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Los Angeles

All the World's a Stage:

Improvisational Theater and Engagement in Newcomer English Learners

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

David Patrick Metz

2021

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

All the World's a Stage:

Improvisational Theater and Engagement in Newcomer English Learners

by

David Patrick Metz

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor Christina Christie, Co-Chair

Professor Kristen Lee Rohanna, Co-Chair

This study examined the use of improvisational theater (improv) to assist newcomer English-learner (EL) students with language acquisition. The study was conducted in a high school in a large, urban school district located in southern California. Throughout a 6-week intervention of 45-minute weekly improv classes, 11 students engaged in spontaneous listening and speaking activities over Zoom (during the COVID-19 pandemic). Participants reflected on their experiences through daily journals that focused on feelings of comfort and anxiety as well as engagement. To capture engagement and participation data, the study also included observations and field notes. Finally, 10 of the student participants engaged in exit interviews of roughly 25 minutes each. Stories emerged that suggest some interesting findings about how EL students experience improv activities. Most students felt they were "part of a team" when they

played improv games, and many felt more comfortable volunteering to participate after watching more advanced peers play a game first.

The current study's author calls for further research into improv's use with Long-Term English Learners (LTELs), students who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH), students with autism and other unique student populations. In addition to further research, the current study also suggests that partnerships between improv training centers and public school districts may have beneficial outcomes for Newcomer ELs and other unique student populations.

The dissertation of David Patrick Metz is approved.

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Kristen Lee Rohanna, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2021

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my two moms. My first, late mom, Mary Virginia Dunn, was a teacher of English learners throughout my early childhood. She often tutored students at our dining room table to help our family make ends meet. She showed me how to lead with compassion when helping students who are new to our country and our language. After her untimely passing in my adolescence, my father eventually remarried.

It was my second mom, Geraldine, who first encouraged me to pursue a career in education after seeing me play with my niece and nephew one day ("you're so good with them!"). Geraldine, who later adopted me and my siblings, has been at my side throughout this journey, tirelessly cheering me on.

Thanks in no small part to these generous and patient women, I have found my way to completing my doctorate. I dedicate this dissertation to them.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Mark Twain once wrote, “Writing is easy, all you have to do is cross out the wrong words.” After having written this dissertation, however, I can definitively say that writing is *not* easy, and yet it’s a whole lot more manageable when one has a community of supporters comforting and guiding along the way. And for that, I must thank my family first.

I will start by thanking my wife Kristen for her patience and understanding when so many weekends and evenings were eaten up preparing and writing this study. She was a kind and thoughtful sounding board for me at every stage of this process; I could not have done this without her support. I also need to thank my father, whose years as a newspaper editor ensured that I would always see writing as an iterative process.

I also have my “work family” to thank. Thank you to my forever optimistic principal. Thank you to our EL designee for offering support in setting up the study. I am also grateful for our parent center staff for interfacing with parents to make sure they gave consent without feeling coerced. I need to thank my colleague for giving me access to her ELD students for 6 weeks.

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Metz, D. (1997, June). Fear is arrhythmia (Profile of Professor Victoria Santa Cruz). *StageCenter—The Magazine of Carnegie Mellon School of Drama.*

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

In the United States, a significant number of English learners (ELs) never exit services before graduating high school, and some drop out in the process (Olson, 2010). Late arrival newcomer Els—those who enter in their early teens or later—are of particular concern, as they have limited time to exit the pipeline before graduation. As a result, they are at particular risk of dropping out (Hill et al., 2019). California serves more ELs than any other state. In recent years, California schools have implemented a variety of new, specialized approaches to serving these students, including new equity and access positions, adaptive software, and new career pathway programs in career and technical education (Ojeda et al., 2019). Some schools have begun using blended learning to improve EL outcomes, while others have developed parent involvement programs (Ojeda et al., 2019). Still, there is room for growth in the number of innovative instructional strategies aimed explicitly at newcomer ELs (Ojeda et al., 2019).

The arts, despite their absence from many schools due to budget cuts, have long been proven to have a positive impact on learning (Boyd, 1934; Catterall et al., 1999; Smith & McKnight, 2009). We need not look far for a performing-arts-based, innovative, well-researched solution that has been waiting in scholars' plain sight for over a century: improvisational theater, commonly referred to as improv (Smith & McKnight, 2009). While arts education is not a new concept, the application of theater arts activities to improve EL outcomes is a promising endeavor that has not been adequately studied. There is one key line of research that has informed the current project: A decade ago, two leading midwestern universities approached the legendary Second City Training Center to be a partner in a set of studies. Their goal: to research the impact of improv theater games on three urban, low socioeconomic status (SES) Chicago

public schools. The present study builds on this research to determine if certain types of improv games are especially effective at engaging newcomer ELs and at promoting an environment that allows them to acquire the English language more effectively (Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

Background to the Problem

At nearly 5 million strong, ELs make up a significant part of U.S. public school students, constituting more than 10% of the country's K–12 population (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). When EL students enter a public school system, districts put them on a track intended to have them gain fluency within 4 to 5 years. Once they have finished this EL program, they are expected to take a test and to have satisfied a combination of factors that allow them to exit services as reclassified fluent English proficient (RFEP). When an EL student meets these requirements and is considered RFEP within 4 to 5 years, they are thought to have reclassified "on time." When students fail to reclassify on time and become long-term English learners (LTELs,) adversarial factors can compound, preventing reclassification and making dropping out more probable (Olsen, 2010; Umansky & Reardon, 2014).

When an EL student becomes an LTEL, the transition can be demoralizing. Schools frequently assign LTELS to regular academic classes that merely "mainstream" these students without proper support and differentiation (Olsen, 2010). Students who become designated as LTEL can suffer from socioemotional issues that cause them to withdraw (hoods up, heads on desks) and disengage, developing habits of "learned passivity and invisibility in school"; in time, this "non-participation becomes a habit" (Olsen, 2010, p. 24). With such adversity facing students who do not reclassify on time, it comes as no surprise that many LTELs eventually drop out of school (Olsen, 2010; Olsen, 2014; Sheng et al., 2011). Educators must prevent more students from being designated as LTEL by providing better support during the critical first 4 to

5 years in ELD classes. By reclassifying students on time, schools can prevent students from becoming LTELs in the first place.

Recent figures indicate that much timely progress is occurring with ELs who enter services in kindergarten; yet “latecomers”—students who arrive to a district as secondary students—often struggle to reclassify before graduating high school (Olsen, 2010). Of the nearly 5 million ELs in U.S. schools today, between 25% and 50% are LTELs (Ferlazzo, 2020). In California, the percentage is even higher (Ferlazzo, 2019). Moreover, California is currently experiencing an increase in newcomers who arrive as refugees or unaccompanied minors and who enter public schools at the middle and high school levels (Hill et al., 2019). This recently expanding subgroup of ELs urgently needs help to reclassify in time to graduate high school on time and with the requisite skills (Hill et al., 2019). But California’s public schools are taking too long to reclassify students, and therefore need to significantly decrease the time to reclassification out of the EL designation by administering consistent, differentiated English language development (ELD) support (Olsen, 2010; Umansky & Reardon, 2014).

Despite the urgency of the problem and government policies aimed at reclassifying ELs within a reasonable time, scholars know “almost nothing about reclassification rates related to instructional practices” (Umansky & Reardon, 2014, p. 880). Every student who fails to reclassify on time represents a failure of our schools to prepare this unique student population to become college and career ready (Hill et al., 2019; Olsen, 2010). The mere presence of almost 350,000 LTELs in California alone indicates a severe problem whereby a considerable percentage of students are failing to meet basic standards of colleges and employers (California Department of Education, 2019). Because of the large number of ELs who attend California’s public schools, the state serves as a bellwether for other states that stand to gain by watching and

emulating any programs that might result in success. More innovative programs must be developed to support students to exit EL services before they become LTELs and fall prey to a multitude of factors that make academic success and graduation less and less likely.

To better serve EL students, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 requires that states set up and make progress toward specific goals, such as reclassification rates. The state of California further stipulates that districts target ELs with prioritized funding through the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). These factors necessitate an evidence-based approach, one that administers programs aimed at reclassifying ELs in 5 years or less. In this manner, LCFF aids in preventing newcomers from becoming LTELs, or worse, dropping out of school altogether.

Since the California legislature introduced LCFF in 2013, EL funds have been made available in a way that fosters innovation by allowing each district to set goals and make plans to improve outcomes for a range of underserved student populations. A recent report has identified troubling trends in how school districts are complying with LCFF with their Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs), however (Ojeda et al., 2019). The study examined the extent to which schools are meeting EL needs in 50 California school districts. The research found that a significant number of goals and actions in districts that are engaged in conventional strategies that are generalized across several subgroups, including special education students, foster youth, and ELs. Notably, the study found "a significant number of goals and actions…that appear to perpetuate horizontal equity" (Ojeda et al., 2019, p. 206).

This recent research, published in *The Peabody Journal of Education*, points out that through the LCFF's design, state EL funds are intended to be directed to support research-based strategies that foster innovation and serve communities by allowing each district to set goals and

make plans to improve outcomes for a range of underserved unique student populations, including ELs (Ojeda et al., 2019). The policy was designed to be dynamic, allowing each district to set goals and make plans to improve outcomes for a range of underserved student groups (Ojeda et al., 2019). Too often, however, school districts have adopted LCAPs that use conventional rather than innovative methods. This fails to take advantage of the LCFF structure, which allows unique local decisions to be made to serve particular local learning communities. Furthermore, districts should develop programs for specific subgroups rather than applying a general approach; ELs, for example, benefit more from customized support, delivering a vertical equity approach (Ojeda et al., 2019).

Borrowed from the world of economics, the theory of horizontal versus vertical equity provides a clarifying lens through which to view inequity in the distribution of LCFF. The *horizontal equity* approach ignores differences between target groups and perpetuates inequities, often by distributing resources in similar amounts to all groups, regardless of need. *Vertical equity*, by contrast, deploys resources more appropriately in measures commensurate with requirements for specific groups. When districts address issues experienced by their unique student populations (special education, ELs, foster youth, etc.), they often seek to comply with LCFF by supporting them all equally—for example, by instituting an initiative that aims to support them all in the same way, such as through extra tutoring. In some cases, districts have divided up their LCFF equally among unique student populations, regardless of need (Ojeda et al., 2019). In contrast, by developing vertically equitable strategies of customized support for specific subgroups (like newcomers), administrators can track measurable gains toward state and national EL goals, as required under the Every Student Succeeds Act.

Due to the size of its public school system and because of its commitment to an enormous EL population, California has long been a leader on issues of EL education. Through recent state legislation (i.e., the LCFF) and national policy recommendations (i.e., the Every Student Succeeds Act), California public school leaders are compelled to make and monitor school success plans that benefit protected populations, such as ELs. Nevertheless, recent studies indicate that not enough innovative programs were being designed explicitly for student subgroups (Ojeda et al., 2019), such as EL newcomers. Without administering this funded mandate with original, locally responsive programs, districts will squander much of this legislation's potential on generalized, conventional, and horizontally equitable approaches (Ojeda et al., 2019). Rather than administer a one-size-fits-all solution, districts should create specific programs for subgroups to ensure vertical equity, whereby appropriate support goes where it is most needed.

In addressing such student subgroups, a few promising studies suggest that an EL program that has the foundation of theater games and role-play within the context of an arts high school can strengthen both academic and social skills that have a positive correlation with student success (Boyd, 1934; Johnston & Wardle, 2012; Smith & McKnight, 2009; Spolin, 1983). Scholars have long known the value of play in developing students' social and emotional knowledge (Canning, 2007). However, as districts cut arts programs and curricula are narrowed to include only easily testable skills, arts-based interventions are being increasingly overlooked. They must be further explored and documented (Smith et al., 2009).

The Potential of Improvisational Theater

One form of play that appears promising for ELs is improvisational theater, or improv. Improv was initially developed by Viola Spolin to build community and create a safe, theatrical

play space for immigrant children in 1930s Chicago. Spolin's spontaneous role-playing and storytelling games were designed to engage students from immigrant families and reduce language anxiety. Studies have shown that doing so has a positive correlation with English fluency (Felsman et al., 2019; Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Game-based play consists of "social patterns with a stamp of universality. Thus, the game has its roots both in human nature and in cultural experience" (Boyd, 1934, p. 414). This aspect of improv promises to offer students increased ownership and access to the content, which uses the universal human experience as its content (Boyd, 1934).

The use of improv in education is not a new idea. Keith Johnston and Viola Spolin, both founding leaders in the field, famously first developed their techniques for use with children (Boyd, 1934; Johnston, 1998; Spolin, 1999). Keith Johnson began his work with improv as a schoolteacher in England, and soon saw how useful improvisational games were at tapping the creative potential of so-called "bad kids". As noted above, Viola Spolin (1983) was an improv pioneer whose work originated with Chicago's immigrant children who resided at Hull House, a settlement house that included a "recreational training school" designed to serve its population of newcomer immigrants. Spolin's work was observed and documented by Dr. Neva Boyd, then a professor at Northwestern University. Spolin's classes functioned as a laboratory for Boyd's research on play theory and learning. Her games were developed specifically for the students from different cultures and language backgrounds who populated Hull House, games which were found to increase student confidence and spontaneity (Boyd, 1934). In this regard, reintroducing Spolin's original work to its target population (newcomer ELs), albeit nearly a century later, seems a promising strategy. Spolin eventually moved her improv school to La Brea Avenue in

Hollywood, California, where she began teaching a demographic resembling the ELs currently served by the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD).

In her groundbreaking study of play in Hull House in 1934, Neva Boyd observed that "the essence of play is the joyous entering into an artificial situation with its subsequent release and consequent organization of the elemental nature of the child into socially acceptable patterns." In other words, students who learn through play also learn social confidence. When students enjoy socializing through play, they will likely be more likely to gain English-only friends who indirectly increase their social use of English (Przymus, 2016). By informally reinforcing students' English listening and speaking skills, more active participation in other classes and social situations is likely, and a crucial piece of the reclassification process advances (Kim et al., 2015).

Recently, in partnership with Second City, a world-renowned leader in improv training and performance, the Universities of Illinois and Michigan both documented overall gains in student confidence and engagement during theater-enriched learning activities (Smith & McKnight, 2009). In 2009, researchers recorded the academic impact of The Second City Educational Program (TSCEP). The intervention was an outreach of the world-famous Second City theater, former home of comedy legends including Dan Akroyd, John Belushi, and Tina Fey. TSCEP selected three elementary schools in the Chicago Public Schools. Overall, the researchers found that the interventions playfully engaged individual students and strengthened the sense of classroom community (Smith & McKnight, 2009).

