations. The more they do it, the more confident they will be doing it. The more they do it, the more it will seem like the norm. The more they do it, the more the classroom will begin to resemble the rest of the world. David Gere, dance writer and cultural critic, describes shifting his process as a writer in his introduction to the collection of essays on improvisation. Forced by time constraints, he shifted from habitually having everything outlined before he began a piece to just writing each piece as it came. To do this he had to “replace an impacted and deep-seated fear of the unknown with a new sense of joy in the moment of discovery, and a basic trust in the mental and physical processes” (Gere, 2003, p. xvii).

Doing without planning is what happened when I walked into the bakery in Santorini, Greece. I had not spoken Greek regularly in over ten years. It was late, dark, and we had gotten lost on the way to our hotel in the village of Akrotiri. What I wanted was to be at our hotel. What I had was not yet that. I felt the gap. I smiled at the proprietress and asked “που είναι ο δρόμος για ακρότιρί;” [Where is the road to Akrotiri?] I had not consciously formulated a question as I walked in. I could have predicted that I would ask a question, since I needed information, but I did not plan, I just entered and spoke. I was surprised at the form my question took, because I did not ask directly about our hotel. As I returned to the car I realized my surprise at the question I asked. I wondered why I hadn’t asked specifically about the location of our hotel, which is what

I would have predicted my question would be about. I was glad I hadn't. It was probably better to take things one step at a time, since the next thing I needed was to be headed toward the correct village. Without planning, I had asked the right question. That's what we need to have our learners get used to, doing without planning, and we get used to this by doing it all the time.

We can do this with speaking exercises. Rather than regularly scaffold every speech production, we ask our students to just dive in. For example, if we're teaching the pragmatics of interruption, rather than present a video of people interrupting each other in conversation, making a list of phrases to use for interrupting, practicing these phrases, etc. one could begin with an exercise in a group of four people, all with a story to tell, and then we create a structure that encourages people to interrupt each other, and see how it goes. Such a structure could be each person having an added task of getting more information from one of the other group members about their story, or physically stepping in front of someone in order to talk, or simply having roles of interrupters, and interruptees. Observers can be directed to take notes on what is happening for later reflection.

Principle v **Improvisers learn to attend to and respond to internal and external stimuli.** In their improvisations most improvisers are conversing, interacting with other improvisers. This is true for jazz musicians, actors in the Second City Ensemble, or contact improvisation dancers. They attend to their internal world, what they feel like expressing, and they attend to their external world, what their colleagues are expressing. They express themselves at the intersection of these two worlds. "The artist has his training, his style, habits, personality, which might be very graceful and interesting but are nevertheless somewhat set and predictable. When, however,

he has to match the patterning outside him with the patterning he brings within his own organism, the crossing or marriage of the two patterns results in something never before seen, which is nevertheless a natural outgrowth of the artist's original nature” (Nachmanovitch, p. 79). What Nachmanovitch describes here for artists certainly applies to anyone speaking an L2 in interaction with others.

To manifest this principle in our classrooms we have to bring learners into improvisations where they must interact with each other, as well as give them ample time to improvise on their own. They need experience in both their internal world, as well as the world of others around them. This can be as simple as sometimes having a learner decide what the discussion will be about, other times having a learner respond to another classmate, a prompt from the teacher, or something else in the environment. In the process of improvising in response to internal and external stimuli, students learn and grow, both within an improvisation as well as when observing others improvising.

For example, my classmates are discussing a movie they all seem to have seen. I'm lost. It's a Portuguese class, but they are clearly talking about a Hollywood movie. My brain tries to sort out the name. 'Dia d'Or' I think I have figured out a snippet! "the day of gold." but what the hell is 'Ogla'? I keep hearing 'ogla dia dor'. Boom. It hits me, I see Mel Gibson in my head, and know they are talking about O Gladiador. I have figured out Ogla, and she is not is variant of Olga. She is O Gla....

