

Text Improvisation: a Skill to Acquire

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Abstract

For MGIMO students, the main goal of mastering a foreign language is the ability to speak in public. When practicing this skill, they often face the problem of stage fright. To overcome it, students seal the text so that it becomes automatic, with the need to communicate the message totally escaping their attention. As a result, instead of an eloquent orator the audience sees a talking head. The method of improvisation, which is used to train actors, may well become the lifeline for the students. Thus, the work aims at seeing how teachers could adapt this method to the needs of the students and train it in the language classroom. Relying on the findings of distinguished Russian and overseas actors and directors as well as on the results of the experiment held by the author, the work proves that improvisation techniques help melt the frozen form of the text and give it life and energy.

Keywords: Improvisation, public speaking, communication, stage fright, sealed text, eloquence.

When a person takes up a foreign language, the primary goal most probably is the ability to use it in daily routine. When an International Relations student engages himself in mastering a foreign language, what he has in mind is the ability to speak in public, confidently deliver formal statements, be convincing when negotiating on the international arena etc; in other words, he keeps in mind the professional perspective. During the course of studies, he will improve the level of grammar, enlarge vocabulary, read professional literature, write texts, listen to record-

ings of various professional backgrounds and, most importantly, he will acquire the needed background knowledge. Still, when zero hour comes, he realizes that words, though chiseled and polished, do not come easy.

What he experiences is stage fright, a nervous feeling every actor meets at least once before he comes on stage. It is true for actors who see the audience after hours, days and months of rehearsals with the text of their parts imbued in them; it is also true for students who write their own texts, memorize them and climb their own rostrum; it is even more true for students who have to think fast, climb that same rostrum and improvise on the spot.

The word improvisation, originally French, derives from Latin *Improvisus*, which means spontaneous and implies the role of instantaneity of response to the external impulse. Public Speaking in essence is meant to be spontaneous, thus every next phrase is nothing else but a constant search for a living word and form of expression. Tolshin highlights that improvisation is a tool necessary for a rapid decision making and for developing an ability to come up with interesting unexpected reactions. To him, improvisation and the very ability to improvise is relevant for many kinds of creativity, both artistic and, what matters to us, academic [Tolshin 2005].

Thus, the first round of questions to tackle is as follows:

- How does one improvise?
- Are there any rules to follow?
- Can improvisation be taught and if yes, how can it be trained in the due form in the classroom?

All mentioned above in mind, the second round of questions arises:

- Whose area of responsibility is improvisation?
- Can teachers leave students alone with it?
- How can teachers be of help and service and boost students' need to improvise?

To answer these questions we need to see into what feeds stage fright and hinders improvisation. The observations rely on the findings of Andrey Tolshin, specialist in the field of theatre pedagogy, Svetlana Korsheva, stage speech teacher, and actors and directors Konstantin Stanislavsky, Michael Chekhov and Peter Brook. The essay also relies on the results of the experiment held in the advanced groups of the third year bachelors with the faculty of international relations, MGIMO and the author's own experience as both an actress and teacher. The intentional limitation to this work would be speeches, which narrows us to improvising with the already prepared text that needs freeing and developing as if it were happening here and now. To put it simply, students have to improvise with the already existing form.

At the stage of preparation, what matters most is the topic, the material, certain linguistic means of putting the idea forward, accurate grammar and required clichés. Once the text is written, the student memorizes every little bit of it, tones and pauses included. In other words, he seals it, which itself is an act of defense from the unknown or unpredictable. As Peter Brook has it, “to protect oneself, one builds and one seals, but a form, once created, is already moribund” [Brook 2005: 56]. What happens next to this dead form is reproducing it on stage through automatism, and instead of an eloquent orator the audience receives a talking head. Thus, the idea of Stanislavsky that improvisation can be taught seems to become a lifeline to both students and teachers.

So, what can be done in the classroom to actually acquire the text of the speech and find freedom in it?