Project Vision and Research Questions

The research I described above validates improvisational theater games as legitimate learning activities, yet a gap remains in the research literature. While scholars have documented

academic gains resulting from improv enrichment programs in low-SES, urban elementary schools in the midwestern United States (Smith & McKnight, 2009), no research yet exists on the potential impact improv might have on newcomer ELs. The current study examined one such EL intervention that featured theater games and role-play in the context of an urban arts high school. I designed this program and hypothesized that by engaging in play-based enrichment activities, newcomer EL students would improve their ability to speak English in social situations with native speakers, thereby escaping the "ESL bubble" (Przymus, 2016).

The purpose of this study was to understand, through the use of qualitative methods, how students who participate in improv might experience changes in their English speaking and listening abilities. This study consisted of a 6-week intervention in the context of an urban arts high school in a low-SES community. The study examined an ELD support class containing roughly 16 students. The intervention occurred once per week for 45 minutes, for 6 sessions. The research was guided by the following research questions (RQs):

1. How do newcomer ELs characterize their comfort levels in using the English language while engaging in improv games?

2a. What are the qualities of improvisational, play-based activities that most engage newcomers in English speaking tasks, if at all?

2b. What are the qualities of improvisational, play-based activities that most engage newcomers in English listening tasks, if at all?

This study will fill an existing research gap pertaining to the potential benefits of the educational use of improv for newcomer ELs. Through participation in games that naturally engage students, ELs should experience changes in their language acquisition and usage and therefore reclassify faster (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). When newcomers are prevented from

becoming LTELs, students avoid a label that on its own conjures up feelings of hopelessness and further compounds the EL problem (Olsen, 2010).

CHAPTER TWO:

LITERATURE REVIEW

Newcomer ELs who enroll in public middle and high schools, sometimes also referred to as “latecomers,” face daunting odds. Some may not have enough time to exit services before graduation from high school, leaving them ill-prepared for college or career (Olsen, 2010). Others who finish their 4 years of services may not test out, pushing them into LTEL status, a designation that, for various reasons, too often dooms students to academic failure (Olsen, 2010). While LTELs appear to be high functioning in social situations, this masks their underlying challenges in English academic language and in their reading and writing skills (Olsen, 2010).

In this literature review, I begin by exploring the current problem, particularly in the context of California, and then identify several scholarly recommendations for better serving the newcomer EL population. Next, I introduce research that outlines the rationale for the use of theater enrichment specifically designed for newcomer ELs. I draw upon seminal literature regarding the purpose and value of improv (Boyd, 1934; Spolin, 1983; Johnston & Wardle, 2012) as well as recent quantitative and qualitative case studies on improv in a public school setting, involving students in two Midwestern urban school districts (Felsman et al., 2019; Smith & McKnight, 2009). In this way, as I explore the problem and its components in depth, I show the promising connection between the fields of drama, education, and developmental psychology in engaging newcomer ELs so that they gain English-language fluency more quickly.

Recent EL Trends in California

California public schools have long struggled to meet the needs of the EL population (Callahan, 2013; Olsen, 2010). On average, ELs are more likely to suffer from poor teaching and to attend unsafe schools; likewise, they are frequently placed incorrectly into their classes

(Olsen, 2010). Even when students get placed into the correct classes, their course content and teaching strategies are too often conventional, one-size-fits-all approaches.

A recent study published in *The Peabody Journal of Education* randomly selected 50 LCAPs and used them to understand emerging trends in the types of support that schools are offering to ELs in California (Ojeda et al., 2019). These support initiatives have included the creation of new, specialized personnel positions, shifts from time-based to performance-based metrics of student progress, more frequent benchmark data collection, new curriculum adoptions, and increased generic instructional coaching positions (Ojeda et al., 2019). The researchers were surprised to discover that, despite the intention of LCFF to stimulate locally developed and specific innovations, a significant portion of EL support remained generalized and conventional.

Ojeda and colleagues (2019) were most interested in programs they determined to be specific and innovative. They were careful to note that student monitoring efforts in the category "signaled a more sophisticated understanding that 'English Learners' were not a monolithic group" and needed a "more fine-grained analysis of progress" (p. 201). ELs, including newcomers, need innovative, specialized support (Callahan, 2013; Ojeda et al., 2019; Olsen, 2010). Late-arriving newcomers, in particular, require support, as they are at a higher risk of dropping out (White & Kaufman, 1997). In this way, individualized and innovative programs create the type of vertical equity described in the previous chapter, rather than "one-size-fits-all" horizontal equity (Odden & Picus, 2008).

Recent state and federal legislation has added to the considerable pressure public school leaders feel to serve all students more equitably. The reauthorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act has required each public school to set goals for particular student populations, including ELs. Furthermore, LCFF ensures state funding for ELs while holding recipient districts

accountable for setting goals and creating plans for progress toward those goals. While state legislators intended for LCFF to encourage schools to design and implement innovative programs at that local level, as noted above, recent studies have shown that conventional approaches are the overwhelming majority (Ojeda et al., 2019). Research calls for specialized, school leaders to develop innovative programs in response to underserved EL populations in California's schools. More of the same support is not enough, and one-size-fits-all solutions, such as increased access to tutoring services, will not suffice. Newcomer ELs have specialized needs, and therefore should be supported in a specialized way (Olsen, 2010).

Engagement: Disrupting the Path to Dropping Out

In order to address our public schools' failure to combat student boredom, dissatisfaction, and potential drop out, researchers have used the construct of *engagement* (Alrashidi et al., 2016). When students do not feel engaged and motivated by school, they become more likely to drop out of school. Yet, dropping out is not an instantaneous event; rather, it is a gradual process that begins with subtle clues (Alrashidi et al., 2016). When addressed early, teachers may not only prevent drop out, a significant threat to ELs, but also "enhance students' motivation and involvement in school-related activities, to increase successful student achievement levels, and to understand students' positive development" (Alrashidi et al., 2016, p. 1).

Much has been studied about how engagement helps learning, but scholars do not always agree on how to define engagement as a construct. In 2003, researchers at the University of California, Santa Barbara, published a review that aimed to summarize the extant literature on

engagement (Jimerson et al., 2003). According to their study, most scholars have defined engagement based on three categories: affective, behavioral, and cognitive.

The *affective* element of engagement includes students' feelings about their school, teachers, and classmates (Jimerson et al., 2003). Especially important for second language acquisition is that when anxiety is mitigated, it can lower what Krashen and Terrell (1983) referred to as the *affective filter*, meaning the learner is more open to input. By implementing Krashen and Terrell's "natural approach," educators benefit from strategies designed to lower students' affective filter. Improv, with its reliance on the use of games and role play, supports the natural approach.

Behavior represents students' outward, observable actions. In a classroom, this would include the degree to which a student is attentive (or disruptive), works hard, and volunteers to participate (Jimerson et al., 2003). Some indicators of how well improv is engaging students might include the proportion of students in a class who volunteer, the length of time a student talks during scenes, the number of exchanges that take place, and students' vocal volume.

Finally, there is the *cognitive* category. When discussing engagement, scholars commonly cite students' beliefs about self, school, teachers, and other students as major factors (Jimerson et al., 2003). In several studies, self-efficacy—that is, beliefs about one's own capabilities—has been positively linked with exposure to improv activities in similar time frames (Smith & McKnight., 2009).

Why Theater?

Theater has been well documented as being beneficial to academic success. One of the largest and longest studies of its kind, The National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS:88), yielded relevant data uncovering a link between theater arts involvement and socioemotional

development. For 10 years, the panel study followed over 25,000 students in American schools. In 1999 Catterall, Chapleau, and Iwanga—researchers at The Imagination Project at the University of California, Los Angeles—isolated NELS:88 data pertaining to low-SES students who had engaged in various levels of arts involvement. They compared their academic performance and self-concept results to similar students who had no arts exposure. Their findings conclusively showed positive correlations between high theater involvement and empathy, tolerance, motivation, and self-concept—all parts of the affective and cognitive components of student engagement mentioned above (Catterall et al., 1999; Jimerson et al. 2003).

The Intersectionality of Cognitive Development and Theater

For those familiar with the personal life of theorist Lev Vygotsky, it is no surprise that the histories and foundational theories of modern theater and his work on cognitive development are intertwined. Vygotsky was an avid patron of the theater (Davis et al., 2015). He attended many productions in Moscow at a time when the modern study of acting was being codified by Constantine Stanislavsky at the famed Moscow Art Theater. The theater profoundly influenced Vygotsky (Davis et al., 2015); he was particularly fascinated by how actors could switch in and out of characters as they walked on and off stage. It follows that Vygotsky would posit that theatrical play is nothing less than humankind's innate meaning-making mechanism (1980).

Vygotsky's research also included other theatrical elements, such as the use of props, gesture, and scripts. In his seminal work, *Mind in Society*, Vygotsky (1980) explained how, through the use of a prop, or "pivot," children can enter an imagined world. The most famous example is a child holding a stick between his legs to appear on horseback. Gesture, Vygotsky believed, "is the initial visual sign that contains the child's future writing as an acorn contains a future oak" (p. 107). Theater games, therefore, tap into the primal learning typified by a child's

natural urge to use gesture, initiate play in imagined spaces, and create meaning with peers through improvised "scripts" (Vygotsky, 1980). Vygotsky posited that playing children are often involved in reenacting common social patterns, or "scripts." For example, two children pretending to be in a restaurant might know various facts about restaurants. There is a menu and a waiter; the waiter takes an order from the diner, some food comes out with the waiter, and so on. One of the children might add the idea of paying a check at the end, imparting a lesson to the other: At some restaurants, one pays the bill at the end.

Play is how children educate themselves about the world, building their listening and speaking skills as they enact scripts, using props and gesture to learn to convey abstract thoughts (Canning, 2007; Krashen & Terrell, 2003; Vygotsky, 1980). It is for this reason that theater promises to be an excellent learning vehicle for all students. Thus, by practicing listening and speaking skills needed by actors, ELs derive added value as they improve their speaking skills to be understood onstage.

In 2014, researchers at the University of California, Irvine, documented similar value-added aspects of theater training as a result of a high-quality arts intervention in five large urban elementary schools in San Diego. The intervention consisted of dance and theater arts instruction that used imaginative games and storytelling techniques to engage students. While the large-scale, mixed-methods study mostly tracked attendance and standardized test scores over the 28-week intervention, some of the quantitative findings included improvements in attendance and in speaking and listening skills (Brouillette et al., 2014). One key finding was that 73% of the teachers felt that "the art program gives shy students confidence to verbalize in front of others" (Brouillette et al., 2014, p. 10). Increased confidence and absence of anxiety are affective factors

that permit more rapid second language acquisition (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) and facilitate student engagement (Jimerson et al, 2003).

While anecdotal, a 2007 article in *English Journal* vividly chronicles one high school ELD teacher's use of play-based (and scripted) theater activities. The teacher, Penny Bernal, observed breakthroughs in the verbal and physical expressiveness of her ELs throughout the process. She emphasized the use of "toning" or emotional loading of lines of dialogue, which was able to "bring out their personalities." This activity succeeded at breaking through the "dreaded monotone that plagues second-language readers and speakers and introduces conscious expressiveness into their voices—the kind of personality that comes naturally with their native tongue" (Bernal, 2007, p. 27).

To support her work, Bernal summoned Stephen M. Smith's (1984) book, *The Theater Arts and the Teaching of Second Languages*:

> Many language learning and teaching strategies are blended into the theatrical rehearsal process….In the drama rehearsal, we have a language class that teaches: grammar; language functions; culture; pronunciation and intonation; language "coping" strategies like circumlocution and paraphrasing; role-playing; appreciation of underlying meaning, that is, how to analyze individuals and situations using available linguistic and extra-linguistic data; appreciation of non-verbal communication;…self-expression; empathy; exploitation of the memory;…sensitivity to speech dynamics like tempo and rhythm; self-confidence in using the "second" language; and lexical, physical, and emotional vocabulary (2, 5) (p. 26)

Theater involves active listening and physicalization. Students engaged in storyteller theater, for example, must take verbal cues in each rehearsal and thereby gain repeated access to

the text with every repetition, widening the scope of their language acquisition each time (Dodson, 2000). But engagement is not always so plainly observable; in some cases, engagement is determined simply by an individual's mindset. Jimerson et al. (2003) observed that scholarly discussion of engagement as a construct commonly includes an affective component. Theater activities, both scripted and spontaneous, provide this support by improving affective well-being (Felsman et al., 2019; Lewis & Lovatt, 2013). In theater activities, "the affective filter is lowered: increases in self-esteem, self-confidence, and spontaneity often result from theater activities in the classroom, thus reducing inhibitions, feelings of alienation, and sensitivity to rejection (Via, 1976; Stern, 1980; Kao & O'Neil, 1998)" (Dodson, 2000, p. 5).

Why Improv?

If research anecdotally and empirically supports play-based activities as a means of improving EL students' engagement, then why use improv games in particular? Why not have students simply perform *Romeo and Juliet*, or *Our Town*? The reason is partly explained by improv's origin story. Two prominent founders of improv (or impro, as it is known abroad), Keith Johnston and Viola Spolin, were schoolteachers, and their students were the first practitioners of improv as we know it. In Spolin's case, in the early 20th century, before her students founded The Second City and became celebrities, she taught groups of Chicago's immigrant children at Hull House, and later had a teaching studio in Hollywood, California.

She designed her exercises, a collection of play-based activities, specifically to help students remain spontaneous and engage in collaborative storytelling through a technique loosely referred to as "Yes, and…". This term is shorthand for improv's distinctive performance protocol that allows players to devise scenes by accepting a partner's suggestion and then adding to it Halpern, Close & Johnson, 1994). These rules simply remind us of how we already play and

create scripts in highly social and imaginative play, or “make-believe.” Neva Boyd, a friend of Spolin’s, lent scholarly weight to the study of improv, as she published research on Spolin’s Hull House project beginning in 1934 through her professorship at Northwestern University. “Play releases and organizes…much of the child’s nature,” Boyd wrote about Spolin’s work, “while urban life represses and inhibits” (Boyd, 1934, p. 416).

The Second City Educational Program

Viola Spolin’s work would eventually inspire her son, Paul Sills, to co-found Chicago’s The Second City in 1959. This prolific theater has produced a steady stream of comedy legends for decades (Wasson, 2017). Many are among the most acclaimed comedic actors in American television, appearing on such programs as *Saturday Night Live!* and *30 Rock*. In addition to producing nightly comedy revues, including both scripted and improvised material, Sills and his mother built The Second City Training Center into what would become a world-renowned conservatory for improvisers, all by using Spolin’s original games. Eventually, The Second City would open new training centers in Toronto, Hollywood, and for a brief time, Detroit.

In the past two decades, scholarly research has begun to study the educational outreach efforts of The Second City, which have extended well beyond their affluent audiences, corporate clientele, and conservatory students. Through partnerships with urban public school districts, The Second City began to conduct improv enrichment programs in underserved neighborhood communities. Interested researchers from two Chicago universities followed, documenting the results in a 2009 study that suggested a connection between improv activities and improved academic outcomes in teenage public school students (Smith & McKnight, 2009).