Principle vi **Teachers support students in their creative growth, and do not only focus on developing technical skills.** Our learners are learning a language, and they are and want to be human beings using a language. This means we need to support our learners in using the L2 as a

tool for their self expression as human beings. The more successful we are at doing this from the very beginning, the better. This may connect students to the L2 with an emotional bond. We will accomplish this by focusing on expression, and reducing focus on accuracy of linguistic forms. The battle between focus on form versus meaning is not unique to language teachers. Nachmanovitch describes our struggle as he writes of this same tension in the arts: “One of the many catch-22's in the business of creativity is that you can't express inspiration without skill, but if you are too wrapped up in the professionalism of skill you obviate the surrender to accident that is essential to inspiration. You begin to emphasize product at the expense of process” (1990, p 119).

Strategies for dealing with fear are also involved with the implementation of this principle. Since fear impedes play it also impedes creativity, because creativity is linked to play. As Jung said, “The creative mind plays with the objects it loves” (1923, p. 155). We must find ways to eliminate or reduce fear. Learners who are creatively engaged and using the second-language will be playing. So it is important to support their creativity. If the activities in our classrooms appeal to the broad creative range of our learners, we are more likely to find ways to link our learners' creative selves with their new language. This will help them to focus on their creativity, which will simultaneously reduce their fear by placing their attention elsewhere. Similar impediments to successful communication exist in both the performing arts and second-language worlds. People who drill forms repeatedly (classical musicians, ballet dancers, and ALM students) often freeze up when confronted with the challenge of freely expressing themselves in unanticipated situations. Familiarity with forms, brought about by extensive drilling, does not generally reduce fear in these situations. It can in fact increase fear, and in

doing so will likely impede communication. A friend in Brazil gave me very helpful advice: “If you want to really learn to speak Portuguese, don’t worry about making mistakes. Just talk. Talk to everybody, talk all the time.” Perhaps my intimate involvement with improvisation over decades made it easier for me to follow this advice.

Even advanced learners need strategies for reducing fear. My creativity, not my L2 technical prowess, allowed me to devise a solution for the following L2 high stakes, potentially terrifying, challenge. I had a performance to do in Potsdam, Germany in November of 1992. Just after the fall of the Berlin wall, English was rare in Potsdam, Russian was more common. I had done this performance many times before, telling stories of my life, in English. Even in my L1 I had a strategy for reducing my fear. I had my laptop on stage with me in case I got lost. I had no script for the show; I followed an outline on my grey plastic Macintosh laptop with a black and white screen. I explained to my audience, “The goddess only gave me so much K, so I have decided to use my K (pointing to my head) for processing, and I bought extra K (pointing to my laptop) for storage” (Scully, 1992).

Faced with the processing demands of doing this performance for the first time in German, I was scared, and I needed an additional strategy. I didn’t want to be perceived by a German audience as less intelligent than I was because of grammatical mistakes I might make on stage. I was also afraid I would lose the timing essential to good storytelling if I was caught up in trying to retrieve some word that wasn’t downloading fast enough. I crafted a solution.

I began with a preamble where I introduced myself, and explained that I would be speaking ‘post-feminist’ German. Just as my ancestors had fled Germany for the US, embracing the simplicity of *the* and forsaking forever *der/die/das*, I would be continuing to make some

changes, but now I would be changing German. Every possible Mann/man [man/one] became Frau [woman/one] (*one* does not generally exist in this context in German, but has been invented by feminists). Jedermann [everyone] became jederfrau and even niemand [no one] became Niefrau. Not only that, every *er* [he] would become *sie* [she] even if the *er* was a prefix, having nothing to do with third person singular male. *Erschaffen* [create] became *sieschaffen*, *erledigen* [finish] became *sieledigen* [no conventional meaning any longer]. By now my audience was so confused and bemused with what I had done with their native tongue, that I no longer needed to worry about what they thought I was doing to their language (Scully videotape Tretter collection). Having the audience laugh helped to dispel my fears of judgement. It also allowed me to sense them as friends, not foes, happy to be there, not disgruntled critics. Furthermore, taking ownership of German as ‘post-feminist’ expert reduced my fear of being perceived as a fool, as less intelligent, should I make a simple grammar mistake. This was because I had developed an intellectual rapport with the audience by playing with their language forms on a meta level.

