The Anatomy of a Witch: Lessons in English Language, Literature and Improvisation

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Abstract

The paper provides a brief outline of the historical development, principles and implementation of improvisational theatre in both the theatrical and non-theatrical context in order to present the art of improvisation as a strategy in foreign and second language acquisition. Research shows that because of the adaptability of the improvisational game structure which allows for the applicability of improvisational techniques in different contexts and with subjects of various backgrounds, improvisational theatre can be incorporated in teaching an array of subjects and topics, including English as a foreign and second language. In order to demonstrate the possible application of the improvisational strategy in English language teaching, there is a detailed description of an interdisciplinary workshop *The English Anatomy of a Witch*, focusing on the oral tradition of storytelling and the fairy tale as the direct product of both storytelling and improvisational practices, which contains different aspects of improvisational techniques in the classroom setting. By discussing the figure of the witch, which is anthropologically and historically present in British and American culture, the workshop aims to achieve a number of goals and objectives pertaining to both foreign and second language acquisition, the re-evaluation of the literary tradition, as well as pedagogies that foster critical and divergent thinking.

Keywords: improvisational theatre, storytelling, English as a foreign / second language, traditional literature, fairy tale

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Introduction

The tradition of drama pedagogy and drama-based foreign language teaching has over the past several decades drawn intensely on various theatrical styles, strategies and forms (Schewe, 2013). However, according to Bettina Matthias (2009), improvisational theatre in the context of foreign language teaching has received only fleeting attention. Nevertheless, the reason why improvisational theatre is particularly suited for language instruction is because the art of improvisation is embedded in the essence of human interaction, as our daily lives and the accompanying exchanges are not scripted. Accordingly, Viola Spolin, one of the founders of improvisational theatre, claims that 'the techniques of theater are the techniques of communicating' (1999, p. 3), and improvisational techniques which are introduced within a specific structure of an exercise or a game may foster spontaneous and intuitive communication, as well as 'a personal and creative response to whatever the linguistic input may be' (Matthias, 2009, p. 59). An important feature linking improvisational theatre and language is its storytelling aspect, often listed as one of the main principles of improvisation (Berk & Trieber, 2009).

The Origins of Improv

Improvisational theatre was utilised before the invention of the written word, in times when tales were told and passed on orally. The oral tradition of storytelling, myth, religion and ritual, such as Mayan religious festivals, shamanic performances or medieval Christian theatre, all contained elements of improvisation (Zaunbrecher, 2011, p. 50). However, the direct historical predecessor of improvisational theatre is considered to be commedia

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dell'arte, which originated in the sixteenth century in Italy and included improvised dialogues within a provisional scenario. Subsequently, improvisational theatre as we know it today was developed in the middle of the twentieth century predominantly by Viola Spolin (*Improvisation for the Theater*, 1999) and Keith Johnstone (*Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*, 1989; *Impro for Storytellers,* 1999), both teachers who successfully devised techniques and exercises for practising improvisation in the theatrical and non-theatrical context.

Nowadays improvisational theatre is performed in theatres around the world, such as Second City, the Chicago-based improvisational theatre, club and school of improvisation, as well as home to many well-known comedians, or Loose Moose Theatre Company, founded by Keith Johnstone and Mel Tonken, in which many new improvisational forms, such as Theatresports, Micetro, Gorilla Theatre or Life Game, were conceived (Johnstone, 2015). Many universities house improv troupes, such as the famous Stanford Improvisors. Improvisational theatre as a discipline has been present in the media as well, via improvisational shows such as *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* (1998-2013), or *Drew Carey's Improv-A-Ganza* (2011-), all featuring entertaining improvisational exercises and games, often involving celebrities. Moreover, improv / impro (improvisational theatre, often referred to as 'impro' [British English] or 'improv' [American English]) as a theatrical form, is also used as part of therapy and evaluation methods known as 'psychodrama' and 'sociodrama', for the purpose of educating actors, preschoolers, children with disabilities, counselors, social workers, business teams and teachers (Zaunbrecher, 2011, p. 50). This wide applicability of improvisational theatre is a proof of the fact that the activities involved in creating an improvisational setting display a wide range of possibilities regarding the implementation of improvisational techniques with subjects of different interests, needs and demographics, which also includes education and foreign language teaching at all levels.