In order to evaluate the impact one Second City outreach improv program had on literacy practices at three public K–8 schools in inner-city Chicago, researchers collected data from over

100 hours of observations and interviews. They also collected student artifacts, which they later analyzed in an exploratory qualitative study. The subject of the study was a program known as The Second City Educational Program (TSCEP). Its main goal was to "push back against contextual factors that have constrained arts instruction and integration" (Smith & McKnight, 2009, p. 1). Based on Spolin's foundational work, TSCEP aimed to engage students in role-playing and gamified social interactions designed to fortify their active listening and speaking skills while also building community in the classroom.

Through their analysis of observations and interview data, the researchers noted that the improv strategies appeared to help lower participants' affective filters, improve individual student engagement, and strengthen a sense of classroom community (Smith & McKnight, 2019). They observed that the improv activities, "led to confidence with expression which helped them to extend their authoring abilities in both spoken and written forms" (Smith & McKnight, 2009, p. 3). They pointed out, however, that variance in the personalities of participant teachers limited the extent to which positive effects were observed.

In *The Natural Approach*, Krashen and Terrell (1983) introduce the second language acquisition theory, which states that comprehensible input that slightly exceeds the comprehension level of the student is optimal, as it permits the student to acquire language more quickly through context clues and body language. Central to this theory is that "Language is best taught when it is used to transmit messages, not when it is explicitly taught for conscious learning" (Krashen & Terrell, 1983, p. 55). Because of improv's "Yes, and…" heuristic, most of the language created in the course of an activity is spontaneous, collaborative, and linked to the here and now. This differs from scripted drama, which can sometimes be rehearsed without actively listening, in a "your turn, my turn" fashion. Finally, other studies suggest that, as a

technique, improv may yield even faster language acquisition when compared to ordinary scripted theater. While traditional theater activities include oral and physical tasks, improv uses games to invite students to actively listen for new information, whereby "process and product co-occur" (Felsman et al., 20219; Sawyer, 2000; Sowden et al., 2015).

The Improv Project in Detroit Public Schools

While the 2009 TSCEP study used qualitative methods to gather and analyze data about an improv program, in 2017 researchers from the University of Michigan used quantitative methods to investigate a more recent outreach program between Second City Detroit and Detroit Public Schools. The Improv Project, as the program was known, spanned 10 weeks, tracked 10 schools, and involved 147 students (down from 266 in Week 1). The study's authors accounted for this dramatic attrition rate by controlling for possible self-selection bias (Felsman et al., 2019).

The goal of the research was twofold. In its primary experiment, the authors attempted to explore the impact that improv programming might have on students with social anxiety. The Improv Project's findings included increased creative self-efficacy and comfort while performing in front of others (Felsman et al., 2019). The article, however, does warn of the study's limitations in its lack of comparison or control groups, and also that the participants cannot escape the placebo effect (Felsman et al., 2019).

While research literature on improv applications specifically with ELs is sparse, if nonexistent, initial results from studies of improv with similar populations in urban schools reveal encouraging prospects for its application within ELD classes. To standardize my treatment with the preexisting research methods, I have implemented many of the Second City (Spolin) games used in The Improv Project's 10-week pacing and curriculum.

The Current Study

Despite improv's introduction to academia nearly a century ago, scholars have been late to thoroughly document its use in school settings. Few studies currently exist that determine how play-based activities such as improv games influence EL students' comfort levels or engagement while participating in English-language speaking or listening tasks. And while a few high-profile studies have been conducted in urban school districts, none have focused exclusively on newcomer ELs. Furthermore, none have attempted to offer insight into why certain types of activities are rated highly by students for increasing engagement in English listening and speaking tasks.

This study offers qualitative insight into the phenomena captured by researchers studying Detroit's Improv Project (Felsman et al., 2019) by delving more deeply into EL students' perceptions of English language usage (while engaged in improv), along with evidence that might be gleaned from field notes and student artifacts. Likewise, the current research serves as an extension of the Smith and McKnight (2009) study, which was conducted in partnership with Chicago City schools. The current study also offers qualitative data with which to make inferences about what types of activities are most efficacious in increasing engagement and thereby acquiring English more quickly.

The benefit to the field from this study is twofold. First, games determined to be more effective at engaging students may have commonalities (such as aspects involving physical movement) and would thereby provide insight. This information, in turn, can aid ELD practitioners in implementing improv in the field, further increasing engagement for their students. Participants' language gains may ultimately lead to a reduction in the time it takes EL students to be reclassified. Second, this study can provide a basis for further research into which

activities ELs find most engaging. This knowledge will provide further opportunities for study of the neuroscientific and psychological reasons that certain types of activities and environments are more engaging for ELs than for others.

CHAPTER THREE:

METHODS

Newcomer ELs who enroll in public middle and high schools, sometimes known as "latecomers," face daunting odds. Some may not have enough time to exit services before graduation from high school, leaving them ill-prepared for college or career (Olsen, 2010). Others who finish their 4 years of services may not test out, pushing them into LTEL status, a designation that too often dooms students to academic failure for various reasons, such as increased dropout rates and inappropriate course placement (Olsen, 2010). With this in mind, this qualitative study sought to understand the ways in which various play-based activities influence comfort or social anxiety experienced by EL participants. Additionally, the study sought to better understand which types of improvisational theater activities, if any, engage EL newcomers more than others. As described in Chapter One, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do newcomer ELs characterize their comfort levels in using the English language while engaging in improv games?

2a. What are the qualities of improvisational, play-based activities that most engage newcomers in English speaking tasks, if at all?

2b. What are the qualities of improvisational, play-based activities that most engage newcomers in English listening tasks, if at all?

The qualitative data, including field notes, interviews, and artifact analysis, provided an understanding of how participants experienced the improv activities, along with how and which play-based activities supported their engagement (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Although this study was descriptive rather than explanatory, these data provide insight into whether any increases in

engagement or changes in social anxiety during language use could be attributed to the play-based activities. The results illuminate common traits of the most engaging activities, so that generalizable knowledge can be derived from future research.

Site and Population

The site for this study was Downtown Arts High School (a pseudonym), where I was employed as a theater teacher. My school site is typical of southwestern urban schools in many regards due to its low-SES, high Latinx population. The unique dual mission of the school, whereby arts and academics receive equal emphasis, provides a culture in which arts-integrated academic programs receive more administrative support than usual. These factors make this school site a prudent choice to conduct research activities effectively.

I originally implemented the program (a curriculum made up mostly of Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone’s improv games) that was the subject of this research as an afterschool program in 2016. The school community, and our district’s leadership, embraced it. The present study, therefore, had the benefit of a supportive administrative environment, which lessened the chances that the 6-week treatment would be interrupted by external forces. To my good fortune, the principal at Downtown Arts High School granted me access to its EL newcomer population. I drew participants from a high school class of 14 ELD students.

I focused on high schoolers because newcomers—ELs who arrive in Grade 6 or later—are at higher risk for not graduating on time (Hill et al., 2019). The teacher gave me access to the students once per week for 45 minutes, for the duration of the 6-week study. While the goal was to recruit all students in the class, only 11 ultimately showed up; all of them became participants (though one did not participate in an interview). The 11 students comprised a triple-rostered class of ELD 2, ELD 3, and ELD 4 students. The designation of ELD 2 means a student is has been in

the United States for two years, and is in the second year of ELD services, while ELD 3 is the third year, etc.. Participants mostly came from Latin American countries, including Guatemala and Mexico, and all shared Spanish as a common language. The Mayan dialect of K'iche' was one student's first language.

Participants in the current study did not take the 2020 English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC), as it was cancelled due to COVID-19-related issues; however, most were assessed in the spring following the intervention. Their speaking scores from the 2021 ELPAC and other salient qualities are shown in Table 1 below. All students came from Latin American countries (although some did not reveal which), all spoke Spanish as their primary language, and most had minimally developed English-language skills. All but two of the students had taken a class with me in the year prior; the two who had not were new to the school in the year the study took place. All students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch under Title 1 guidelines (not shown).

Table 1

Participants' English Proficiency and Background Information

	ELPAC Speaking Scores[a]			
Name	**Spring 2019**	**Spring 2021**	**Country of Origin[b]**	**Taught by Mr. Metz in Prior Year?**
Veronica	Novice	Level 1	Guatemala	No
Vicenté	Level 1	Level 1	Nicaragua	Yes
Maria	Novice	Level 3	Mexico	Yes
Ernesto	Level 1	Level 1	Unknown	Yes
Monica	Level 2	Level 3	Guatemala	No
Carlos	Level 1	Level 1	Unknown	Yes
Monica	Level 1	Level 2	Unknown	Yes
José	Level 1	Level 1	El Salvador	Yes
Esteban	Level 1	Level 1	Guatemala	Yes
Juan	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Yes
Grace	Level 1	Unknown	Unknown	Yes

[a] Novice = no English present; Level 1 = minimally developed; Level 2 = somewhat developed; Level 3 = moderately developed
[b] All students whose countries of origin are unknown came from Spanish-speaking countries.

The site and sample resembled the larger Californian EL population, and indeed the nation's. As such, the findings can help inform practitioners and instructional designers elsewhere. In addition to the above-mentioned site-selection rationale, it bears mentioning that this sample is desirable because, according to the school district, there were no similar improv EL interventions being conducted at that time.

Intervention

This intervention spanned 6 weeks, beginning in mid-October and ending in late November of 2020. This timeline fit nicely into the school district's 20-week term, allowing 9 weeks of preparation before the intervention and 5 weeks after to follow up with participants. Each week, participants engaged in a series of improv games, and always began with a warm-up game that was simple and promoted a collaborative, playful environment. A list of the games played, along with brief descriptions, can be found in Appendix A.

The intervention was adapted to a distance learning format in which the Zoom platform was used. The study did not require students to participate with their cameras on, but it was strongly encouraged for most games. While only a few participants did turn on their cameras at any given time, most reported regularly watching the video of their classmates who participated in the improv activities with their cameras on. Because of the Zoom format, and because of the tendency for students to keep their cameras off, the intervention focused more on language-based games than on more physical games. There were, however, opportunities for students to engage in the physical games if they wished (with their cameras on), but only a handful of students did so.

Data Collection

Students and their parents were provided an opportunity for informed consent at the beginning of the year. Informed consent forms were translated into parents' primary language and distributed by email (see Appendix B). The school's parent liaison placed regular follow-up calls to parents in their home language, explaining the study's purpose and giving parents the opportunity to ask questions and give oral consent for their child's participation in the study. Students and their families were notified that they had the option of opting out of the data collection process.

Data collection consisted of multiple methods, including surveys, student artifacts, interviews, and video observations of class. In order to answer RQ1, I had an associate conduct observations, and collected student reflection journals. Semi-structured interviews and student artifacts assisted me in answering RQ2a and RQ2b.

Artifacts: Journals and Teacher Notes

Participants finished each lesson with 10 to 20 minutes of guided, online journaling (through our school's learning management system) on the day's activities, describing their progress in areas of participation, risk taking, growth, and engagement in the class (see Appendix B). These online journals aided in the safe storage and organization of the artifacts while avoiding illegible handwriting. The inclusion of student artifacts offered a secondary data source with which to triangulate other qualitative data. I also included teacher notes, which I recorded during and after each session. Teacher notes often focused on overall student participation and content of storytelling games. Together, these artifacts helped me understand whether participants who had just engaged in improvisational play-based activities might have been

experiencing a change in their engagement; they also shed light on how improv activities influenced their feelings of social anxiety or comfort.

Field Notes

To offer more data in the form of thick description, I engaged a research associate trained in classroom observation to aid in capturing field notes during the second, fourth, and sixth class sessions. The field notes targeted specific types of moments that included desirable outcomes in the context of an improv class. For example, they focused on moments that showed changes in English-language usage, such as duration of speaking time, speaking volume, frequency of volunteering, incorporation of information from the prior speaker, frequency in initiating a game, and “cheating out,” or turning toward the audience/lens while performing (see Appendix D).

Interviews

As the study progressed, I analyzed the data described above for emergent themes related to engagement. When significant evidence of increased engagement or change in language use arose, I created a related interview protocol probing for more information. These interviews were semi-structured, consisting of individual, roughly 25-minute sessions in which participants reflected on the data of interest, such as a unique moment captured in field notes, teacher notes, or a journal entry, to understand more about how and why they felt a particular activity engaged them (see Appendix E). Additionally, the interviews sought to draw out participants’ feelings of social anxiety or comfort during or after engaging in (or observing peers playing) improv games. Of the 11 students in the study, 10 participated in interviews. The interviews were conducted in Spanish (the participants’ primary language) through the use of a translator. The English translations of participants’ interviews were transcribed and analyzed.

Data Management and Analysis

Only I had access to field notes, teacher notes, student artifacts, audio recordings of interviews, and transcription data. I managed and secured these data by performing daily backups to hard drives, all of which were password protected. To protect the identity of the participants, I assigned them pseudonyms and changed some other arbitrary information.

I analyzed the data by several means. I used Creswell and Creswell's (2017) five-step coding process to analyze the interviews by looking for common themes revealed through careful analysis of the transcripts. I coded transcripts, student artifacts, and teacher and field notes for themes related to feelings of anxiety or comfort as well as information regarding active or passive engagement. Finally, I scanned the transcripts for any information which might disconfirm my findings.

Researcher Positionality and Ethical Issues

One positionality concern for the current study was that, while the students did not have me as their teacher at the time of the study, several students had me as their teacher the prior year. This may have caused a degree of reactivity in the interviews, and in the lessons themselves. In table 1 (above), the final column to the right reflects which students had me as their teacher during the prior year.

Two years of teaching ELs in a magnet high school in Zhoushan, China, gave me a practical understanding of research-based EL strategies, such as the use of Sheltered English and Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (Metz, 2015). I have participated in extensive training in improvisational theater at Second City and at other improv schools, and this adds to suitability for research of this type. Since several studies have been conducted using Second City teaching artists, implementation of similar content will help create more parity with

existing research. I have been conducting an annual afterschool intervention called the “EL Theater Workshop” for the past 3 years, including in the year prior to the study when I was the ELD teacher of record at this school site. These factors make conducting the proposed research in my own classroom appropriate.

Reactivity issues were a consideration in the current study since students might have simply said what they thought I “wanted to hear” during interviews. Even though I was only a guest teacher when I conducted the present study’s intervention, and therefore didn’t have control over students’ grades, they may have felt that I still had authority over them and engaged in participant reactivity. To mitigate this, I emphasized to students and parents that their participation was voluntary and that their grades would not be affected by their participation or the results of the study.

The study’s primary ethical consideration was participant privacy. If a student or parent in the participant group did not agree to have their data used in the study, their data would not have been collected. Because the treatment was in line with existing state and district ELD directives, there was little concern about the ethical consideration of the intervention. It was always stressed to parents and students they had the opportunity to opt out of having their data used in the study with no negative repercussions.