Learners can similarly own their L2s if we consistently find ways to tie their efforts to learn a new language with opportunities to be the creative beings that they most enjoy in their lives. We will, of course, need to let them teach us about those aspects of themselves, to support us in making those linkages. They will come to their L2s if we create opportunities for them to really use the L2 as their own, even when they experience the fear, as I did going onto that stage. Nachmanovitch describes the fear in terms of what artists experience; his words are equally true of learners of languages. “We often fear that people won't take us seriously, or that they won't think us qualified enough. For the sake of being accepted, we can forget our source and put on

one of the rigid mask of professionalism or conformity that society is continually offering us. The childlike part of us is the part that, like the Fool, simply does and says, without needing to qualify himself or strut his credentials” (p. 50). This is likely to mean abandoning textbooks with their self described ‘high interest’ subject matter, in exchange for things the learners are truly interested in. In my class in January of 2011, consisting of many refugees and other recent arrivals to the USA, this meant lots of attention to the events in North Africa and the Middle-east. Their high interest in these world affairs meant they were eager to talk about them in class, and in their eagerness to express themselves, they spontaneously engaged in conversation with each other. They did not need me to ask a question to prompt discussion. They wanted to talk about what these events meant to them. What resulted resembled a scene in a popular bar more than a classroom discussion in which everyone raised their hand and took a turn.

The classroom application of each of the six principles presented here will guide teachers to create and modify activities which, when implemented will allow L2 teachers to get their learners to improvise.

### **Applying the definition of improvisation**

Our definition of improvisation can also serve as a guide to transform our activities to be freer.

*Improvisation is creating, in the moment and in response to the stimulus of one's immediate environment and inner feelings, novel, potentially divergent products which are free, spontaneous, unpremeditated, informal, impulsive, unrehearsed, unplanned, not thought-out. The act of creation is synchronous with its performance. The performers of the improvisation are its creators.*

Use this definition to evaluate each speaking activity. Is the activity novel? Is the language produced novel? Is the language produced instantaneous? Is the language produced spontaneous? Does the activity lead to the generation of L2 verbal expression? Is the activity authentic? Is the language produced responding to internal and/or external impulses? In the activity, can learners communicate with numerous possible L2 expressions? If no is the answer to any of the questions, then we have an opportunity to create a freer activity, a true improvisation.

### **3. b) How can language teachers learn to teach improvisation?**

Language teachers stand to benefit significantly by taking steps to expand their skills as improvisers. Exploring improvisation in other contexts will allow language teachers to develop intuitive skills which will transfer to their classrooms. In this section I present answers to the question: How can L2 teachers learn to improvise? To be successful in applying these principles, teachers may need ongoing professional development on an individualized path leading toward a personal improvisation practice.

By the time I got onto that stage in Potsdam in 1992, I had, as a learner, internalized the process of creating circumstances for myself to improvise. I credit many of my teachers for that, from my early German teachers, who allowed us to create our own skits in class and throw out the boring dialogues from the book, to many teachers in the arts. The context frequently changed, but the principles stayed the same. They gave me the chance to play, to have fun and really enjoy myself. I also credit myself for having the courage to seize the opportunities, and for continually searching for more. But this courage and willingness to search is in each of us, and we as teachers have the opportunity to nurture that in our learners.

Nachmanovitch asks a very deep question; “How does one learn improvisation? The only answer is to ask another question: What is stopping us? ... the work of creativity is not a matter of making the material come, but of unblocking the obstacles to its natural flow” (1990, p. 10).

It is unrealistic to expect a teacher who does not know how to improvise to be able to get her students to improvise. Only a teacher with improvisational skills, who enjoys improvisation, is likely to be willing and able to lead her students into this realm. Once in the realm of improvisation with learners, learner improvisation will necessitate teacher improvisation in response.

Learning to improvise will be an improvisational process for each L2 teacher. Fortunately, as an improvisation, each of us can begin where we are. We don't have to be more prepared or know more than we now do, in order to begin (Principle #1 p. 23). Improvisation is something that many beginning teachers fear; they feel safer sticking to the lesson plan. But many experienced teachers come to trust improvisation as a valuable skill in their teaching, recognizing the need to improvise every day in the classroom as they adapt lessons to the reality of what happens. Prompts to improvise range from having technical equipment break down to recognizing that what I had planned to do is not what my learners need, to what I had planned is too complex, I need to simplify it, or conversely what I had planned we got through in a quarter of the time I expected, I need to create novel ways to cover this same material again, right now. Nachmanovitch describes teaching as an activity where the expectation that one can follow a plan or script is inappropriate. He contrasts following syllabus, which has an expectation of where, what, when, and how students will learn something, with teaching, which connects “in real time...the living bodies of students with the living body of the knowledge” (p. 20). Zaporah

in the introduction to her first book (1995, p. xxii) describes exactly the approach to teaching that Nachmanovitch has called for. Spolin advises a similar approach in her reminders and pointers for teachers: “Be flexible. Alter your plans on a moment’s notice if it is advisable to do so, for when the foundation upon which this work is based is understood, and the teacher knows his role, he can invent many of his own exercises and find games to meet an immediate problem” (Spolin, 1963, p. 38)