Background

Zaunbrecher (2011, p. 50) defines improv as 'the deliberate use of improvisational methods in a performance that manifests in the context of a dual matrix of immanence – that of the audience's gaze to the performers and of the performers' bodies to the

audience', thus separating theatrical improvisation from other forms of 'artistic improvisation'. In its essence, improvisational theatre places emphasis on spontaneity and human intuition, as well as spontaneous and uninhibited communication, which Johnstone claims to have atrophied due to flaws in formal education. Likewise, Spolin argues that 'when response to experience takes place at the intuitive level, when a person functions beyond a constricted intellectual plane, intelligence is freed' (1999, pp. 3-4). However, the art of improvisation is not entirely free of boundaries, but is placed within the controlled structure of an exercise or a game. Accordingly, Downs (2004) defines four characteristics of an improvisational game: the automatic individual adjustment between the degree of ability and difficulty, the existence of the controlled environment, the demand for concentration which focuses a participant on the present moment, and immediate relaxation as the result of being focused on the present moment. Accordingly, Neva Boyd, Spolin's mentor, described playing an improv game as:

> [...] the ability to create a situation imaginatively and to play a role in its tremendous experience, a sort of vacation from one's everyday self and routine of everyday living. We observe that this psychological freedom creates a condition in which *strain* and *conflict* are dissolved and potentialities are released in the spontaneous effort to meet the demands of the situation. (qtd. in Spolin, 1999, p. 5)

Consequently, the developmental and therapeutic effects of improvisation are more than obvious. Johnstone claims that drama has to consider the whole person and include all their faculties in the process of building a spontaneous scene in which a story is told (1999, p. x). Furthermore, he asserts that improvising produces a similar effect as that of Wolpe's progressive desensitisation, as well as paradoxical psychology in which a patient is asked to rehearse their own symptoms. Accordingly, the main principles of improv are trust, acceptance, attentive listening, spontaneity, storytelling, nonverbal communication (Berk & Trieber, 2009, pp. 31-33), all essential for communication and interaction. Similarly, Lockford and Pelias (2004) identify the act of improvisation as the process of *bodily poeticizing* (p. 432), which includes the 'epistemic stances' of communication, playfulness, sedimentation, sensuality and vulnerability. All the aforementioned categorisations

strongly emphasize communication as the defining characteristic of improvisation. As opposed to other theatrical forms, improvisation is not script-based and allows for 'natural communication' (Schütz, 2014) to occur. Primarily for this reason, improvisational theatre can be a valuable teaching strategy in a foreign and second language classroom.

Improvising in the Classroom

In their account of improvisation as a teaching tool, Berk and Trieber propose 'major instructional reasons' why improvisation should be used in the classroom:

- it complies with the characteristics of the *Net generation* (learning by inductive discovery, through social interaction and collaboration, with focus on emotional openness and limited attention span),
- it engages multiple intelligences,
- it fosters *collaborative learning* and *deep learning* (2009, p. 33).

They also point out that improvisational techniques can be 'added to any existing set of teaching strategies' (p. 30). Similarly, in her research on improvisational theatre in the classroom, (Nemet) Flegar (2014) argues that improvisational activities affect the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domain incorporated in Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956), contain the elements of 'critical pedagogy' as first defined by Paulo Freire (Canavan, 2012), or a 'pedagogy of articulation and risk' as proposed by Grossberg (1994), which is not primarily concerned with the outcomes of the instruction, but rather the empowerment of pupils / students to reconstruct and transform their own world and surroundings. Accordingly, (Nemet) Flegar provides the classification of narrative activities into the categories of *transformation*, *association*, *building*, *word-at-a-time* and *interaction*. In all these aspects, improvisational theatre fosters verbal spontaneity which is encouraged through the disruption of the expected and 'acceptable' discourse, for example, by telling a story in which every participant adds one word at a time, or a dialogue in which every sentence has to start with a question or a different letter of the alphabet (Johnstone, 1999). In the classroom, such activities can be used for warming up, as well as to enhance focus or group cohesion. Narrative exercises and games, in particular, can be

used to acquire concrete knowledge and skills, such as learning numbers and letters of the alphabet, expanding vocabulary, practising grammar, syntax, phonetics, or types of discourse such as public speaking or storytelling. Consequently, improvisational techniques can also be incorporated as a psychological and communication strategy in foreign language acquisition (Nemet, 2007), because learning a foreign or second language is often accompanied by a certain level of anxiety. In *The Study of Second Language Acquisition* (1995), Rod Ellis recognises 'language anxiety' as a situation-specific anxiety which students experience when attempting to learn a foreign language and communicate in it (p. 480), while Casado and Dereshiwsky (2001) emphasise the importance of the role of a teacher who can either foster or discourage the learning of language by applying different communication and psychological strategies. Accordingly, research on public speaking in the second language university classroom by Nemet (2004) revealed the significance of improvisational techniques in modifying L2 public speaking anxiety by turning 'debilitating' into 'facilitating' anxiety and, thus, enhancing the quality of the performance in the second language.