Summary

This basic qualitative study was designed to collect data on whether newcomer EL participants experienced anxiety or comfort in English-language use during and after an improv intervention, and on what types of activities, if any, they found to be most engaging. By conducting observations and gathering field notes, online student reflection journals, and teacher notes, the study provides a window into how certain improv activities might impact student

engagement and participants' experiences of social anxiety or comfort during and after the improv activities. By targeting moments of interest with follow-up interviews, I hoped that rich descriptive data would emerge, potentially offering insight into how and why, if at all, improv engaged newcomer ELs, and if it influenced the presence or absence of social anxiety, a key factor in triggering adolescents' affective filter (Krashen, 1981).

CHAPTER FOUR:

FINDINGS

This chapter describes the study's findings. The discussion is organized around the three research questions, which explored how newcomer ELs characterize their comfort levels in using the English language while engaging in improv games (RQ1) and what qualities of improv activities more engage them in speaking and listening tasks, if at all (RQ2a and RQ2b). Overall, participants said the improv activities decreased their social anxiety around speaking English and built trust with their peers. Some of the more advanced participants sought out opportunities to challenge themselves by engaging in more complicated storytelling games. These more daring activities led them on a journey of confidence building and adaptation, echoing improv's "Yes…and" mantra.

Participants felt engaged enough to participate in oral activities for various reasons, chief among them the opportunity for collaborative learning with peers. Some felt engaged enough to set goals to participate more in upcoming classes, and the intrinsic motivation for mastery engaged students to speak English in the improv games. Some felt improv was fun to perform and made them laugh. At the same time, many students indicated that they were engaged in watching and listening to their peers participate. Even those who were not actively speaking during the games could be passively engaged. Some believed they acquired vocabulary just by "enjoying the show" that their peers put on for them.

The synoptic table below illustrates the frequency with which students expressed these overarching themes (Table 1). At the top, the two rows of preexisting anxiety and comfort reflected students' feelings about speaking English in general (in a classroom context) but were not directly related to the improv activities. Below those two rows, the "reducing anxiety"

category indicates the widespread participant sentiment that the improv games lowered their anxiety about speaking English in class (RQ1). Finally, the bottom two rows describe engagement in speaking and listening; these correspond to RQ2a and RQ2b, respectively, and show that most found the listening and speaking games engaging, with some finding engagement in listening only. While some students did describe motivators that increased their participation, some of the same students sometimes only felt passively engaged at times.

Table 2

Frequency of Overarching Themes in Student Interviews and Journals

Code	Maria	Grace	Juan	Vicenté	Ernesto	José	Silvia	Esteban	Veronica	Monica	Carlos*	Total Mentions	Notes
Preexisting Anxiety	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		10	
Preexisting Comfort	X	X										2	
Reducing Anxiety	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X		9	
Motivators	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	10	Of 11
Passive Engagement			X	X		X			X			4	

Note. Student names are pseudonyms.
*Carlos did not participate in interviews; data pertaining to him are from his journal reflections.

RQ1: Newcomers' Comfort Levels in Using English

Nine of the 10 student interview participants indicated that the improv activities used in the study lowered their anxiety about speaking English. Importantly, all 10 had expressed that speaking English induced social anxiety—a factor that predated the study. They often described it as relating to their experience speaking English in general; sometimes they attributed it to their status as beginners. The findings regarding RQ1 are in contrast to this backdrop.

“Unfolding” and “Letting Go” of Anxiety

While nine of the interviewees agreed that the improv games lowered their anxiety, they attributed this to various factors. Table 2 below shows the distribution of codes among the 10 interviewees relating to comfort or anxiety because of engagement in the activities. These codes are noteworthy because they demonstrate that students expressed a diverse array of reasons for why they felt improv activities either lowered their anxiety or increased comfort. One student described a type of “letting go,” and one a sort of “unfolding.” Two students felt the games redirected their attention away from their social anxieties; one student was comforted by the predictability and clear patterns in the games, which allowed him to follow along with the others. Most students simply portrayed their reduction in anxiety in general terms.

Table 3

Frequency of Subthemes Related to Lowered Anxiety

Code	Totals	Maria	Grace	Juan	Vicenté	Ernesto	José	Silvia	Esteban	Veronica	Monica	Carlos *	Code Definition
Unfolding (*Desplegar*)/ Letting Go	2	X							X				Student(s) felt the games helped the class "unfold" and feel more comfortable.
Moving Past Beginner's Anxiety	3	X							X		X		Student(s) felt the activities helped them stop worrying about being considered a beginner by others.
Moving Past Anxiety	7			X	X		X	X	X	X	X		Student(s) felt the activities lessened their social anxiety about speaking and/or understanding English.
Distraction From Social Anxiety	2		X						X				Student(s) felt the activities distracted them from thoughts of social anxiety.
Building Trust in Others	2			X						X		X	Student(s) felt that interacting with others in the activities helped them lower their anxiety.
Predictability	1				X								Student(s) felt comforted that they knew how to play the games and would know what others would say.
Adapting to Others	1	X											Student(s) felt it was important to adapt to what the activity was calling for.
Code	**Totals**	**Maria**	**Grace**	**Juan**	**Vicenté**	**Ernesto**	**José**	**Silvia**	**Esteban**	**Veronica**	**Monica**	**Carlos ***	**Code Definition**
Challenging Oneself	3	X						X			X		Students(s) felt they were pushing themselves to exit their "comfort zone" in the context of the lesson.

*_Note_. Table only includes 10 students for most categories, as Carlos did not participate in an interview.

As shown in the row entitled "moving past anxiety," seven of the student participants felt that the improv activities lessened their social anxiety about speaking and understanding English. This was a common theme in the data: a reduction in anxiety because of the improv enrichment program. While most students spoke in general terms, some were more specific about how the

games lessened their anxiety. Three students specifically described a reduction in their anxiety about being beginners at speaking and understanding English.

Two students described a process they underwent as their anxiety diminished. Esteban, for example, said that the improv games helped students "learn how to let go of [our] nerves." Similarly, Maria described her experience as *desplegar*, a Spanish word roughly translated as "unfolding." In her interview, she explained how the participants "were able to sort of break [them]elves up a little bit and open [them]selves up." In both cases, notably, the students framed their experiences of increasing comfort as something they were doing to themselves, such as Esteban's "learning to let go" and Maria's description of how the students were "breaking" or "opening" themselves up. These details suggest that students are sometimes actively engaged in their process of anxiety reduction.

One student who described reduced anxiety was Grace, who, as a 12th grader, was the oldest in the group. In her interview, she revealed a slightly different characterization of her reduction of social anxiety—she said the games distracted her from it:

> I thought it was really funny, and it helped me not think about what other people thought about me or what others thought about me.…Because the games are interactive. They're fun, and they keep our minds busy, and we don't really think about other(s)…just the game.…I felt happy.

This quote shows Grace felt improv was a way to reduce her anxiety by redirecting her attention to the game rather than to her fears of being judged by peers. In his interview, Esteban also explained that improv allowed participants to "let go of the nerves" by "making you think fast and answer fast." The rapid pace of the games seemed to prevent Esteban from lingering on

thoughts of social anxiety about speaking English. This state is what many acting and improv teachers call "being in the moment," analogous to the sports term "being in the zone."

Vicenté said he was comforted by the predictability of the improv games, as they helped "students not to feel embarrassed. You learn new words; you learn to be more secure with yourself or confident." When I inquired what it was about the games that made him feel more confident, he replied, "The games help you feel less embarrassed, and with less nerves is that you know what you're going to say. You know what you're playing. You know what others are going to say." This comment was somewhat of a surprise because, in the spontaneous world of improv, one never knows what a peer might say or do next. However, the patterns and turn-taking structure that make up many improv games are, in fact, predictable. Perhaps this is what Vicenté meant when he referred to the certainty and the resulting confidence that the games allowed him to feel.

Two participants cited that the improv activities allowed them build trust with new peers, which in turn helped to reduce their anxiety. Carlos, for example, did not participate in an interview but reflected in his journals that he "felt more relaxed and confident" by his fourth session. By his fifth and sixth sessions, he "felt outstanding because [he felt] in harmony with all of them." Similarly, Veronica revealed in her interview that her trust in others was built gradually. "At first it felt weird, and I felt embarrassed to ask," she admitted, "but little by little, you start building trust." Notably, Carlos, Veronica, and Juan (who also felt this way) were all new to the school that year and had never met their classmates in person due to the distance learning format in effect at the time of the study.

“What Are You Doing?” Engages Bodies and Redirects Minds

As Grace expressed in her interview above, improv games have the capacity to redirect players from their social anxiety. Instead of worrying about what others may think, participants are invited to engage in a cognitive language task, usually in collaboration with another student. One game that keeps students’ minds and bodies engaged simultaneously is called “What Are You Doing?” In this game, a player starts by pretending to engage in an activity, such as “painting a picture” or “singing a song.” Then, while performing the activity, the player is asked by another student, “What are you doing?” The player replies by naming a different activity, such as “I’m brushing my hair.” At that point, this next student becomes the active player, immediately physically engaging in the new activity (brushing hair), and the game continues.

To better understand how this improv activity typically unfolded in our online improv class, consider the following generic example: The teacher invites students to join a game of What Are You Doing? Their cameras, mostly disengaged until that point, spark to life, revealing five teens in various states of dishevelment as they peer over the keyboards of their school-provided Chromebooks. Students who choose not to play are perched behind deactivated cameras, outwardly showing only a black box with their names, often in all capitals, in Zoom’s non-descript default font, suggesting their presence in the remote class.

Student A goes first, pantomiming stirring a bowl of a mysterious substance. “What are you doing?” Student B asks, peering into his camera’s lens. “I’m brushing my teeth,” Student A replies without a moment’s pause. With that, Student B begins brushing his teeth. Next, Student C chimes in and makes eye contact with the lens, asking Student B, “What are you doing?”

Student B freezes, as if to think of another activity without the distraction of performing his imaginary tooth brushing. (It is the rule that a newly created activity is disassociated from the

one in which the current player is engaged.) The teacher jumps in, side coaching, “Student B, keep brushing,” the teacher implores. “Don’t stop to think!” With that, Student B snaps back into brushing his teeth, and eventually blurts out, “I’m reading.” Student C then suddenly finds herself intently reading a book made of air, which she continues to hold as she responds to Student D’s query of, “What are you doing?” “I’m sleeping!” Student C replies. Student D dutifully closes his eyes and pretends to nod off, setting off a wave of giggles throughout the virtual classroom.

Apart from enhancing language acquisition by combining words with related actions, this activity is designed to encourage students to permit others to share control over their own actions. One key feature of the game, as detailed above, is that players are reminded to continue to perform the physical activity given to the previous player while thinking of a new action to be performed by the next player. This quality of improv seems to connect with Esteban’s characterization of how improv lowered his anxiety, since you have to “think fast and answer fast.” In this manner, improv games may prevent students from excessively monitoring themselves by encouraging them to commit fully to a physical activity.

Experiences of More Advanced Students

Three of the more advanced students—those who, in the coming spring, would score on the ELPAC as somewhat or moderately developed in their English oral skills—demonstrated a more risk-tolerant disposition toward the games. Their ELPAC data were in contrast to the others’ data in spring, when six of the nine participants who were tested scored as minimally developed in their English oral skills. (The 10th student, Silvia, scored in her Spring 2021 ELPAC as “somewhat developed”; she participated in the storytelling game Hand Puppets, but

she become ill with COVID-19 during the program's second half, which inhibited her participation.)

For example, when the class agenda included more challenging games, such as spontaneous storytelling, the small group of more developed participants constantly volunteered. Their stories contained extended turn-taking (which often spanned several minutes) and involved active listening as well as initiative taking. Students were careful to respect each other's ideas as they added their own, offering bold plot points that kept the story moving forward. While most students sat back and enjoyed the show during such activities, these more skilled students took center stage, transforming confusion and fear into a sense of "being in" the story.

In contrast to most of their classmates who had low ELPAC scores in listening and speaking, Maria and Monica both scored as moderately developed in their English speaking and listening skills. These two more advanced students differed from their classmates in describing their improv experiences, referring to their increasingly comfortable involvement with the activities as a process of "adaptation" or "challenging" oneself. Grace, who described the games to distract from her anxiety (discussed above), occasionally joined her classmates in storytelling games. Because she was not tested on ELPAC with the others, it was impossible to determine if she was as advanced at speaking and listening as Monica and Maria. Together, the three spun a spontaneous yarn that left the class spellbound. During their fourth session, Monica and Maria both volunteered to participate in a storytelling game that tested their confidence to use spoken

English and their ability to listen and pronounce English words. The activity triggered a wave of anxiety in Monica, which eventually transformed into comfort at “being in” the story.

A Complex Activity: The Conductor Game

Like many improv storytelling games, the Conductor Game involves two or more participants—”players,” in improv parlance. Students tell a story together, each stepping up when called upon while incorporating information from the prior speaker. During the 6-week intervention, this game only involved pairs or triads. Even with only a few participants, however, it was both rigorous and entertaining. Players became a team of storytellers, taking turns to flesh out the story, one sentence at a time. Like all improv games, the Conductor Game invites players to follow improv’s golden rule: “Yes, and….” This rule requires them to both actively listen to partners’ story contributions (the “yes”) and incorporate them into their own ideas, propelling the plot forward one sentence at a time (the “and”).

It was November 5th, and Halloween was still very much on the minds of the ELD students. It came as no surprise that a student suggested our next homespun story be entitled “The Boy and His Magic Pumpkin.” It was important that the story’s title, picked arbitrarily by a peer, somehow be justified. While extemporaneous teacher notes captured the plotline, some unknown details are approximated, such as the speaker order, exact wording, and beginning and ending of each participant’s turn. On Zoom, the game was nothing much to look at, the familiar grid, cameras off, with only names instead of faces, as students decided only to use their voices to engage in the activity. I did not require them to turn on their cameras, and while Maria started with her camera on, she soon turned it off when she realized her partners were not using theirs.

The story began with Maria: *A boy told his parents he wanted to get a pumpkin for Halloween*. Then Monica chimed in: *His parents complied and took him to a local pumpkin*

patch. The boy picked out a beautiful pumpkin. Grace continued: *The boy brought the pumpkin home and placed it in his bedroom.*

Monica then induced the rising action: *Later that night, the boy awoke to the eerie sight of his new pumpkin glowing in the darkness, filling him with fascination and dread.* Grace took over again: *In the following days, several spooky events that frightened the entire family were subsequently blamed on The Pumpkin.*

Monica finally revealed the story's climax: *Eventually, the boy decided to take matters into his own hands. He packed up the mysterious, evil pumpkin and took it out with the garbage*. Maria capped the story neatly with a resolution: *The boy promised himself, "I will never buy another pumpkin again."*

When I interviewed Maria about how it felt when she and Monica told the story about the magical pumpkin, she recalled it in transformative terms that spanned excitement to confusion and adaptation with her partner's storytelling contributions. "At the first time, I was excited and then confused," she admitted, "because Monica has a different mind than me, and she's in different…sentences, and I need to adapt to the idea."