Learning to improvise will benefit teachers in ways that extend beyond any given realm, such as music, or creative writing. Nachmanovitch describes this as “metalearning , a metadoing that transfers across styles and forms” (p. 9). Another improviser, Kent De Spain writes, “once you have developed and honed your awareness [through improvisation] you can attend to the improvisational quality of any moment of your life” (2003, p. 27). Eisner speaks of flexible purposing (a term originated by Dewey in *Experience and Education*, 1938), referring to the improvisational side of being able to change what one is teaching, even one’s goals, in order to better meet the needs of the situation. He suggests a value in such artistic training that reaches beyond the arts: “The kind of flexible purposing found in the arts might develop forms of thinking and attitudes toward problems that emerge in other fields” (Eisner, 2002, pp. 77-79).

Most teachers already know something about the need to improvise, having had to deviate, on the spot, from prepared lesson plans that were not working. Assuming that a teacher would like to know more about improvising, I suggest turning directly to sources of improvisation in the arts as one place to begin. Explore improvisation in dance, theater, music, creative writing, and/or the visual arts. Engage directly in any/many of these creative activities as a learner, both for the personal creative joy of it, and as part of a process which will help you to

bring improvisation into your classroom. Much in the same way that our own L2 learning can inform our language teaching, our experiences in learning to improvise can enrich our teaching as we look for ways to support our learners in improvising, creating and expressing their unique content in unique forms. New ways of thinking, being, and doing may be brought to us by these creative approaches to personal expression from the arts, expanding our intuitive and expressive potentials as people, and as teachers. Learning a new way to draw may trigger new insight into how to adapt a lesson plan that's almost working. Learning to move without set choreography may guide us with the one student for whom the other things just don't seem to be working. We can never know where new insight will come from. Expanding our capacity and skill at creating and improvising can only support what we do in the classroom, where, of necessity, we are all making it up every day. Our intuition as a teacher is a valued tool, and often something we may not easily be able to articulate.

I suggest starting in the realm that is most comfortable.

More introverted teachers might want to begin alone, with a book. Those drawn to words might begin with Natalie Goldberg's (1986) *Writing Down the Bones*. Those more drawn to images might begin with Betty Edward's (1979, 1999) *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*. While playing with material in these books, be aware of the difference between creating and editing. Engage, for now, in creating and trust, for now, that time for editing can be found later. A next step, after playing with the material in the book, might be to seek out a teacher whose approach to teaching is congruent with the approaches suggested in either of these books.

More extroverted teachers might want to begin improvising in an area of the performing arts; dance, theater, or music. In dance, improvisation is commonly found as a component in

modern dance classes, and it may also be found in classes where improvisation is the entire focus of the course. Contact improvisation is a particular approach to dance in which improvisation is the entire focus of the course. Tap, flamenco, bharat natyam and some forms of post-modern dance such as Authentic Movement, also make extensive use of improvisation, and may be fruitful fields for an aspiring improviser to play within. In theater, improvisation is often a part of actor training, and is likely to be a component of most acting classes. In theater, too, classes can be found which focus entirely on improvisation. Ruth Zaporah and many of her students teach an approach to performance called Action Theater, which is strictly improvisational and blends dance and theater. Comedy improvisation is another theater realm which works strictly with improvisation. There are some excellent books in these fields, but, unlike my advice for writing or drawing, I would not suggest starting with a book for the performing arts. The essence of what happens is so interactive that it really requires being part of a group.