The practical example provided in this paper combines the power of improvisation and storytelling for the purpose of consuming, retelling and telling personal and collective stories in a foreign language, and in doing so developing language skills and knowledge while becoming aware of relevant and pressing issues. In this sense, the use of improvisational theatre displays similarities to 'process drama', a small-scale category of drama-based teaching, rooted in modern educational theories and the 1960's avant-garde theatre, which makes use of improvisational drama techniques (guided improvisation, prepared improvisation, Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre) (Gruić, 2002, p. 15, p. 48) and in which students and teachers are involved in 'challenging performative activities' (Schewe, 2013, p. 8), enacting a variety of roles in order to 'explore deep personal connections to themes and issues' (Weltsek-Medina, 2008). However, in an improv-based classroom working within the structure of the Theater Game (Spolin, 1999), the focus is placed primarily on the act of communication and producing language in a spontaneous and unrestricted manner.

Improvisation, Storytelling and Children's Literature

Schewe (2013, p. 5) argues that drama-based foreign language teaching can 'be applied to the three core areas of a foreign language discipline (i.e. language, literature and culture)'. The spontaneous storytelling involved in playing improvisational theatre links this particular art form to the oral tradition of storytelling, and, thus, the genre of traditional literature. Anthropologists claim that 'societies make the world coherent by constructing dramatic plots to model human actions' (Johnstone, 2003, p. 643). In other words, storytelling was and is the essential way of communicating, sharing information and building communities, regardless of the medium. Accordingly, Tunnell and Jacobs claim that traditional tales are:

> stories of the human experience told in primary colours, the nuances of life stripped away to reveal the basic component parts: love, fear, greed, jealousy, mercy, and so on. Therefore, traditional stories from around the world are basically alike because fundamental human characteristics and motivations are universal. (2008, p. 102)

A study of the storytelling tradition is rather suitable in the context of the theatrical art form of improvisation which places emphasis on communication and the development of language skills. The significance of the fairy tale in contemporary times is undisputed, evident in the creation of constructs such as the 'fairy-tale web' by Christina Bacchilega in *Fairy Tales Transformed?* (2013), who observes multiple interweaving storytelling traditions and the complexity of the fairy tale genre experienced and produced in contemporary times as a web of 'intertextual, multivocal and transmedial cultural practices' (27). Moreover, Tunnell and Jacobs recognise the value of teaching using children's books and literature due to the fact that engaged readers are also life-long learners (2008, p. 226). The style, the formats, structures, perspectives, or the language of works of fiction allow for vicarious experiences that promote not only literacy, but also a deeper understanding of everyday issues and phenomena. These facts, as well as the intermingling of the core areas of foreign language discipline, prompted us to devise a

workshop that combines drama-based and literature-based foreign language learning experience.

The Topic of the Witch

The witch is the representative antagonist of the traditional, classic and modern fairy tale. The fairy tale, although originally not aimed at children (Zipes et al., 1995, p. 175), over time became children's property and the property of children's literary tradition. Generally, the fairy / folk tale witch is a powerful archetypal figure very useful in any study on marginalisation and 'Otherness'. As aberrations from the norm, both physically and mentally, witches are considered monsters, yet, according to Vladimir Propp, the author of the classic *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), Baba Yaga is also a donor or a character in a tale who, often inadvertently, provides the hero with a means to further their 'quest'. Similarly, in her celebrated book *Women Who Run With the Wolves* (1995), Clarissa Pinkola Estés portrays Baba Yaga in her retelling of the tale of Vasalisa the Wise as a 'Wild Hag'. However, for Pinkola Estés, Baba Yaga is also an important aspect of a woman's psyche in developing her intuition, 'familiarising [her]self with the arcane, the odd, the "otherness" of the wild' (94-5) and facing great power in others, as well as in herself.

