

Improv storytelling by Christian Spiteri

Age:	Teenagers/Adults
Level:	Upper intermediate +
Time:	1 hour 30
Objectives:	To practise speaking publicly; to build on fluency; to improve confidence in telling stories
Key skill:	Speaking
Materials:	One copy of the role cards for every four students (cut up as indicated)

Procedure

1. Try and establish a warm and friendly atmosphere in the classroom. If they are your regular students, start by asking them how their day has been so far or how their weekend was etc, or tell them about your own. If they are new students, find out all their names and get them to share a little bit about themselves, asking for more information.

2. Ask for a volunteer. Invite the volunteer to the centre of the classroom, and once they are there, ask them to tell you a story. Give the following specific instruction:

I want you to invent a story and tell it to us.

If they ask for further clarification, explain that the story can be about anything they want, and it must be made up on the spot, not real. You will find that some students will be able to do this task, perhaps speaking for several minutes. Others will not be able to accomplish it. Many will feel uncomfortable. If they remain stuck for over a minute, invite them to return to their seat. Ask a second volunteer to perform this task and a third, if you wish.

3. Notice how everyone reacts differently, and you can even point this out to them. Sometimes students hold themselves back because they feel their story is not interesting or original. It's important to let them know that you didn't ask for a good story, just a story. Teach them that they don't need to expect perfection.

4. Ask if the students know who Keith Johnstone is. Tell them that he's a famous improvisation teacher, and he often says, 'Be more average.' Let the students discuss this quote. You can explain that Johnstone encourages his students to let go of perfectionism and the need to be unique, as these things hinder improv actors.
5. Invite another student to be the storyteller. It's okay if the student is a bit nervous because you're going to help them. Let them stand in the centre, and tell all the other students that they have 15 seconds to think of a word (or a noun or an adjective, as you prefer). Then, explain that you want your volunteer to start telling the story but that, when you see that they are stuck, you are going to call out 'Pause!' and point at a student, who will immediately call out their word. The storyteller has to continue telling the story but find some way of incorporating the new word into the story. Check understanding by asking your storyteller what their role is and the other participants what their role is.
6. Let the activity go on for a good five or even ten minutes, and whenever you want the story to take a new direction or when your storyteller seems to be struggling, say 'Pause!' and point at a student who will give the storyteller a new word to use in their story.
7. When this activity has gone on long enough, then let a new storyteller be selected (it's a good idea for this to be a close friend of the original storyteller's, if possible). Instruct this new storyteller to continue the story where their friend left off and also to reincorporate into the story all the new words that were said by their classmates during the first part of the story. Let the story come to a natural conclusion.
8. Now that the students understand the tasks, ask them if anybody else would like to give the activities a try and invite any volunteer who feels up to the task to do it. They can choose if they want new words to help them or not.

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9. When the activities are complete, get some feedback from the students. Ask questions like:
 - Are you good at this kind of activity? Why? Why not?
 - Would you enjoy having to do this activity very often?
 - How do you feel when you have to tell a story like this in front of everyone?
 - Is it easier when you are being fed words that you have to use, or is it easier when you are fully in charge of the story?

At some point or another, a student will bring up imagination, or lack thereof, or if they don't, you can bring it up and discuss it.
10. The class now needs to be split into two groups of equal size. The first group, the A students, will be made up of the students who feel somewhat comfortable with this activity. The second group, the B students, will have the students who claim they don't have imagination or that they are too shy to create a story. If there is no way to split the group equally in this way, then just randomly split them by labelling them A, B, A, B, A, B ...
11. Instruct every student A to buddy up with a student B and move their chairs to somewhere in the room where they are some distance from the other pairs. They should face each other.
12. Give each student a role card, A or B as appropriate, instructing them to read it without showing it to anybody. When everyone has had time to read their instructions, let the activity start, and set a time limit of around 15 minutes. If there's an odd number of students, you can buddy up with a student but the student should be in group B.
13. When the activity is done, invite each student B, one by one, to come to the front of the classroom and tell the story that they have extracted from student A. After each student B completes the story, ask the student some questions like:
 - Do you like this story?
 - Do you think your partner is good at telling stories?
 - Does he/she have a good imagination?
14. These questions will very likely elicit giggles from the rest of the classroom. Let all the students exchange role cards so they understand the meaning of the activity.
15. After all the gasps of surprise have died down, you can elicit feedback from the class, asking them what they can learn from this activity. If the answer you're looking for isn't forthcoming, you can guide your students towards the answer: that everyone has imagination – sometimes it gets blocked, but it is always there. You can explain that once the responsibility of creating and sharing a story were taken away, the students happily thought up questions to ask.

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Student A

Your partner thinks that you are going to create a story, but they are wrong – they will be the ones creating the story without realizing.

Your partner is going to ask you questions to understand the story, for example 'Is it about a house?' You will have to answer these questions.

However, you must follow these rules:

- If the question ends in a consonant, the answer will be NO.
- If the question ends in a vowel, the answer will be YES.
- If the question ends in a Y, the answer will be MAYBE.

Is the story about a fairy? – Maybe.

Is she sad? – No.

Does she live in a small house? – Yes.

Student B

Your partner has thought of a story – but they are not going to tell you the story. Instead, you have to ask them Yes or No questions to extract it from them.

Try and find out as much as you can about the story because later you will be sharing it with the class.

Is the story about a cat?

Does it live near here?

Have you ever met it?

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