Maria clarified that adapting in improv is a "need to understand the idea of the others and be respect(ful) with them." Monica had a similar experience. "When it came to creating a story," she said, "I had to rely on working with other people. We had to kind of construct that story together." These details suggest that while engaged in spontaneous collaborative storytelling activities such as the one depicted above, students navigate an array of emotions—in this case, before achieving "synchronization" with the minds of their peers.

Like Maria, Monica said the experience of telling the story of the magical pumpkin was transformational. "At first," she described, "I was really nervous, because I'd never played a

game like that. But as I started going through it, and the story came out…I'm in it." In other words, fear or stage fright seemed to peak for Monica just as she began. As she embraced their collaborative story, listening to her partner's words, making sense of them, and adding her part of the story, there was a resulting reduction of anxiety afterward.

According to teacher and field notes, Maria, Grace, and Monica frequently engaged in the more complex, linguistically challenging games offered, such as total physical response (TPR) games—which use physical movement to react to verbal stimuli—and storytelling activities. Monica, however, was new to the school and didn't share Maria's or Grace's comfort with their classmates or familiarity with the improv games. This fact underscores Monica's courage and skill to participate in new improv activities that were administered in a distance learning class with peers she had never met. When I inquired about why she felt the need to challenge herself as she did in class, Monica replied, "so I can reach whatever I want, or the goal that I want to reach." For Monica, some of her improv experiences involved a sort of "transformational stage fright," which eventually helped her increase her tolerance for anxiety while speaking and listening to English.

RQ2a: Qualities That Most Engaged Participants in Speaking Tasks

The 11 participants described various motivators for their engagement in the improv activities, including having the opportunity to collaborate with peers, having intrinsic motivation for mastery, and enjoying a fun, easy, less stressful break from academics. Students also described enjoying the TPR activities, both as performers and observers. Table 3 (below), shows the array of motivator codes applied to students' descriptions of their engagement with the improv activities. The numbers in the "Totals" column (second from left) reflect the total number

of students who generated the code in their interviews. Since one student did not participate in an interview, only 10 students are included in Table 3.

Table 4

Motivators for Student Engagement With Improv Activities

	Totals	Maria	Grace	Juan	Vicenté	Ernesto	José	Silvia	Esteban	Veronica	Monica	Code Definition
Total Physical Response	2	X				X						Student(s) found activities that used Total Physical Response elements were more engaging.
Thrill of Not Knowing What Comes Next	2	X						X				Student(s) felt the unpredictability of the spontaneous activities was engaging.
Excited to Try Something New	1	X										Student(s) expressed interested in experiencing new EL activities.
Fun	4	X			X			X	X			Student(s) felt the activities were fun.
Funny	2						X	X				Student(s) liked that the games were funny.
Familiarity With Task	2						X	X				Student(s) felt the more familiar games were more engaging.
Positive Prior Impression of Improv	1	X										Student(s) motivated by a positive impression of improv activities from the prior year.
A Break From Stressful Academics	1							X				Student(s) engaged by the activities the seemed not academic like "regular" school.
Wanted to Participate, but Had Tech Issues	1					X						Student(s) wanted to participate in the lesson but prevented from doing so by tech issues.
Opportunities for Student Voice (vs. Teacher Voice)	1								X			Student(s) enjoyed that there were opportunities to practice speaking English during the lesson.
Drive for Mastery	6				X	X		X	X	X	X	Student(s) felt motivated by a desire to master English language content.
Collaborative Learning (Speaking and Listening)	7	X	X	X	X	X		X	X			Student(s) felt motivated by opportunities to engage in listening and speaking with peers in English-language tasks.
Feeling Part of a Team	2	X								X		Student(s) felt part of a team during and after the lesson.

Note. Table only includes 10 students, as one student did not participate in an interview.

Collaborative Learning: One-to-Fifteen, No Doubles

The "collaborative learning" code was prevalent when students described their motivations for engagement in the improv activities (RQ2a). Seven of the 11 students expressed

that the collaborative nature of the improv games engaged them to participate, which was also reflected in the participation data captured in the field notes. One game that demonstrated this collaborative learning code stood out: One-to-Fifteen, No Doubles. In this game, the class was asked to count to 15 in English as a group, one participant at a time, in an order that emerged spontaneously. They were asked to work together to enumerate without any players speaking simultaneously. If two students said the same number at the same time, the count started again from zero. The game was simple in one regard (counting from one to 15 in English) but unpredictable in another (when to say the following number).

The field notes documenting participant data showed this game took a clear lead in participation attempts per session, with 33 attempts (voluntary English utterances). The game that had the next most frequent participation attempts, What Are You Doing?, had only 10. These data show that students found One-to-Fifteen, No Doubles highly engaging. (I return to this later in this section.) The game was highly collaborative, with numbers bouncing from one student to the next like a beach ball kept in the air by 11 eager pairs of hands. While hard to capture in words, the students' Zoom-bound giddy energy was wound tight; one by one, they propelled themselves from one number to the next, trying to blurt out each number ever so slightly before their classmates did. Despite frequent overlaps and subsequent count resets to zero, students repeatedly persisted, trying to work with a "sixth-sense" synchronicity to make it to 15. According to field notes and interview data, this simple counting game was the student favorite by far. It was a chance for many students to take small, safe risks (saying a number in English) and collaborate with all their classmates in a relatively short period.

As an example, early one afternoon in late November, the ELD class began the final session of the current study. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic had been working its way

through our school community for 7 months. As a result, distance learning was a struggle, but the ELD students at Downtown Arts High School showed up to their Zoom classes regularly despite this adversity. Ms. Rivera, the ELD teacher of record for the class participating in the study, was taking roll. It was 12:37 p.m., and students were primarily present, albeit with their cameras off. After few more minutes, the entire class had virtually arrived, and we began. I greeted the students with my usual enthusiasm and invited them all to participate in our first game of the day: One-to-Fifteen, No Doubles. By encouraging a heightened quality of group awareness, the game serves as an effective warm-up in which students of all levels can engage.

None of the data collection methods were designed to capture a verbatim transcript of any of the games, so the following vignette does not necessarily match the exact order of the participants' contributions to their final game of One-to-Fifteen, No Doubles. I provide this fictional transcript solely to illustrate how the game works in action. The placement of the player's name on the page is meant to reflect their utterances, spread out on the zoom grid and through time.

After an awkward silence, Ernesto's Zoom square was suddenly outlined in yellow, indicating that he had activated his microphone. He put himself in the hot seat.

Student 1: "One"

Student 2: "Two"

Student 3: "Three!"

More yellow boxes flashed.

Student 2: "…Four?"

Student 1: "Five" Student 4: **"FIVE!"**

I instructed them, *"Start again!"*

Student 3: **"One!"**

Student 5: "…*TWO*…"

And on it went for over 4 minutes, until the 11 students had participated collectively more than 30 times. Later, seven of the 10 interviewees described this game as their favorite to play, but for different reasons. Specifically, they mentioned including motivation for mastery, the familiarity of the task, and even admiring peer "fearlessness" while they played. In their interviews, students commented on how the game helped them build trust, feel less anxiety, and become more comfortable speaking English in class.

Vicenté, for example, spoke insightfully about how the collaborative quality of this group-counting game engaged him. He explained how he liked the "synchronization that you had to have with other students." As demonstrated in the vignette above, the students collaborated in a speaking and listening exercise that required repeated attempts to complete. Despite this, students redoubled their efforts to attain the activity's objective: to reach 15 without two or more players speaking simultaneously (the true learning objective was to acquire English numbers, but that was not made explicit). Ironically, the more students participated, the more challenging the task became, as more participation attempts increase the chances of two students overlapping each other as they count off.

Consequently, it was not a surprise that 10 of the 11 participants indicated in their reflection journals that they felt "part of a team" during the improv activities. Moreover, this sense coincided with the collaborative learning that participants described in their interviews. Therefore, improv's engagement through collaborative learning was a significant finding with respect to RQ2a, and this was supported by the triangulation of two data sources—interviews and student artifacts.

A Desire to "Participate More Soon"

Four of the 11 student participants who kept reflection journals expressed that they wished to participate more during the class, in the next improv class, or "soon." In keeping with theater terminology, I named this code "waiting in the wings." This represents a point when participants have decided they want to participate, but for whatever reason they do not feel ready during that day's lesson. This detail is notable because it suggests that students "prime themselves" to engage later. In this way, the interval between lessons becomes more interesting, as it seems to help students mentally prepare to take part. According to field notes collected on participation, all four students who indicated that they wanted to participate but had not yet done so, or who said they would participate more in the next class or "soon," actually did increase their participation throughout the remainder of the program.

By comparing data from reflective journals and field notes about the "waiting in the wings" code (which captured participation attempts from the second, fourth, and sixth session; see Table 4), I confirmed that three of the four students followed through on this, increasing their participation in subsequent sessions. (One student, Vicenté, increased his participation from the first to the second session, but ultimately backslid in participation during the sixth session after a string of absences.) It is worth noting that at no time did the journal prompts or teacher request that students "participate more next time" or "in the future." These codes emerged purely inductively and were not prompted in any way.

Table 5

Participation Over Time of Students Who Indicated They Wanted to Participate More

	Participation Attempts			
Session	**Monica**	**Carlos**	**Juan**	**Vicenté**
Session 2 (10/15)	3	0	Absent	3
Session 4 (11/05)	3	2	1	Absent
Session 6 (11/19)	6	8	4	2

In her reflection on her first day, Monica acknowledged that she only participated once and did not challenge herself that day. She wrote: "but in the next class I may :)." By the second session, she had increased her participation to three times and eventually doubled that to six participation attempts by her sixth and final session. Carlos also showed a desire to increase participation after the first, third, and fourth sessions. In his reflection on the fourth session, he wrote that he "hope(d) to get more involved." The field notes showed that Carlos increased his participation from two attempts in the fourth session to eight tries in the sixth session. Therefore, he also fulfilled his goal to get more involved in the improv activities. Likewise, Juan, who was new to the school and absent on the first day of the program, wrote in his first journal in the second session that he "longed (to participate) a few times" that day but he did not. However, he did participate in the following week's class once; by the sixth session he participated four times. Thus, Juan also fulfilled his desire to participate more as time progressed.

Vicenté wrote that he wanted to participate more on his first and last day; he didn't make any participation attempts on his first day. During the second class, Vicenté increased his participation to three attempts. After that, Vicenté was absent from the third, fourth, and fifth classes but assured me in his interview that his absences were related to some personal issues and didn't reflect disinterest in the improv class, which he thought was fun. On the final day, Vicenté

didn't participate much, and he didn't seem to know it was the last session because he indicated in his journal that he would try to participate more in the next class.

While it is possible to say that Vicenté did not fulfill his aspiration to participate more over the long run, he did achieve his desire to participate in the short run (the next lesson). After that, however, he had a string of three consecutive absences. Then, when he returned, he participated only twice and commented in his journal that he was "a little busy." In Vicenté's case, this suggests an interruption in his learning momentum due to a lengthy period of absence, resulting in a backsliding of participation attempts.

Drive for Mastery

Six of the 10 students who participated in interviews expressed that they found the improv activities engaging because they enjoyed how they improved their English speaking and listening skills. For example, Ernesto spoke about why he liked playing One-to-Fifteen, No Doubles because "we say short words, and then I get to remember those short words." The language skill level of the content was a comfortable fit for Ernesto, resulting in longer-lasting language acquisition. He went on to explain, "I liked listening to the words they would say. I liked learning the words, and I liked practicing the words that others would say." Collaborative learning (described above) appears in this quote as well. Yet, Ernesto's distinction that he "liked learning the words" suggests there was something about the mastery of the language skills (in this case, vocabulary) that was a significant part of what engaged him about the improv games.

Improv is Fun (and Easy)

Five out of the 10 student interviewees expressed that the improv games were fun or funny. However, it's not clear from their responses if they felt the speaking tasks were fun (RQ2a) or just the listening opportunities (RQ2b). For example, Vicenté and Esteban described

certain pattern games as "fun" because they were "easy." For example, Vicenté described his engagement in the counting game One to Fifteen, No Doubles. He said that, at first, "it was a bit confusing, but at the same time it seemed easier." Just as Maria experienced in her tandem story with Monica, Vicenté initially felt confused but then entered "synchronization" with other students and felt "more confident."

When I asked her what most appealed to her about performing improv games in ELD class, Silvia expressed appreciation for the social-emotional learning involved. As she described it, part of why she liked improv was not because of what it was but because of what it was *not*. It was not "highly focused on the academic," yet she felt that she was learning. "Because we have classes that were stressful," Silvia explained,

> I really enjoyed going into this class because it was one of my classes that wasn't as stressful. And not only was it not stressful and fun, but I also was able to learn new words in English. It was less stressful because you didn't just focus on them advancing or learning more, but you also just made it like a space where they could enjoy the time.

While Silvia acknowledged that she did acquire new vocabulary during the improv games, she appreciated that this was not the only focus. This detail suggests that learning happens even though it is not the explicit goal, a notion that some educators might find counterintuitive.

Many Reasons for One Favorite Game

To further address RQ2a, I scanned the interview transcripts for mentions of favorite games, resulting in Table 5. Here, students' favorite activities are listed in order of popularity. In two cases, participants identified more than one favorite from the 29 games introduced during

the intervention. The righthand column lists the various codes represented in students' explanations for their choices.

Table 6

Students' Favorite Improv Games

Game Titles	Total Mentions	Codes
One-to-Fifteen, No Doubles	7	Familiarity with task (engagement), mastery (engagement), distraction from social anxiety (increased comfort), building trust (increased comfort), moving past anxiety (increased comfort), admiring peer fearlessness (engagement)
What Are You Doing?	3	Total Physical Response (engagement), cooperative learning (engagement), drive for mastery (engagement)
Hand Puppets	1	moving past anxiety (increased comfort), funny (engagement)
Sentence-at-a-Time Story	1	Thrill of not knowing what comes next (engagement)

As the table shows, seven of the 10 interviewed students identified their favorite game as One-to-Fifteen, No Doubles, the group counting game. It bears noting the wide variety of codes listed as the motivators for engagement. These data suggest that even a basic counting task can engage many learners if presented in a game format. It is also important to note that this game may have become more prominent through its frequency in the program, as it was our warm-up for each session. Even so, the diversity of codes students cited suggests that improv can engage ELs for a range of reasons. One-to-Fifteen, No Doubles was their favorite, with 33 attempts at engagement in one session (according to field data).