It is no surprise that, historically, the witch hunts during the Spanish Inquisition or the Salem witch trials often involved persecution of those different and marginalised. However, a witch is, equally, a part of our contemporary everyday experience, and may represent ordinary figures and occurrences. In the words of Roald Dahl, a witch:

> might even – and this will make you jump – she might even be your lovely school-teacher who is reading these words to you at this very moment. Look carefully at that teacher. Perhaps she is smiling at the absurdity of such a suggestion. Don't let that put you off. It could be part of her cleverness. (*The Witches*, front matter, pp. 9-10)

In its most basic fairy tale form, a witch is the epitome of intentional evil imbued with magic, which, translated into everydayness, signifies power, both personal and

institutional, to which every child is drawn because of the inherent powerlessness of childhood. A witch, therefore, represents a powerful force, signifies a deviation from the norm which, as media theories report, children particularly enjoy, and is the shadow of which Ursula Le Guin speaks in her essay 'The Child and the Shadow' (1975) that 'not only imbues us with our creativity and passion, it fuels our intuition and inspiration' (Lamb, 2008, p. 10). Finally, a witch is also a figure which children long to conquer in the pursuit of justice (Bettelheim, 2010) and with whom they might identify as the 'liminal' or 'boundary-crossing' character (Turner, 1989, pp. 95-97), because as boundary-crossers themselves, they are privy to all that is transitional and borderline (Lacoss, 2002). Creatures with supernatural powers or ordinary objects with extraordinary functions are a desirable part of any growing-up experience and accompanying education, with the possible goal of developing a sensitivity and a broader understanding of other groups on the margins of society, be it racial, ethnic, gender-related or marginalisation based on physical or mental abilities.

Originally, 'The English Anatomy of a Witch' was the title of a section of the interdisciplinary exhibition *Children's Business, Dragons and Witches* (Faculty of Education, University of Osijek, 2012), composed of visual and textual material containing literary, media and research references to witches in the English language. The English-language tradition is opulent with references to witches, such as Arthur Miller's 1952 play *The Crucible*, Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) or J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, as well as various television and film productions, and music. A witch might find her way into the English classroom via an innocent tongue twister for the purpose of practising pronunciation, or as a means of discussing linguistic, cultural or social issues. For example, works of historical fiction such as the Newbery Medal winner *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* (Speare, 1958) discuss the conditions of marginalised people in a specific setting, yet the situations described are not uncommon in the everyday life of a child. For the workshop which follows, the instructors opted for the traditional and classic version of the Slavic fairy tale witch, Baba Yaga, because it provides a starting point for a variety of interpretations of the character. In many postmodern and innovative fairy tale adaptations, the shift in point of view and characterisation is readily presented to the reader. The traditional witch, on the other hand,

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signifies an ambivalence which might be used to intricately develop critical and divergent thinking, which is why the complex character of Baba Yaga was carefully explored within the drama-based improvisational workshop.

Workshop: The English Anatomy of a Witch

The workshop *The English Anatomy of a Witch* was offered as an activity included in the EKTe Festival: Arts in Education organised at the Faculty of Education, University of Osijek (Croatia), 27-29 May, 2015. It was aimed at student teachers of English, English teachers and English university instructors. The content of the workshop was created to suit the participants' level of foreign language proficiency, but contained materials and activities which could be adapted to suit other levels of proficiency. In order to demonstrate improvisational techniques as a strategy in foreign and second language acquisition, the organisers decided on a topic connected to the oral tradition of storytelling and children's literature, making central to the workshop the figure of a witch, a traditional fairy tale antagonist whose ambivalence may result in personal and interpersonal insights.

Learning Outcomes

The workshop *The English Anatomy of a Witch* was devised for participants of a high level of proficiency in the English language, namely C1 and C2 (Proficient User) according to the Common European Framework for Reference in Languages (CEFR). Although a drama-based improvisational session might not be primarily concerned with learning outcomes, they were of importance during this workshop because it was created as a resource for future or current teaching and instruction. Therefore, at the end of the workshop, the participants were to be able to:

1. identify the appropriate type of presentation of literary content at various levels of instruction
2. recognise and perform improvisational warm-ups, as well as selected narrative improvisational exercises and games in different variations
3. implement improvisational techniques in an English language classroom

4. incorporate foreign / second language knowledge and skills in the frame of an improvisational activity

5. construct a mask and incorporate it in a specific context

6. re-evaluate and assess literary tradition, as well as everyday myths and beliefs

7. evaluate improvisational activities (use of Post Mortem; Spolin, 1999)

Accordingly, the goals of an improvisational session subsequently organised with this workshop in mind would be to bring about a specific understanding of the storytelling tradition, to raise awareness of cultural and social issues, to develop critical and divergent thinking, expand language-specific knowledge (vocabulary, grammar), to practise skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening and to encourage spontaneous communication in the English language.