For those drawn to music, music could be the place to begin. Nachmanovitch describes improvisation as the “most natural and widespread form of music making” (1990, p. 6) and tells of da Vinci and his friends improvising entire operas, words and music, and of Beethoven’s prowess as an improviser at the keyboards. Centuries ago improvisation was prominent in classical music, but today practitioners overwhelmingly focus on form and technical execution, and improvisation in classical music is more the exception. Improvisers in music might be found anywhere, but the most likely places to look today would be in jazz music, and some forms of Indian music. The goal is to find a teacher who is eager to work with a student who is looking to learn to improvise.

For those who feel shy about starting in the arts, there are at least three other options. I suggest mindfulness meditation, co-teaching with teachers who have arts based improvisation experience, and/or a set of steps for enhancing personal creativity.

I suggest mindfulness practice, because of its ability to develop awareness that can support improvisation. Barbara Dilley, a performer, educator, and administrator at the Naropa Institute, a truly multi-disciplinary center of improvisation, writes in her introduction to Zaporah's book, "Nothing offered those of us fascinated by the art and practice of improvisation a language and an understanding of this process of perceptual spontaneity like the teachings of meditation and awareness practice from the Buddhist tradition... It gives us a language to investigate the experience of impulse" (1995, p. xvii). Mindfulness practice might be used as a starting place for some to prepare to improvise and as an auxiliary place for those already improvising to gain insight into what they are learning and doing. Recent research in neuroscience Hölzel, et al. (2009) suggest that mindfulness practice leads to increases in regional brain gray matter density, possibly indicating that meditation actually impacts brain plasticity. Perhaps activities that support improvisation, like meditation, would also support language acquisition. Hölzel proposes an explanation of a likely route for meditation's role in reducing the experience of fear. She acknowledges that more research is required, but if meditation can reduce fear, this could impact language acquisition, providing teachers a tool for lowering affective filters.

A true commitment to mindfulness may require turning some things upside down. As we search for answers to unblocking obstacles, we must continue to be courageous and searching. This means sometimes questioning the systems in which we work and the assumptions of those

systems. A one credit dance class meets for four hours a week at the University of Minnesota, when a one credit 'academic' class meets one hour. Should a language class be scheduled more like a dance class? Is it not the same kind of experiential, body-based learning? Why am I never surprised to find a teacher in the arts who makes room in class for relaxation and or meditation, and always surprised to find this in a language class?

Mindfulness practice may lead us to revisit some of the designer methods of the seventies. Those that like Suggestopedia included room for relaxation and meditation, might have been on to something important. At a minimum, we should consider as many ways to reduce fear as we can. Taking a more proactive approach, we could involve relaxation and/or meditation in our classrooms. We might replace fear with mindfulness.

Research in neuroscience suggests a potential role for mediation. If we would like our classrooms to be centers of flow experience, because we want the effortless information processing that is so characteristic of the flow state, meditation may help to get us there. According to Dietrich (2004), in the flow state the knowledge in the implicit system (associated with the skill-based knowledge supported primarily by the more efficient basal ganglia) is implemented without interference from the explicit system (associated with the higher cognitive functions of the frontal lobe and medial temporal lobe structures which evolved to increase cognitive flexibility). Dietrich proposes that to get to the flow state, we need to reduce the activity of the explicit system. Such a reduction can be a function of meditation. Robert Turner (2008) in *The Neuro-politics of Contact Improvisation* provides a neurological explanation for why fear is an impediment to improvisation with things new and novel, and the role of awareness training in opening ourselves to new possibilities.

Co-teaching with teachers who have art-based experience with improvisation can allow for the co-creation of lessons by a language teacher and a teacher versed in improvisational approaches. Artists who teach in the schools are frequently asked to help to design cross-disciplinary curriculum. I find that the key here is to find objectives that translate across disciplines. This can be done by focussing on a range of objectives, from very specific to very broad.

Another path into the meadow of improvisation is offered by Csikszentmihalyi (1995) in his book on creativity. As a first step toward greater creativity, he offers some simple advice to anyone looking to cultivate their curiosity and interest. He advises three steps: “Try to be surprised by something every day. “Try to surprise at least one person every day. Write down each day what surprised you and how you surprised others.” Finally he suggests to review what you have written to find patterns, and when a pattern emerges, to recognize it as noteworthy. “When something strikes a spark of interest, follow it” is his fourth step in cultivating curiosity and interest. He then goes on to suggest how to nurture and sustain this curiosity. I suggest his book, particularly the chapter on enhancing personal creativity, to anyone drawn to following this route (Csikszentmihalyi, 1995, pp. 347-348).