In contrast, What Are You Doing? came in a distant second, with only three mentions from the 10 interviewees, garnering only 10 attempts in one session. This might be because most

students were at ELPAC Level 1 (as measured in 2019 and 2020) and therefore they found the basic counting game more appropriate for their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1980). Two of the students, however, enjoyed the physical aspects of the games. One appreciated how it helped them learn new vocabulary, and one student like cooperatively learning with peers.

RQ2b: Qualities That Most Engaged Participants in Listening Tasks

Some students found the games engaging even though they did not actively participate. By actively listening, timid students were nevertheless engaged in meaning making by attentively enjoying the show their classmates put on. One student even said she sometimes participated with her Zoom camera and microphone off to access the task without enduring the social anxiety she associated with oral participation in English.

"Hand Puppets" Offers Access and Entertains

On the morning of the sixth and final session, our 1–15, No-Doubles warm-up garnered more participation than ever from the beginner ELs. As I transitioned to a more challenging game, however, I found fewer participants who were eager to volunteer. Silvia, who had been participating frequently during the first two sessions of the intervention—in both beginning- and intermediate-level games—was reluctant to give Hand Puppets a try on that day. I didn't know it at the time, but she was recovering from COVID-19 and didn't want anyone to see her face. Sensing her anxiety, I suggested we play Hand Puppets in pairs. By promising that she didn't have to show her face, maybe just her hand as a talking puppet mouth, I convinced her to participate.

Hand Puppets combines collaborative storytelling with a kind of rudimentary puppetry, somewhat akin to Shari Lewis's famous "Lambchop" character, but without the sock. Suited for more advanced students, the game combines the Sentence-at-a-Time game with an active

listening game. In the scene I describe here, two of us were voices (Monica and me) and two students used their hands as puppets to act out collaborative, spontaneous dialogue (Maria and Silvia). Notably, I stepped in to play with the students, as is my custom when another player is needed to form a pair. In a collaborative effort, Monica and I built a story together, one sentence at a time, while Maria and Silvia acted as puppeteers, listening actively to the story while carefully syncing their fingertips with the words of their voice partners. Not only did students aim to mimic the mouth shapes of the English words with their hands, but the emotional physicality of the hand puppets was also meant to match what was happening in the story.

Maria suggested both the location (a mountain) and the relationship (boyfriends). As the story unfolded, we learned that the two young men, Steve and Spencer, were going for a hike. Coincidentally, it was Steve's birthday. Early in the story, the two boys summited a tall mountain and could see for miles around. They took in the view and marveled at the majesty of their surroundings. They soon became anxious that they might not make it back in time to get picked up by their friends, as nightfall was quickly approaching.

Echoing the emotions expressed in the dialogue, Silvia's and Maria's hand puppets began to tremble, their finger-noses rumpled with fear, and shot glances down the steep trail ahead. After a few wrong turns, and some leaps of faith down steep cliff faces, the two managed to find their way back down safely, to be happily reunited with their friends who took them to celebrate Steve's birthday. Not only did this story elicit extended interactions from participants, their spontaneous laughter throughout seemed to indicate that they were comfortable as well as engaged.

The Hand Puppets game is one of s handful of collaborative storytelling games that students played and observed. While only a few players engaged verbally at one time, spectator

participants remarked in their interviews how they enjoyed simply observing and learning through actively listening. Silvia, who participated in the game captured above, admitted in her interview that she sometimes learned even when she wasn't playing, as she was "learning new words as people were sharing stories." Juan, who was new that year, also remarked that he enjoyed watching and listening to the students collaborate, as he liked "to see how the students do their work together." These comments suggest that students who may not participate in a particular activity are still engaging in active listening skills, a key component of the ELD framework.

Enjoying the Show

Four of the 10 students who were interviewed described that they were entertained when listening to and watching other students participate in improv activities. All four of these students identified an entertaining quality in the experience of improv. Because of the mime-like "space work" component, students who play improv games benefit from the attendant TPR techniques, such as the Hand Puppets game described above. This embedded visual stimulus gives students physical context clues, which allows access to both the meaning of the English language being used in the activity and the humor that underlies many amusing game structures. This detail means that, even without speaking, students could still be motivated to engage in active listening and meaning making with the help of physical context clues, such as the pantomime used in What Are You Doing?

Juan, who was new to the school that year, admitted that he enjoyed watching his classmates demonstrate "the capacity of their art, how fast they do it." José and Vicenté said the games were funny and "fun" to watch. Vicenté liked watching What are You Doing? because "you could laugh more there." He went on to admit that "it was fun watching them act.

Sometimes when they would say incorrect phrases, I just thought it was fun." Vicenté's response here was unique in that it suggested that he enjoyed when other people made mistakes in class. When I was once his ELD teacher, I learned that Vicenté tended to tease his male classmates when they did improv, which may have had a slightly chilling effect on their performances and participation rates during the study.

Veronica also had a unique response: She marveled at the bravery of her classmates who did the improv games. When I asked her what made her want to participate, her answer was "Seeing my classmates participate and seeing the trust that they felt to say the words without fear." Veronica was inspired by her classmates in a way that made her want to join in.

Monica liked watching What Are You Doing? because it involved aspects of TPR. "There was a word that was said in the game at that time that I didn't know," she recalled. "And so ever since then I learned the word because you're supposed to, I guess, act out the word. Now I understand, not only do I understand the word, but it really helped me to sort of get in there." This quote shows that Monica listened and acted out English vocabulary, which helped her retain her newly acquired words. By "getting in there," Monica acquired the new English vocabulary by experiencing it physically, rather than just learning it intellectually.

Singing in the Shower

While it was likely an anomaly unique to the distance learning format, one student actively listened and spoke during games, yet she chose to conceal this from the class. Veronica, who was new to the school and hadn't met her classmates or teacher in person, reported participating in activities with her Zoom camera and microphone off, but she "would still participate, or still say things." This detail indicates that she found a way to overcome her anxiety yet satisfy her desire to engage by participating covertly. I found this behavior analogous

to “signing in the shower,” as it captures a willingness to engage in the activity while ensuring privacy.

Summary

Student participants in this study characterized their experiences with the English language through improv games as gradually decreasing anxiety and increasing comfort. Students also grew more trusting of each other, which helped diffuse their anxiety. Some more advanced students even dared to challenge themselves and took risks, which they believed helped build their language skills and confidence.

Overall, the study’s participants found these English-speaking improv games engaging for a multitude of reasons. For some, witnessing each other’s performances inspired them to overcome their fears and join in on the improv fun. Others were engaged by the perception that the improv games were helping them acquire vocabulary more effectively. Some enjoyed that the games were fun, easy, and made them laugh. Finally, some students pointed out that it was the physical aspects that interested them about some games. Most beginner students said One-to-Fifteen, No Doubles was their favorite game (for many different reasons), indicating the game had a broad appeal across diverse learners. Finally, some students who did not feel like participating verbally in games or who engaged in TPR listening activities still felt engaged in listening tasks as they “enjoyed the show” their classmates put on for them.

These findings suggest that participants’ experiences with the improv activities were potentially engaging and anxiety-reducing. The students all initially felt anxious about using English in a classroom setting but reported increased comfort and confidence through repeated participation and exposure to the games. Because improv is highly collaborative, no one student is responsible for a language task. By working as a team, students share ownership of their

language contributions, making the prospect of individual failure less intimidating. By offering structures embedded with openings for students' English-language choices, they have multiple invitations to engage with peers in every game.

The use of Zoom as a platform for improv may have offered students even more protection from any perception of failure, namely by offering them a chance to turn off their cameras, affording them even more anonymity. Even though students who turned their cameras off may have been concealing their faces, they could still participate orally, as in storytelling or pattern games, for example. In this way, the Zoom platform may have mitigated some of their anxiety by allowing them to participate in a somewhat anonymous way. At the same time, however, students in the current study likely did not benefit as much from the more physical games, when doing so may have enhanced their learning through the use of total physical response elements.

CHAPTER FIVE:

SUMMARY

Improv, and its widespread network of theaters and training programs strewn across the country (and the world), has a long, distinguished history in shaping the mainstream culture of the United States. It has, for example, influenced numerous college theater programs, and it gave foundational training to actors such as Will Farrell, Amy Poehler, Stephen Colbert, Gilda Radner, and many other cast members of the iconic show *Saturday Night Live*. But improv is more than just fun and games; it is also an amalgam of various educational best practices, such as role-playing, storytelling, and other play-based activities that are supported by research in the education and psychology fields.

This dissertation aimed to extend the existing scholarship to include a group that has not yet been studied in the improv context: newcomer English learners. Specifically, the study investigated the use of improvisational, play-based activities to engage high school EL students in using English in their ELD classes. The findings align with prior studies that show improv's play-based activities to be both highly engaging (Smith & McKnight, 2009) and effective at lowering the affective filter in adolescent students (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Taken together, the current findings suggests that improv is a potentially effective vehicle for English language arts content in general because it offers meaningful and effective opportunities for language acquisition. Moreover, they show that improv activities support the necessary conditions for Krashen and Terrell's (1983) natural approach to language acquisition.

The primary data for this study were the coded transcripts of 20–30-minute interviews with 10 study participants. The semi-structured interviews probed moments of interest revealed by other data, namely observations, teacher notes, and student reflections. Observational field

notes were collected during the second, fourth, and sixth class sessions, all of which were held on Zoom. These field notes captured moments of interest, specifically regarding increased engagement as reflected by students' participation attempts in the improvisational activities.

Review of the Findings

Improv Lowers Anxiety

Nine of the 10 interviewed participants indicated that improv lowered their anxiety around speaking English. Seven students felt that it helped them move past anxiety; three of these students specifically said that they moved past beginners' anxiety and that improv helped them overcome a fear of mispronunciation in front of their peers. Two participants said the improv games distracted them from worrying about what others may think about them.

The existing literature predicted that EL students who were exposed to improv would experience a drop in anxiety. In a 2019 study that investigated improv's ability to reduce social anxiety in adolescents, 43% of students who were assessed as having a social phobia at Week 1 of an improv treatment no longer screened positive by the program's end (Felsman et al., 2019). Felsman and colleagues' findings demonstrate improv's significant capacity to reduce anxiety in adolescents; the findings of the present study—in which nine of the 10 students interviewed reported that improv lowered their anxiety—suggest that this potential for anxiety reduction may also extend to newcomer English learners.

Further, the literature also predicted that adolescents who increased their uncertainty tolerance would find positive meaning in challenge at greater rates than those with lower uncertainty tolerance (Felsman et al., 2019). While this finding correlates with the responses of only two participants in the current study, it still bears mentioning, as both of those students had English skills that were measurably better than those of their classmates. For example, Maria,

one of the more advanced students, remarked about her experience coauthoring a story with her peers: “At the first time, I was excited and then confused. Because Monica has a different mind than me and…I need to adapt to the idea.” This remark is emblematic of the higher uncertainty tolerance associated with adolescents who do improv. It indicates that Felsman et al.’s (2019) findings—that students with higher uncertainty tolerance will derive positive meaning from challenges—are echoed in the present study on newcomer ELs.

Another notable aspect of the findings was how effective the improv activities were at reducing anxiety in such a relatively brief period (six weekly 45-minute sessions). Krueger et al. (2019) similarly found in their improv research that “a brief intervention based on improv exercises may provide a strong and efficient treatment for patients with anxiety and depression” (p. 621. This suggests that improv interventions in schools need not be long to be effective, making implementation more manageable in today’s crowded public school curricula.

Two students who described their drop in anxiety in relation to being distracted by the games may have entered what the literature on psychodrama calls the *spontaneity state*, which provides a sense of “imminent unity” in those who experience or witness it (Mann, 1970). In a lecture on that topic, Mann (1970) asserted,

> Such persons either completely forget about the existence of the audience or cease to be concerned about their reactions. In fact they cease to be afraid of anything. Their temporal sense alters. They come to view time as an “eternal now” in which past, present, and future are all enfolded in a dream like experience from which they begin. (p. 7)

The spontaneity state, analogous to theater training’s dictum of being “in the moment,” may suggest some context for this “distraction from anxiety.”

Grace, one of the two students who characterized their experiences with improv as a distraction from anxiety, reported that the games "keep our minds busy and we don't really think about other something else, just the game…I felt happy." Of most significance to second language (L2) acquisition is that, in the spontaneity state, "the usual gap between thought and expression ceases to exist. Expression becomes an integrated whole" (Mann, 1970, p. 8). Likewise, Esteban, who reported feeling less anxious because he was distracted by the games, suggested it was because "you have to think fast and you have to answer fast." While only these two students described something like the spontaneity state, this finding is nevertheless notable. Their experiences reflect the literature on this phenomenon quite specifically, especially in Grace's "just thinking about the game" (forgetting about the audience) and Esteban's description of "thinking fast" with improv (an absence of gap between thought and expression).

Other students mentioned experiences that may have been related to other qualities associated with the spontaneous state. One described being engaged by the "synchronicity" that one must have with others in an improv game; another related an experience of "being in" the story. Both comments indicate the presence of the "dream like" and "eternal now" characteristics of the spontaneity state (Mann, 1970, p. 7). Thus, what is known in the field of psychodrama as the spontaneity state may also apply to newcomer English learners who engage in improv.

Collaborative Learning Engages Students

Collaborative learning, defined as "a *situation* in which *two or more* people *learn* or attempt to learn something *together*" (Dillenbourg, 1999, p. 1), emerged in the present study as one of the most salient motivators for participant engagement in the improv activities. While collaborative learning has not been directly identified as a motivator in other studies on improv, Smith and McKnight (2009), in their study of Second City's intervention with an urban public

elementary school in Chicago, found there was a process by which "the playfulness inherent in the art of improvisation engaged the students…increasing the involvement even of youngsters who had been reluctant to participate in other classroom work." They continued:

> [T]his engagement strengthened classroom community, making possible the opportunity for students who had previously been marginalized and/or who had special learning needs to take on more positive roles in their classrooms. (p. 3)

In other words, Smith and McKnight cited the playful quality of improv as a primary motivator; due to a series of secondary effects, the resulting increase in involvement created a "strengthened classroom community," which led to the eventual participation of another set of "previously marginalized" students, some of whom had "special learning needs."

This suggests that the collaborative learning motivator identified in the present study is intertwined with a trust-building process. When a critical mass of students engage, Smith and McKnight (2009) asserted, the classroom community becomes safe enough to support risk taking by students who otherwise would not feel comfortable participating. Improv's ability to support the inclusion of students with special needs suggests its promise for this particular population—something I detail further in the implications section. Notably, while nine of the 11 study's participants reported feeling engaged because of the collaborative nature of the games, only two explicitly indicated that trust building was a factor in their participation and confidence. Although this proportion is relatively small, Smith and McKnight's (2009) study seems to suggest that trust building can play a significant role in how improv engages students in play-based activities.