Resources

The workshop content drew signficantly on the tradition of improvisational theatre developed by Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone. To this end, Spolin's *Improvisation for the Theater* (1999) is a remarkable resource containing over 200 games and exercises, as well as valuable comments on each of the activities, followed by evaluation questions. Additionally, Johnstone's *Impro for Storytellers* (1999) presents numerous narrative improvisational activities, whereas *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (1989) contains chapters on various concepts in improvisation, including a very useful chapter on mask work. Due to the fact that the tradition of improv also relies heavily on oral traditions, many improvisational activities are passed on by word of mouth and their origins are difficult to trace. In view of that, a good improvisational resource is the internet website *Improv Encyclopedia* (2014) which was established in 2001, is regularly updated and contains numerous activities sorted into categories, as well as the references and the glossary. The organisers of the workshop also used resources provided by London Theatresports at the Theater School in Isola, Slovenia.

Generally, the workshop revolved around two narrative improvisational activities, *Yes And* (Johnstone, 1999; Spolin, 1999) and *Expert* (Johnstone, 1999; *Improv Encyclopedia*, 2014). Presented here is the outline of the main activities:

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Yes And

Description. Players sit or stand in a circle. A volunteer begins by saying the first line of the story, for example, 'Once upon a time...' The next person in the circle then continues the story by saying the next sentence beginning with 'Yes, and...', in other words, adds information to the story and builds the plot. This continues in the circle until the story reaches the conclusion.

> The first player on a team of four or more starts a story [about anything]. As the game progresses, the leader points out various players who must immediately continue the story from the point where the last player left off. This is continued until the story has been completed or until the leader calls a halt. (Spolin, 1999, pp. 166-7)

Objectives. This exercise in all its variations constitutes an excellent practice in spontaneous storytelling. On the one hand, the participants experience the retelling of the assigned content, and on the other, they create their own content as a group. Verbal spontaneity, focus and group cohesion are the outcome of such an activity because a participant is required to spontaneously build on the offer of another participant in the immediacy of the situation.

Students may also be encouraged to spontaneously invent their own story at the end of this segment. When implementing improvisational exercises, the attitude of the instructor is of great importance. For more information on improvisational behaviour, see Ryan Madson (2005).

Expert

Description. One player is an expert on a particular topic, which is suggested by the audience. The other is the interviewer, and the game is played in the format of a TV show. The questions and answers can be random, but they need to be connected to the selected topic. There are various types of expert games and here are two most popular versions:

- ***Arms-Through Expert***. The expert in this game has an additional set of arms played by another student. The arms can do anything they want and the more frantic they are, the better. Additionally, the arms have to follow what is being said and act accordingly, and the expert should also pay attention to the arms and draw ideas from their movements.

- ***Three-Headed Expert*** **(Word-at-a-Time).** The expert is played by three people who each say only one word at a time.

Objectives. The *Arms-Through Expert* makes use of free speech with respect to linguistic rules. Through this game, the students learn to interact and observe what is happening at the moment, therefore drawing ideas and free associations from the present. In the *Three-Headed Expert*, the possibility of planning ahead is completely excluded, because one does not know which word the person before them will utter. Both versions emphasise verbal spontaneity.

One word at a time is sometimes difficult for beginners, but it is highly recommendable. Because these activities are done as interviews, they usually make the transition into more formal interviews easier.