Step 1. Acknowledging that what frightens people most of all is speaking, Peter Brook suggests that either words or ideas are secondary and what one must begin with is the body. Making a panic-free emptiness within the body and consciously releasing the tension in the muscles is the exercise every speaking practice

should start with. Intentionally releasing tension in the feet, hands, neck, forehead, lower jaw etc. should become a prerequisite task because only when the body is loose is the speaker ready to perform.

Step 2. To liven the frozen moribund text students can be introduced to Stanislavsky's and Dalcrose's method of physical action where they experiment with the text to find its real pace and rhythm through their own free bodies. This method, also known as proprioception, teaches students to consider their bodies as an instrument for exercising creative ideas. [Ter-Minasova 2024]. Moving fast or slow, walking up or down the stairs, balancing, jumping, leaning to the wall — any movement is possible, there is no right or wrong; the only requirement is the continuity and spontaneity of both text and action.

Step 3. Students should be taught out of merely repeating the lines. Letting the text go, giving up on it and never trying to seal it is crucial when attempting improvisation. Peter Brook insisted that “one needs to do the preparation to discard it, to build in order to demolish” [Brook 2005: 29]. Michael Chekhov strongly believed in renouncing the already existing form, bringing forward the feeling of the whole, otherwise understood as Entirety [Chekhov 1985]. Knowing the last and the first phrases, being able to reproduce the statement backwards or start from any part of it is a huge step forward to freeing the text and oneself in it. Following the axiom that everything is related to everything, the state of the speaker, his individual atmosphere, the atmosphere of the audience and that of the venue, the posture of the speaker, limitations, such as a clicker in the hand, are to be taken into consideration. Academic preparation does contribute to knowing the topic; what the students need to do next is to get rid of it, beware of the situation and let the text happen here and now in the presence of the audience.

Step 4 trains the active attention of the speaker because uttering the words does not mean speaking. Students should be well aware of why they speak and where their attention is during the performance. One speaks to make something happen, to make the audience react and act, thus the energy and the true intention of the speaker is of vital importance; they are to keep in mind and consciously use the internal action which will depend on both what they are talking about and what they want their audience to do next. As an exercise, students can give the same lines of their speeches with the intentions to instruct, reproach, accuse or commend. The impact the phrase will acquire based on the intention to accuse is sure to be different from the one with the intention to commend. As Korsheva puts it, “the text should become a tool to implement the intention and turn it into a verbal action” [Korsheva 2021: 38]. As long as there is action, there is someone who this action is directed to, which means being in constant contact with the audience. To practice, students are welcome to give a speech evading the audience and focusing on the text only and vice versa. The outcome will speak for itself: speaking is impossible without a partner, and a monologue, which in actual fact is a dialogue, is no exception.

Step 5. In the learning process, the one who delivers the talk is almost always the one who writes it and rarely do we see the difference between these two actors. In his study, Peter Brook addresses this duality problem and comes to the conclusion that there should be a clear distinction between myself, number one, the author, and myself, number two, the speaker. What he writes next does not require any translation: “if the speaker reads these words, his head bent over his paper, delivering the contents in a monotonous, pedantic tone of voice, the very words that seem lively on paper, will sink down into unbearable monotony, demonstrating once again what so often gives academic lecturers

a bad name. So ‘myself, number one’ is like a playwright who has to have confidence that ‘myself, number two’ will bring a new energy and a new detail into the text and the event” [Brook 2005: 96]. Adapting the idea of Brook’s to language classrooms, students should have no reverence towards their works and be ready to improvise with their texts as if they were written by somebody else. This may seem to be a difficult task, as for every creator his own work is sacred; yet, when myself, number two steps over myself, number one, he acquires this so much needed creative freedom and is ready to improvise.

Brook once said that each time he speaks in public, it is an experiment in theatre. Both actors and students face the same challenge of improvising with the prepared learned lines; yet, actors are taught to improvise, whereas students remain in the dark. Turning to acting techniques becomes a logical step to achieve the set task. Five suggested practices are no panacea for the problem, but they are the ones that have proven that text improvisation is a skill that can be acquired in the language classroom with due focus and perseverance on the part of both students and teachers.

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