Improv also gives students control over when and how they participate. With most improv training programs (as in the current study), participation is voluntary, dictated only by a

student's desire to join the activity at hand. Many improv activities begin with a suggestion from the audience, such as a location for the scene or the title of a never-before-told story. In this way, content in a classroom setting is governed by the students themselves; they have full ownership. Giving students autonomy to govern when and how they participate empowers them, democratizing the classroom, which may aid in maintaining engagement and lowering student anxiety. Smith and McKnight (2009) claimed that "the democratization of the classroom that the underlying principles of improvisation support can enhance classroom community, making possible an atmosphere in which creative risk-taking is the norm rather than the exception and where all students are truly included" (p. 14).

In the present study, students had control over when and if they participated as well as in determining the content of the games, such as the titles of their coauthored stories. However, none remarked that this democratic nature of the games had any impact on them. As described above, Smith and McKnight (2009) linked engagement to community-building, which they attributed in part to improv's democratic nature. It's possible, however, that the concept of a democratic classroom was not developmentally appropriate for students of this age and was therefore absent from the data. Student may not perceive a student-centric activity such as improv as "democratic", but the prominence of the collaborative learning theme in the findings suggests there might be something democratic happening in terms of how participants co-created their work.

When asked to choose their favorite game of the dozens played, students chose "One-to-Fifteen, No Doubles" by a wide margin. While they listed various reasons for making this choice, it is noteworthy that they chose a game that offered a high degree of collaboration. When this game was played, it was typical for every student to participate multiple times in a relatively

short period. By involving many students who functioned as a large group, this highly collaborative game potentially offered "protection," or safety through numbers (Stern, 1980).

The students' preference for collaboration may also have its roots in the literature concerning the technique of *psychodrama*, which the Oxford English dictionary defines as "a form of psychotherapy in which patients act out events from their past." Specifically, the spontaneity state (Mann, 1970) again becomes relevant. When improv students enter the spontaneity state, they inspire each other to participate, and the classroom becomes a kind of wellspring of inspiration. The steps in this process, enumerated below, also reflect Smith and McKnight's (2009) finding of a unified relationship between engagement and community. Participants and spectators are both powerfully impacted by the "free flowing creativity that is unleashed by the improvisational act"; a person in a spontaneous state "in varying degrees acts as though inspired," drawing on resources, "which neither he nor his friends may have thought he had at his disposal" (Mann, 1970, p. 8).

Improv is designed to support a spontaneity state, and the interview and participation data derived from the current study seem to reflect this. This type of participation can be illustrated by a repeating cycle of events, as follows:

1) Spectator Student A is inspired by other students' spontaneous state performances.
2) Spectator Student A loses anxiety, builds trust and confidence, and increases participation.
3) Spectator Student A eventually enters spontaneity state and inspires other students.

It is important to note that the steps listed above are potentially contingent on having some students who are initially confident enough to enter the spontaneity state, thereby inspiring others to participate. For example, in the present study, students who most often participated

early in the program, such as Maria, Silvia, and Grace, either had a higher skill level with English (Maria and Silvia) or benefited from a close friendship with a classmate with whom they felt comfortable performing (Grace). While five of the 11 participants thought their peers' performances were engaging because they were "fun" or "funny," Veronica, an EL beginner who was new to the school, specifically remarked that she was engaged by "seeing the trust that [peers] felt to say the words without fear," which in turn "motivated [her] and helped [her]…to participate more." Taken as a whole, these data echo the extant literature on the spontaneity state and suggest that, even in an newcomer EL classroom, improv can invoke a state of free-flowing ideas that inspire participation.

The presence of a range of skill levels among the study's participants may also have helped spur the initial instances whereby more advanced students felt confident enough to enter the spontaneity state. Relevant ELPAC data—measured 4 months after the conclusion of the intervention and not available until 10 months after the intervention's end—showed at least three levels of oral English proficiency among the study's participants. As described in Chapter Four, most students in the current study scored as "minimally developed" in English speaking and listening, with one student scoring as "somewhat developed" and two as "moderately developed." This differential in skills meant that intermediate-level students could engage in performing more complex games (like collaborative storytelling) and beginner-level students could engage as spectators by "enjoying the show" put on by their more advanced (arguably more confident) classmates. Eventually, however, most of the minimally developed students were inspired to increase their own participation in the games. As Smith and McKnight (2009) revealed and as Mann (1970) predicted, engagement by some students can eventually inspire the participation of other "spectator" students who would not normally otherwise join in.

Mastery is a Motivator

One unexpected finding was that six out of the 10 students who were interviewed reported that they felt motivated to engage in improv activities because they thought it was helping them improve their English skills. Prior studies have not specifically explored the notion of mastery as a motivator for newcomer ELs in the context of improv. The literature does, however, predict that the drive for mastery is a powerful intrinsic motivator (Pink, 2011). Perhaps this finding is due to improv's embedded meaningful communication (the use of language to communicate an idea), making it more effective at helping learners acquire language (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). TPR, which is present in improv's "space work" techniques, ensures that students experience meaningful, lasting learning (Asher, 1969). Only two students admitted, however, that the physical aspects of the games helped them learn. It is possible that this was not a significant finding in the current study in part because of the virtual nature of the intervention. The classes were held via Zoom, which did not ensure that all students could see each other through their webcams.

Beyond predicting that more confident students would initially participate and thereby inspire shyer students to do the same, extant research supports the notion that the present study's heterogeneous skill groupings helped scaffold the input for optimal acquisition. Students who mentioned improv's engagingly collaborative nature sometimes attributed it to a multitiered zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1980). Perhaps this aspect of the intervention was because collective knowledge of the class helped support mastery through a collective learning framework. For example, Vicenté expressed that he was engaged by improv's ability to enhance his English acquisition because, as he said, "my friend might not know something and then I know it and then, now he knows it, and we can both know it."

The notion that the collective nature of the learning supports English mastery is dictated by Krashen's (1981) "i+1" theory of EL instruction. This theory, for example, calls for comprehensible L2 content that is both at the student's level (the "i") and also slightly above (the "+1"). With heterogeneous skill groupings in improv EL classrooms, there is more likelihood that conditions for i+1 will spontaneously occur in collaborative activities. It may be that evidence of improv's educational benefits in the findings were because of this heterogeneous skill grouping of EL students, rather than despite it.

Spectator Students Enjoy the Show

As described above, the potential impact of improv as an instructional vehicle is manifold, with students of various skill levels gaining comprehensible input alongside powerful motivators to engage in spontaneous language tasks. To understand what motivates students to engage as listeners during improv activities, I asked why they felt engaged (or not) simply by listening to English being used by classmates who were involved in improv games. Four students said they liked to observe their peers doing the games, and they offered several reasons. For example, their peers made them laugh and they marveled at their peers' bravery and skill. Indeed, improv has long been associated with high engagement, even if only by spectators (Mann, 1970; Smith & McKnight, 2009). Since the literature on spectator engagement seems to echo the student experiences of engagement in the current study, it may be that this knowledge can be extended to newcomer ELs. Importantly, simply witnessing improv activities has been shown to eventually increase participation among spectators (Felsman et al., 2019; Smith & McKnight, 2009).

Limitations of the Study

Perhaps the largest limitation of the current study stems from the many impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic that preceded the data collection stage and continued through analysis and publication. Chief among these limiting impacts is the virtual setting, which is not the usual milieu for improv activities. While many of the improv games maintained their essential qualities when transferred to a virtual setting, the glaring exception was the physical component, which constitutes a considerable portion of the games.

Despite this virtual setting, many participants expressed distinct experiences that informed the current study's findings. In general, these findings echoed themes that have been documented by prior research on in-person improv interventions conducted in school settings. As mentioned earlier, the absence of physicality (due to the limited use of cameras in the Zoom sessions) informs my recommendation for additional study of EL improv interventions that are conducted in-person.

Of course, as with all instruction that occurred during this period, the COVID-19 pandemic also had an indirect impact on the current study. In particular, the underserved Latinx population—and therefore the entire sample of study participants—was disproportionately affected. At least one student in the study contracted COVID-19 during the study, and her participation was negatively impacted as a result. Since the impact of COVID-19 on students' lives was beyond the scope of the current research, the extent to which the pandemic affected the participants' families' health and financial status remains unclear.

Another limitation stems from the study methods. As a qualitative study with a relatively small sample size, the generalizability of the results is somewhat limited. However, data sources included field notes, participant interviews, teacher notes, and student artifacts, such as online

reflection journal prompts (in both English and Spanish). This diversity of sources allowed for triangulation and yielded rich stories that shed valuable light on the research questions.

Finally, because the interviews were conducted using a translator, the participant responses described in the findings did not reflect the students' precise word choices. Moreover, some inaccuracies may have been present in the English interview transcriptions. This potential for imprecision, therefore, also constitutes a limitation of the present study.

Implications

The findings of the present study are in line with extant literature on how improv reduces anxiety and increases student engagement (Felsman et al., 2019; Mann, 1970; Smith & McKnight, 2009; Stern, 1980) while extending this knowledge to a new unique student population: newcomer English learners. The findings suggest that improv can lower anxiety and be engaging for newcomer ELs. Further, improv's multitiered zones of proximal development engage and differentiate content for participants—likely because a drive for mastery is an intrinsic motivator (Pink, 2011)—all while making language acquisition accessible to preverbal EL students as well as EL students who are ready to reclassify. Importantly, this study affirmed that improv activities are a suitable vehicle for Krashen and Terrell's (1983) natural approach, as it satisfies the prerequisite for highly engaging material while lowering the affective filter.

In this way, using improv games to deliver L2 content can be like throwing out a net of high-interest, comprehensible input offering support to a range of skill levels. As I discussed above, Krashen (1981) called this "i+1"—a term that signifies the inclusion of content that provides a next-level skill on top of current knowledge. Fittingly, this seems to have a similar meaning to the improv dictum "Yes, and…," which regulates the cooperative building of an imaginary world. As a scene, story, or pattern progresses, students achieve both listening and

speaking language acquisition while taking turns building stories with peers, plot point by plot point. Accordingly, students in this study reported acquiring a new vocabulary through participation in and observation of the games, bit by bit, as they encountered unfamiliar words and ideas with the help of context clues like pantomime and the reinforcement of TPR.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings described above, my first recommendation is simply for instructional designers, administrators, and teachers of ELs to get improv training themselves. This could take place in a local training center—fortunately, there are hundreds nationwide, catering to all sorts of students, from professional performers to those who want to try it out. This could also take place through district-funded extracurricular professional development, such as the teacher training programs at Second City Chicago or the Loose Moose Theatre in Calgary, Canada. There is an urgent need for more, potentially large-scale partnerships between school districts and improv training programs like the Loose Moose, including The Second City, Upright Citizens Brigade, and The Groundlings in Los Angeles. Fortunately, the programs that do exist are most often found in the same large, urban centers that serve many underserved public school students. Urban school districts can incentivize improv training as professional development for their EL teachers with salary points. Perhaps district-level instructional designers can introduce afterschool or summer enrichment programs that involve improv activities in partnership with established improv schools.

Once trained, educators and instructional designers can access a wealth of material for implementation, such as the improvencyclopedia.com website, an ever-growing crowdsourced repository for hundreds of improv games and activities. For EL educators who intend to introduce improv games into their own classrooms, I suggest patience with results. The silent

period may take months to escape; thus, teachers who plan to use improv games should not be overly concerned that students are not participating orally during the initial lessons. Recall that four participants in the present study reflected in their journals that they planned to participate more during the next class; in three instances they did so. With improv, it is important to invite consistently and emphatically but never force students to participate in every game, even those who seem uninterested. Some students might be on the edge of a breakthrough, so EL educators should not stop encouraging students to participate in all activities, even when they seem outside their comfort or skill level zones.

It is also important for EL educators who intend use improv to remember that silent spectators may still be "enjoying the show" and thereby engaging by listening. By observing games that are interesting and provide physical context, nonverbal students engage with comprehensible L2 input, a vital step in language acquisition (Krashen et al., 1983). Like the activities in the current study, many improv games use gestures, mime, and other TPR activities that offer various access points to students at a range of levels, even those who remain silent throughout the lesson. And, as noted earlier, heterogeneous skill groupings in improv EL classrooms may increase the likelihood that conditions for "i+1" will spontaneously occur. It is important, therefore, to resist the desire to "level" ELD content in an improv activity, since that would prevent students from encountering and acquiring new language skills. I recommend that teachers and administrators who choose to use improv with their students seek out opportunities for heterogeneous skill grouping of ELs, at least for oral language acquisition purposes.

Although this was not a focus of the current study, research indicates that students with other types of special needs can potentially benefit from improv interventions. For example, students on the autism spectrum who find oral expression challenging can collaborate with

classmates using their physicality. This application of improv in a special education context was documented by Smith and McKnight in their 2009 study of an improv program in a public elementary school in Chicago. The authors described Penny, a student with autism who was being mainstreamed into a third-grade class. She "was able to draw on her strength—movement—and compensate for her limited oral expression, in order to participate in the literacy event of the scene performance" (Smith & McKnight, 2009, p. 9). Similar programs, such Zip-Zap-Zop, which uses improv to support social skills acquisition for students with autism, have become more accessible in recent years (Maas, 2021).

While improv has many benefits in the classroom, it bears mentioning that these come with a few potential pitfalls. For example, improv's risk-taking philosophy means that some situations will require a teacher's intervention to maintain a safe space for students. This was the case here when, in a few instances, laughter from Vicenté at others' mistakes seemed to border on teasing. Reminders may be necessary, for example, to ensure students know that not all laughter feels supportive. Because of the potential for students' spontaneous choices to be inappropriate or hurtful, teachers must address these instances as they occur and redirect students as needed. For improv to be a comfortable space to take risks, students need to feel they are safe. Therefore, teachers who use improvisation must be vigilant to ensure their classroom management strategies support this sometimes delicate balance.

Recommendations for Future Research

Conducting the current study during a pandemic carried with it obvious limitations, which I have already described above. One such limitation was that, since the study was entirely conducted over distance learning format (using Zoom), some students did not feel comfortable using their cameras to interact with the games physically. Despite the study's low rate of webcam

adoption, however, two students mentioned that the physical aspects of games were especially significant as a factor in their engagement. This corresponds to Asher's (1969) above-referenced theory of TPR—physical movement, when tied to language, can offer robust benefits to ELD students, speeding their acquisition of L2 exponentially. To understand improv's capabilities more fully, more studies like the current one should be carried out in physical EL classroom settings. There is a need for more research in this area to explore the full array of potential benefits that improv offers through its heavy use of physicalization, often called "space work." Novice ELs—those who have no English language knowledge at all—would logically stand to benefit the most from in-person improv and its collaborative TPR activities.