Although there are many narrative games available, these particular ones were incorporated into the structure of the workshop because of their popularity and their adaptability within the categories of *building*, *word-at-a-time* and *interaction* (Nemet Flegar, 2014). The category of *building* encourages the development of storytelling skills, as well as the understanding of the plot structure, characterisation, setting, theme and narrative styles. Within a *building* exercise, one can practise various grammatical or syntactic structures by adding language-related rules to the structure of the exercise. *Yes And* is a representative *building* exercise and can be used to retell the content of a lesson or a literary text which was used during instruction for the purpose of simplifying it or presenting it from a different point of view. Both the activities can be played *word-at-a-time* style, which allows for the revising of various topics and units, developing of presentational skills, spontaneous communication, interaction in the context of *bodily poeticizing* and focus on the utterance produced in the immediacy of the situation. Finally, activities of *interaction* place emphasis on continuous negotiation, mutual exchange of

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verbal and nonverbal signs and coordination of information exchange. The two improvisational activities, *Yes And* and *Expert*, were combined with other activities to produce a vicarious experience inspired by the literary text in which language is learned in a spontaneous and uninhibited manner.

Session Outline

The English Anatomy of a Witch three-hour workshop consisted of several sections, outlined as follows:

1. warm-up (improvisational theatre exercises)
2. fairy tale reading ('Vasalisa the Wise' from *Women Who Run With the Wolves* (Pinkola Estés, 1995)
3. retelling the fairy tale in groups (*Yes And* exercise)
4. expert session
5. short break
6. writing an interview with the antagonist
7. sharing interviews in groups and preparing presentations

7a. mask work (Johnstone, 1989)

8. presenting / enacting masked interviews in groups
9. discussion
10. wrap-up

The formal introduction at the beginning of the workshop is followed by *warm-up* exercises. In improvisational theatre, warm-ups are designed to create group cohesion, enhance concentration and focus, raise energy level, as well as improve communication. They do not possess high performance value, but can be used at the beginning of classes, workshops, rehearsals or as preparation for a performance. In this particular context, warm-ups are a good way to subtly lead into the upcoming topic, and to prepare the participants for working in groups. One example is the warm-up *Name Rename* (Johnstone, 1989), in which the first time round the players are given a signal by the instructor to start walking around the room pointing at and shouting the names of the objects that they see in their surroundings. After the instructor yells 'Freeze!' they stop,

and when they are again given the signal, they 'pace about the room shouting out the wrong name for everything that their eyes light on' (p. 13). Johnstone claims that this warm-up results in a change of perspective and verbal spontaneity which can lead to the revision and acquisition of new vocabulary. Another useful warm-up, which can be done at the closing of the session as well, is the *Human Machine*, in which one participant begins by producing a sound and a movement, after which other participants join in by producing their own distinct, repetitive sounds and movement. The result is a 'machine' which fosters focus, group cohesion and nonverbal interaction.

After the warm-up session, the participants may feel equipped enough to enter the dark forest and visit Baba Yaga for the reading of the fairy tale. The fairy tale that was read to the group was *Vasalisa the Wise* (Pinkola Estés, 1995, pp. 77-82). This retelling is a powerful and sensory account of the tale with the emphasis on the female protagonists, therefore quite appropriate for this specific group profile. The reading was accompanied by slides of the forest, mostly black and white, instrumental music and a simple choreographed contemporary dance routine done by the second-year and third-year students of the Faculty of Education. Within the multimedia depiction of the fairy tale, the instructors focused on the sensory appeal of the tale. The intention was to highlight that younger learners are connected to what Strasburger and Wilson term 'perceptual boundedness' (2002, p. 19) in children's media, such as animation or lively music. The reading of the tale was followed by a brief discussion on whether the participants had already encountered this tale and in which way, as well as how a tale such as this one could be presented to younger and secondary-school learners of English.

What was generally agreed upon is that the retelling and / or simplifying of the tale might be an option, which is when the *Yes And* exercise was introduced. The group of participants eagerly tried out all variations of the exercise, which can be done in one group or several smaller groups. During the exercise, the verbs in the past tense occurring in the tale were displayed on the screen, such as lost, married, went, ran, entered, fetched, flew, looked, etc. These can be introduced within the exercise structure either explicitly, in the case of younger learners, or subtly displayed in the background in the duration of the exercise for more experienced learners.