If a final word of encouragement is needed to play in this meadow, consider these words again: “The unexpected awaits us at every turn and every breath. ...When we drop the blinders of our preconceptions, we are virtually propelled by every circumstance into the present time and the present mind: the moment, the whole moment and nothing but the moment. This is the state of mind taught and strengthened by improvisation" (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 22).

## Summary and Conclusion

This paper has examined improvisation in the arts and in language, with the intention of providing information to second-language teachers that will be useful to them as they engage their learners in free activities in their classrooms. A definition of improvisation was developed. This included information from recent neuroscientific research showing that improvisation in the arts and in language appears to be related, from a brain function point of view. A brief autobiography of experiences that led me to write this paper followed. I reviewed literature from the arts as well as applied linguistics to examine the role of improvisation in each. I began in the arts, and examining improvisation's functions there. From writings on the theory and the praxis of the pedagogy of improvisation in the arts, six principles of the pedagogy of improvisation were distilled, which apply across the disciplines, and which distinguish the pedagogy of improvisation from the of the pedagogy of re-producing refined works. I then examined improvisation in L2 learning, and identified its functions from both a SLA research perspective, and from a L2 teaching perspective.

The needs of second-language teachers for improvisational skills with which to successfully implement free activities are directly addressed from two different angles, classroom application and professional development. Suggestions for classroom applications include three model activities, and an examination of each of the six principles in relation to those activities. Each of the six principles of the pedagogy of improvisation is then examined as a reference tool for designing, modifying and/or creating free activities. Similarly the definition of L2 improvisation was presented as a tool for designing, modifying and/or creating

improvisational activities in the classroom. A range of professional development suggestions is offered to teachers interested in developing greater improvisational skills.

I recall reading so many comments about the underdeveloped state of the various fields of improvisation. The same underdeveloped state is true of improvisation in the field of second-language teaching. I hope in this paper to have made a contribution to the development of better second-language teaching, as well as the broader pedagogy of improvisation. This paper has recorded a process of trying to make explicit many things that were for me implicit until now. As certain as I am that I have explicitly articulated six principles, I am sure that there is some knowledge about improvisation that will always remain implicit, defying definition. Much of the wisdom of the world of improvisation seems to at least lean in that direction, defying efforts to make it explicit. Perhaps that is part of what has given the world of refined art works the dominant position in western culture. At the same time, improvisation is part of western culture, and it seems that we have arrived at a point where many who improvise and teach others to do so are moving to articulate what we do. This is a good thing. We improvisers know a lot, even if we don't often know how to put it into words. My reading has shown me that we are collectively beginning to form a theory to support our praxis, and we are increasingly articulating both theory and praxis in a way that is even supported by neuroscience. I hope that this can lead to gatherings of improvisers, across disciplines, to come together to share knowledge to further this process. Once we have come together, we can engage our collective improvisational skills to figure out how to proceed. These gatherings might be something like academic conferences. Whatever forms they take, in a gathering of practitioners and teachers who have learned how to trust the

process, it will be exciting to watch, listen, smell, taste and feel as we describe to ourselves and to the world what it is that we do, and how we go about doing it.

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## **Appendix A - references sorted by category**

### **Arts**

#### **Arts and creativity**

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## **Table of Contents**

<b><u>Introduction</u></b>	<b>1</b>
<b><u>What is <i>Improvisation</i>?</u></b>	<b>3</b>
<b><u>Personal background</u></b>	<b>15</b>
<b><u>Review and analysis</u></b>	<b>16</b>
<b>1. a) How does improvisation function in the arts?</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>1. b) How is improvisation taught in the arts ?</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>2. a) What is the role of improvisation in L2 speech production and acquisition?</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>2. b) How is improvisation taught in L2 contexts?</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>2. c) What impediments exist to the teaching of improvisation in L2 speech production and acquisition?</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>3. a) How can L2 teachers get their L2 learners to improvise?</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>3. b) How can language teachers learn to teach improvisation?</b>	<b>86</b>
<b><u>Summary and Conclusion</u></b>	<b>93</b>
<b><u>References</u></b>	<b>95</b>
<b><u>Appendix A</u></b>	<b>108</b>