Perhaps the most obvious next step in the scholarly community's inquiry regarding newcomer ELs' experiences with improv might be expanding the scope to study long-term English learners' (LTELs) experiences with improv. There are many common traits between newcomers and LTELs, who are often newcomers who simply did not reclassify in time. In addition, students who are deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) would potentially benefit from improv enrichment. Like Newcomer ELs, DHH populations are able to use contextual physicality to understand and transmit ideas through language. It stands to reason, therefore, that in addition to the newcomer ELs documented in the present study, LTELs, DHH students, special education students, and other unique student populations would likely also benefit from improv's anxiety reduction, confidence building, and highly engaging characteristics. The improv experiences of these student subgroups should therefore be the subject of future scholarship.

Finally, as noted in the limitations section, due to the small sample size of the current study, the generalizability of the findings is limited. Future studies with more participants would

help bring more generalizable knowledge about improv's use with English learners. In addition, a longitudinal study about improv and ELD students would likewise be compelling, as it could determine causal inference. Especially useful would be research that tracks a treatment group alongside a randomized control group, plotting English-language progress (as an example) on a timeline over 4 or more years.

Conclusion

In the recent series of pandemic-related school closures, hybrid learning models, and subsequent reopenings, changes in students' routines have negatively impacted their academic progress and emotional well-being. While keeping students safer from potential COVID-19 infections, school districts have also been forced to deprive them of normalcy, routine, and, perhaps most importantly, a sense of community with their classmates. But this debacle is just the latest setback suffered by our underserved public school students, especially our newcomer ELs. For them, overtesting and a never-ending conveyor belt of new textbooks and learning strategies have long inflicted "initiative fatigue" on frustrated students and practitioners alike (Freedman, 1992; Fullan & Quinn, 2015). In California public schools, standardized tests, such as the ELPAC for ELs and the Smarter Balanced Assessment System (SBAC) for 11th graders, returned in the 2020–2021 academic year, despite COVID-19's continued presence. Now more than ever, students need the social-emotional learning that improv provides. By its very nature, improv offers opportunities for inclusive collaboration and a much-needed break from traditionally delivered academic content.

As a national community of educators and students, we have reached an inflection point in how we value in-person learning; improv has a role to play as we transition into to a new normalcy. Politicians' obsession with assessment must take a back seat to meaningful, research-

based instruction. Instruction rooted in improv capitalizes on the wide-ranging benefits described in the current study, not the least of which is its seeming fit with Krashen and Terrell’s (1983) natural approach to language. If we can implement improv across some of our country’s larger, urban school districts, many of which serve considerable numbers of newcomer ELs, students will likely benefit from the positive outcomes described in this dissertation. Improv’s unique disarming engagement sets the stage for more meaningful and effective language acquisition (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Students supported by improv’s confidence building and highly engaging activities can unfurl their creative sails while building strong, safe classroom communities, taking risks, acquiring English skills, and inspiring others to do the same along the way.

APPENDIX A:

GLOSSARY OF IMPROV GAMES

Game Title	Source	Game Description
Brain Zap!	TiaMarie Harrison & Maja Watkins	This game involves two players, player A and player B, facing one another while making eye contact. While player A and player B are making eye contact, the facilitator says, “Brain zap, brain zap, 1...2…3!” After the facilitator says “3!”, player A and player B will say the first word that pops into their mind at the exact same time. Example: player A: “Pizza!”, player B:“Train!”. Player A and player B then try to silently think of a word that can connect the two words which were just said. The facilitator then says “Brain zap, brain zap, 1..2..3!” again and player A and player B say a word they think connects the words they just said. Example: player a says, “delivery!” and player B says “car!”. Player A and player B then say, without saying any words that had been said previously, tke the words “pizza”, “train”, “delivery”, and “car” and think of a word that connects all these words. Remember to have players keep in mind one another’s perspective. This may or may not end in a “Brain Zap”, but perspective is taught either way. A “Brain Zap” happens when both players spontaneously say the same word.
Conducted Story (adapted to Conductor)	www.improvencyclopedia.org	Players form a line on the stage. A title for a story and a story genre are obtained from the audience. The host starts the game by pointing to a player who then starts telling the story. At any point in time the host can switch to another player who then needs to continue the story seamlessly, even if the switch happens in the middle of a sentence or the middle of a word.
Ding	www.improvencyclopedia.org	A scene is played. Whenever the host rings a bell (or yells “ding”), the player that is doing something or saying something needs to do or say something else.
Free Association	www.improvencyclopedia.org	Players are asked to say the first thing they think about when hearing (or seeing, feeling, smelling, or tasting) anything another player provides. Anything is valid, as long as it is not preconceived; the association should be based on what the previous player has offered.
Hand Puppets	www.improvencyclopedia.org	See Puppets (below), but hands instead of people’s heads are used as puppets.

King/Queen Game	Keith Johnstone	One player is the king or the queen. Other players try to please his/her Royal Highness. They do this by entering the room and offering something. The queen (for example) either tells them to continue (if she is interested), die (if she is bored), or freeze (if she might be interested). Players who are allowed to continue may approach the queen, and the queen may unfreeze frozen players at her discretion. The game is over when a player is close enough to actually touch the queen. Notes: The queen may kill a player for any reason—she may not like the message, or she may not like the way the message has been presented. The queen can give hints why she is not pleased (e.g., "You know I don't drink coffee, so die!"). The queen should be really difficult.
Knife Baby Angry Cat	www.improvencyclopedia.org	All players walk around the room. Start with one player pantomiming throwing a knife, ninja-style, to another player. That player catches the knife and throws it to another player. Players should have eye contact between thrower and catcher before the knife is thrown: it should be very clear who is supposed to catch the knife. Once that goes well, players can add a pantomimed baby, which gets thrown very carefully. Give the baby a sound that is clearly distinguished from the knife. Finally, add in an angry cat, again with distinct sound.
No Doubles—One to Ten (adapted to No Doubles—One to Fifteen; also known as Digits)	www.improvencyclopedia.org	This is a nice concentration game. Everyone is in a circle and counts from one to 10. Any player can start by saying "one." Then any other player can say "two," and so on. If two players say a number at the same time, the game starts all over again.
One Mouth	www.improvencyclopedia.org	One player (or the host) interviews all other players, but the group of other players is a single character. This character answers the questions, but all players provide answers at the same time, as if the character is speaking out of many mouths simultaneously. The answers should make sense (at least grammatically) and should be clear. If one player starts answering a question by saying "YYYY," no one should try to turn that into a "No." Notes: The game works best if everyone goes for the obvious and simple answers. Don't try to speak too fast; rather, take your time to let the answer organically grow. Coach players to take the

		lead if the answers are lagging, and to happily give up the lead as soon as they feel the other player has the lead. Move players who stubbornly always take the lead to another position in the group (at the back or the end).
Presents	www.improvencyclopedia.org	This is a great warm-up exercise that helps blank the mind; it is good for control freaks. Players stand in pairs and give each other presents. To give a present, a player just opens their arms/hands to indicate they're holding something. Upon receiving the present, the player gives it a name—the first thing that comes to mind. They may say something like "Oh, thanks, a little dead bird." That player then promptly ignores that present and returns something else to their companion.
Puppets (also known as People Puppets)	Unknown	This is a game for four players. Two players are puppets; these players offer the lines of dialogue in the scene but are not allowed to move about themselves. The other two players are the puppet masters who provide the movements for the puppets.
Questions Only	Unknown	Players improvise a scene in which any sentence they use must be a question.
Three Changes	Viola Spolin	Players face each other in two rows. Each observes the opposite person, noting clothing, hair, and so on. Players then turn their backs on each other and change three things on their person (e.g., changes hairstyle, modifies dress, moves jewelry). Players then face each other again. Each player must now identify what changes his/her opposite has made.
Tug-of-War	Viola Spolin	In this game, two players play tug-of-war using an imaginary rope.
Two Truths, One Lie Session	Unknown	A player makes three personal statements, one of which is a lie. Others must try to guess the lie.
What Are You Doing?	www.improvencyclopedia.org	Everyone at one end of the room forms a long line. The first player in the line (Player 1) steps into the room and starts miming an activity. As soon as the activity is clear, Player 2 approaches Player 1 and asks "What are you doing?" The first player answers something that has nothing to do with what they are actually doing (e.g., if Player 1 is cutting someone's hair, they might say "I'm reading the newspaper."). Player 1 moves away, and Player 2 starts miming the activity stated by the previous player. A third player comes up to Player 2, asks what they are doing, and so

		on. Play until everyone has mimed something and has answered the question.
Where Am I?	Viola Spolin	One player performs pantomime, which indicates a physical environment. Another student joins in with either the same activity or one that might also occur in the first player's location.
Who Started the Motion? (also called Follow the Leader)	Viola Spolin	Players are seated in a circle. One player leaves the room while the remaining players select a leader. The leader chooses a motion to make (e.g., tapping fingers, swaying) and can change this motion at any time. The player is called back and stands in the center of the circle and tries to discover who the leader is. The other players copy the leader's motions as they change and try to keep the center player from discovering the leader's identity.
Word at a Time Story (adapted to "Sentence at a time Story")	www.improvencyclopedia.org	This is an exercise to train group narrative. All players sit in a circle and tell a story, one word at a time. Each player provides one word of a sentence. The end of a sentence can be indicated by a player saying "period," although that is not necessary.
"Yes, and…"	Viola Spolin	Players accept everything said and/or done and do something with it. This is also used as a verb: "Yes-anding."

APPENDIX B:

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

University of California, Los Angeles

PARENT PERMISSION FOR MINOR TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

All the World's a Stage:
Improvisational Theater and Engagement in English Language Learners

David Metz and Department Chair and Dean Christina Christie, Ph.D., from the *School of Education & Information Studies* at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) are conducting a research study.

Your child was selected as a possible participant in this study because *he or she is enrolled in an English Language Development course at XYZ High School.* Your child's participation in this research study is voluntary. If you or your child refuse to have his or her data used in this study, you and/or your child will not be penalized in any way.

Why is this study being done?

This study is being done to understand if and how theater activities can help English learners improve their English speaking and listening.

What will happen if my child takes part in this research study?

If you agree to allow your child to participate in this study, we would ask him/her to:

- *After each weekly 1-hour session, which will happen during his/her regularly scheduled ELD class, your child will fill out a short reflection journal about their feelings during the theater activities.*
- *Participate in one 15–30 minute interview after school about their experiences with English doing the theater activities in class.*

How long will my child be in the research study?

Participation will take a total of about *15–30 minutes for the interview.* All other activities will happen during regularly scheduled class time.

Are there any potential risks or discomforts that my child can expect from this study?

- *There are no anticipated risks or discomforts.*

Are there any potential benefits to my child if he or she participates?

Your child may benefit from the study *by improving their speaking and listening skills in English.*

The results of the research may *help other educators of English learners improve their teaching.*

What other choices do I/my child have if my child does not participate?

If your student chooses not to participate, his/her information will not be collected as a part of this study but he or she will still be expected to attend the sessions as a part of their ELD class schedule. If the school is closed past September 14th, 2020, all sessions will happen over Zoom. If the school reopens before September 14th, 2020, sessions and interviews will happen in person and will follow LAUSD safety rules.

Will my child be paid for participating?

- Your child will receive:
  - *an Amazon gift certificate equal to $5 for each of the 10 Zoom sessions (including a completed weekly reflection journal for each), and*
  - *$10 for attending the afterschool interview (which will be held over Zoom should schools remain closed).*
  - *The total value of the gift certificate will not be more than $60 and will be sent by email no later than one week from the last class session.*

Will information about my child's participation be kept confidential?

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify your child will remain confidential. It will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of *erasing your child's name from any materials used in the study and replacing it with a code.*

What are me and my child's rights if he or she takes part in this study?

- You can choose whether or not you want your child to be in this study, and you may withdraw your permission and discontinue your child's participation at any time.
- Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you or your child, and no loss of benefits to which you or your child were otherwise entitled.
- Your child may refuse to answer any questions that he/she does not want to answer and still remain in the study.

Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?

- **The research team:**

If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about the research, you can talk to the one of the researchers. Please contact:

David Metz	*424.210.2216 (cell)*	*metz@ucla.edu*
Dr. Tina Christie	*310.825.8308 (work)*	*tina.christie@ucla.edu*

- **UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP):**

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers, you may contact the UCLA OHRPP by phone: (310) 206-2040; by email: participants@research.ucla.edu; or by mail: Box 951406, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1406.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

SIGNATURE OF PARENT OR LEGAL GUARDIAN

____
Name of Child

____
Name of Parent or Legal Guardian

______________________________________ ______________________
Signature of Parent or Legal Guardian Date

APPENDIX C:

ONLINE JOURNALING INSTRUMENT

Criteria	When possible, answer each question by using examples from class today.
Participation Did you try to go up first during this class and did you consistently volunteer? If so, which activities did you do?	
Taking Risks Did you make things challenging for yourself or stay in your comfort zone?	
Team Spirit Did today's activities make you feel like part of the team? Explain.	
Audience Engagement Did you stay engaged in the lessons and performances in class?	

APPENDIX D:

OBSERVATION PROTOCOL (EQUIP)

Discourse Dimensions

LOAD DEFAULTS EXPORT IMPORT

Dashboard > Metz ELD Theater Intervention - Discourse Dimensions

Discourse dimensions are the aspects of classroom talk that you want to track, like the type of questions teachers ask or the length of student contributions. Click on the "load defaults" button to display and use a basic set of discourse dimensions commonly used by many EQUIP users. Customize these as appropriate, separating each option with a comma. Click the "Save" button when you are finished.

Social Marker:

Wait Time for Volunteer

Options:

Less than 3 seconds, 3 or more seconds, N/A

REMOVE

Social Marker:

Length of Talk

Options:

1-4 words, 5-20, 21 or more

REMOVE

Social Marker:

Student Talk During Improv

Options:

absence of questions, presence of questions

REMOVE

Social Marker:

Student Talk During Improv

Options:

integration of data from prior speaker

REMOVE

Social Marker:

Student Talk volume During Improv

Options:

Inaudible, audible

REMOVE

Social Marker:

Number of student exchanges with partner/group

Options:

1-5, 6-10, 11-15, more than 15

REMOVE

ADD SAVE

APPENDIX E:

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: To determine which improv activity components, if any, are identified as more effective at increasing engagement. Additionally, the objective is to elicit a thorough description of the participants' experiences while engaged in activities.

30 Minutes

INTRODUCTION:
Explain why we're here and what we hope to learn today.

> "Hey ________. Thanks for agreeing to come after school to help with this study. Your answers will help me learn more about improv and ELs. Please feel free to be honest, since your grade will not be affected in any way based on your responses. Your honest feedback will help make this study more useful to others who are learning English like yourself.

QUESTIONS:

1) I was reviewing your journal material and my notes, and I found something that I wanted to learn more about. I'm going to review your journal entry/my notes and ask you to tell me a little more about a particular moment. Would that be okay?

2) Thank you for sharing that information. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your experience with the intervention?

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