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After the *Yes And* session, the focus was shifted from the fairy tale plot to the antagonist (see Figure 1). Depending on the level of proficiency, the relevant witch-related vocabulary can either be elicited beforehand or introduced one item at a time.
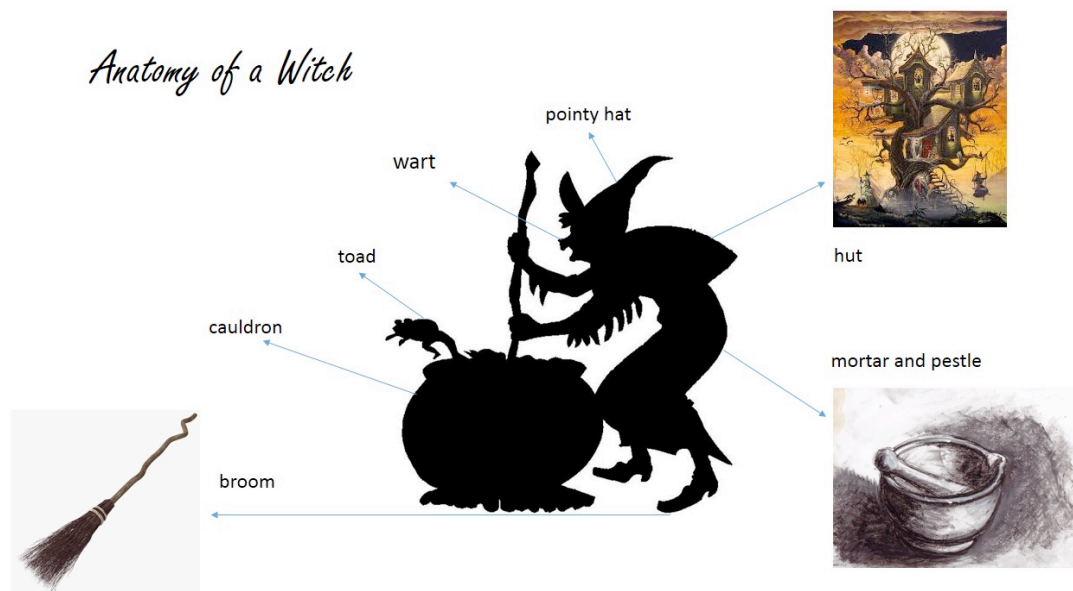

Figure 1. The slide 'Anatomy of a Witch'

The examination of the slide was followed by a reading of the 'Witches' Chant' from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (Sims, 2013, p. 486), which contains many of the listed words and then some that are top secret. The participants were then informed that they possessed enough knowledge of the witch to be experts on the topic. At this point the *expert* session began, dealing with topics such as how to brew a love potion and witch modes of transportation, suggested by the audience. Figure 2 shows both versions of the expert.

The expert session serves as an introduction into interviews which are to be subsequently created by workshop participants. This popular improvisational activity in all its variations is an appropriate and playful activity leading into the personal narrative of the 'Other'.

Following a short break, the writing session is done in pairs. The participants are given the assignment to write an interview and create a narrative of the 'Other' featuring

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the antagonist of the tale that was read to them – Baba Yaga – telling the story of Vasalisa from her point of view. Some of the interview questions could be: Do you really eat children? How did you feel about Vasalisa's visit? What were you doing when Vasalisa arrived?

Figure 2. *Arms-Through Expert* and the *Three-Headed Expert* on witches

After the writing session, the participants are invited to divide themselves into groups of four for the *speaking / sharing* session. In groups they read their interviews and decide which one they could most effectively present for the participants of the entire workshop. The length of the presentation should not exceed five minutes and participants should be able to explain why they chose the narrative in question.

The parallel preparatory activity before the presentation includes *mask work*, an exercise in visual arts. The participants are given the opportunity to create masks that they can wear and display at the end of the workshop. Johnstone (1989, pp. 143-205) dedicates

a whole chapter to mask work because wearing a mask means becoming 'possessed' by the character (he provides here the example of Charlie Chaplin's Tramp). In the final session of the workshop, each group of four can be divided into those who rehearse presenting the interview with the antagonist and those who create the mask for the antagonist. The participants have at their disposal the pre-modelled mask shapes[1] and self-adhesive collage paper in all colours. The available material makes it possible to create a visually unique and effective mask in the simplest way possible by gluing the pieces of collage paper onto the ready-made masks. Before creating the mask, the participants may discuss the desired facial features of the character that they wish to introduce to the audience. The instructor might introduce the participants to the examples of various media depictions of witches[2] in order to give an overview of the range of opportunities involved in creating the visual representation of a witch. Additionally, when creating the mask, the emphasis is placed on communication and exchange of ideas among the participants, as well as the use of topic-related vocabulary.

During the *presentation* session, the participants present the interview of their choice. In the case of this particular workshop the participants each requested to create their own mask and individually answer questions that they had devised earlier during writing (see Figure 3). The interviews presented were mostly very humorous depictions of the witch character and offered the audience a fresh perspective on the motives and activities involving Baba Yaga and her premises. We found out, for example, that Baba Yaga was in fact outcast into the forest, is homeless, cannot afford to pay her electricity bill, and does not eat children at all, but does not like them either.

After the presentations, each participant's attention is turned to the *Post Mortem* sheet available in the Workshop Pack. Post Mortem in improvisational theatre means an essential discussion after an activity or a show about what worked well and what did not. The questions should revolve around the implementation of improvisational activities, but also the experience of embodying the character of the witch. The *discussion / evaluation* should draw on the experiences of wearing a mask and playing the part of the antagonist, as well as any experiences of difference and 'Otherness', both positive and negative. It is interesting to find out whether the participants' perception of the witch changed from the

beginning to the end of the workshop and whether the experience of playing this character resulted in any intra- and interpersonal insights.

Figure 3. Selected examples of witch masks

The workshop can close with the warm-up exercise the *Human Machine* previously done at the beginning of the workshop, which encompasses building and interaction emphasised during the workshop. In addition to language and literature, a lesson in improvisation should also raise awareness of each person's abilities and their place within a group or a community.

Evaluation and Reflection

After the workshop, the participants were given evaluation sheets comprised of ten questions connected to the content of the workshop. Overall, they described the workshop

as enjoyable and well organised. Some of the most memorable moments were listening to and watching the Baba Yaga story, making and wearing masks, as well as playing the Expert game. The new insights were mostly connected to various activities which could be involved in presenting a literary work to learners of English, information connected to improvisational techniques, new ideas about strategies and approaches to certain topics, practising improvisational games and how they could be incorporated in the classroom, new information about witches regarding their ambivalence, new fairy tale experience. All of the participants reported that they could apply the techniques introduced during the workshop in their own instruction, which is a valuable piece of information considering the fact that there were representatives of various levels of instruction involved in the workshop. Most of the participants were satisfied with all the sessions, though the student teachers requested more Post Mortem discussion. This is understandable considering the complexity of the workshop – improvisational activities are applicable across various contexts, but others involving writing, speaking or discussion depend on learners' levels of proficiency.

Overall, the participants believe that improvisational techniques could affect foreign and second language learning and performance in overcoming language anxiety, resulting in more self-confidence and a relaxed atmosphere marked by trust, the indirect learning of language structures and the development of conversational fluency. Wearing a witch mask was described as a powerful, a bit unusual, a little silly, as well as a not too comfortable experience, and generally encouraged reflection on issues of marginalisation and 'Otherness'. Finally, the atmosphere of the workshop was described as full of humour, relaxed, respectful, encouraging, creative, fun, highly positive and full of laughter. The comments seem very enthusiastic, but in fact reflect the recurring feedback over the years of experience in teaching improvisation, particularly the university course *Drama Workshop in English Language* (since 2005), which focuses on improvisational techniques and has resulted in many positive experiences of students overcoming their fear of speaking a foreign language, using a foreign language in general and presenting literary works on stage and film.

Conclusion

Improvisational theatre as a strategy in foreign and second language acquisition can be adapted to suit various levels of proficiency, introduce and consider various topics, and can be combined with already existing teaching strategies. Accordingly, the workshop *The English Anatomy of a Witch* is an example of drama- and literature-based instruction resulting in language learning, as well as critical and divergent thinking. Considering the outcomes and the workshop evaluation, the benefits of using improvisational techniques in the classroom are numerous and mostly affect the language performance in modifying 'language anxiety', developing conversational fluency, improving communication skills, as well as resulting in positive self-image and group cohesion. Additionally, the workshop makes use of improvisational visual arts techniques in creating costumes / props to intensify the dramatic experience. Overall, improvisational theatre techniques are a valuable teaching strategy and a welcome addition to any foreign and second language classroom.

Notes

[1] An example of a mask shape is a Low Polly Mask, available at www.thingiverse.com.

[2] Some examples of films are *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987), *The Witches* (1990), *Hocus Pocus* (1993), *The Craft* (1996), *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's / Sorcerer's Stone* (2001), *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005), *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012), *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters* (2013), or *Maleficent* (2014).

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