Finnish Language Teaching through Improvisation - Conforming the Educational Values within an Improvisational Frame

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Abstract

In my article, I examine the moments of gaps or pauses in improvisational scenes used in a Finnish language as a foreign language class. In my research I use different improvisational exercises and techniques (e.g. Johnstone 1981; 1999) when teaching Finnish as a second language. My pedagogical aim is to improve Finnish students' communicational skills in different kind of improvised settings. My research focuses on teaching Finnish as a foreign language in a Romanian university using improvisation theatre as a method in language teaching.

I start from some values of Finnish educational system, such as equity, flexibility, creativity, teacher professionalism and trust (Sahlberg 2007). I compare how these values are conformed within an improvisational frame in a second language class. I present three examples from two different drama courses and I show through these examples how students contemplate with delicate, shameful and radical moments or pauses within their improvisational interaction in the classroom. My aim is to show how the teachers repeatedly accept the students' ideas based on the rules of improvisation (Johnstone 1981; 1999) and how this positive freedom of improvisation (Peters 2009) shows similarity with the values of the Finnish educational system.

Rezumat

În articolul meu cercetez momentele breșelor sau pauzelor din scenele de improvizație folosite într-o oră de limbă finlandeză ca limbă străină. În cercetarea mea folosesc diferite exerciții și tehnici de improvizație (de exemplu, Johnstone 1981; 1999) în predarea finlandezei ca a doua limbă. Scopul meu pedagogic este de a îmbunătăți abilitățile de comunicare ale studenților de finlandeză în diferite tipuri de scene improvizate. Cercetarea mea se concentrează asupra predării limbii finlandeze ca limbă străină într-o universitate românească, folosind teatrul de improvizație ca metodă de predare a limbilor străine.

Încep prin a enunța câteva valori ale sistemului educațional finlandez, cum ar fi echitatea, flexibilitatea, creativitatea, profesionalismul profesorului și încrederea (Sahlberg 2007). Compar modul în care aceste valori se potrivesc unui cadru de improvizație dintr-o oră de limbi străine. Prezint trei exemple din două cursuri de dramă diferite și arăt prin aceste exemple cum studiază studenții cu momente sau pauze delicate, rușinoase și radicale în interacțiunea lor improvizațională din clasă. Scopul meu este să arăt cum profesorii acceptă în mod repetat ideile studenților pe baza regulilor de improvizație (Johnstone 1981; 1999) și cum această libertate pozitivă de improvizație (Peters 2009) prezintă similitudini cu valorile sistemului educațional finlandez.

Keywords: improvisation; second language acquisition; applied linguistics; Finnish as a second language; Finnish educational system

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1. The Finnish miracle and Finnish educational system

For the last 20 years Finland has been recognized as the country of remarkable good educational system¹. One indication of good educational system has been based on the success in PISA tests, in which Finland has been ranked high since 2001². One explanation for Finnish students' good performance in PISA tests has been suggested to *simply be the high congruence between the objectives of PISA and of the Finnish basic school reform from the early 1970s, which led to the adoption of comprehensive 9-year education for all*.

However, two of the latest Finnish governments reduced almost 1.5 billion euros from the Finnish educational system between 2011 and 2015³. The results can be seen in the increasing differences between different schools in Finland as well as the decreasing results in the PISA success Finland has been well-known for⁴. Since 2011 the cuts in education have been made in all educational levels starting from early childhood education.

In this article I compare the values of the Finnish educational system according to Pasi Sahlberg's (2007) research about the key factors behind the education policies in Finland and how these values are parallel with the values of improvisational theatre practices. I am currently researching the use of improvisation as a tool of practicing Finnish communication and language skills. The rules of improvisation emphasize the freedom and

¹ Kupiainen et al. 2009; Simola 2005; Sahlberg 2007.

² <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/46581035.pdf>.

³ (The government of Jyrki Katainen (Kok) and Alexander Stubb (Kok) between 2011 and 2015 and the term of prime minister Juha Sipilä 2015 - 2018) (Lindholm 2018 in *Suomen Kuvalehti* 17/2018).

⁴ Lindholm 2018.

student-based learning to encourage the students to use Finnish in a life-like situation in communication with others.

2. The values of the Finnish educational system

According to Kupiainen, Hautamäki and Karjalainen (2009) the Finnish educational system has followed the other Western countries in the last decades, but the biggest difference lies in two big distinctions: Finland hasn't accepted the consequential accountability with national testing and the Finnish educational standards are open to flexibility and diversity. The Basic School Law was accepted in 1968 and implemented between 1972 and 1977, which has led in Finland to a system where the values are based on flexibility and diversity instead of standardization, broad knowledge instead of emphasis on literacy and numeracy and trust through professionalism instead of consequential accountability⁵.

According to Pasi Sahlberg the Finnish educational policy has been built upon sustainable leadership led by commonly accepted values and shared vision⁶. The values can be divided into three main values as stated by Sahlberg:

1. Flexibility and loose standards (not standardization)
2. Broad learning combined with creativity (not focusing only on literacy and numeracy)
3. Intelligent accountability with trust-based professionalism (not consequential accountability)

Finnish teachers and students are encouraged in schools to try new ideas and methods, learn through innovations and raise creativity, meanwhile still respecting schools' pedagogic legacies.⁷ The important part of the education system is the culture of diversity, trust and respect of the educational system. The focus in the Finnish system is not to prepare students for the tests, but instead the learning itself, which causes that teachers use quite freely different teaching methods throughout the school

⁵ Kupiainen et al. 2009, 11-12.

⁶ Sahlberg 2007: 150.

⁷ Sahlberg 2007: 152.

system⁸. What is also seen as one of the differences in the Finnish educational system is the freedom in the teaching methods. Especially primary school is seen as a 'testing-free zone', where the students are encouraged to learn by doing and sustain their natural curiosity. It also applies to teachers when they plan their lessons, and it enables them to apply the curriculum freely⁹. Freedom in the classroom also applies to the use of school theatre that has a strong and long-term position in the Finnish educational system. Even though drama and theatre haven't acquired an official position in the curriculum, they have been a part of the Finnish educational system since as early as the 1550's in the first monastery schools in Turku, and they are still used in the Finnish National Core Curricula for Basic Education (2004) under the subject 'mother-tongue and literature' ¹⁰. The objectives of using drama as part of teaching are mainly interactional.¹¹

3. What are the values of improvisation?

By improvisation I refer to improvisational theatre that is a form of theatre, which is unplanned or unscripted and happens spontaneously by the performers in interaction and *in situ*¹².

I have divided some key rules and values of improvisation theatre into four different rules according to the philosophy and methodology of improvisation by Viola Spolin (1963), Gary Peters (2009) and Keith Johnstone (1981; 1999). These rules are chosen based on their accountability with Finnish language teaching among students who haven't practiced drama and theatre before.

Improvisation is suitable for everyone

As one of the key founder of improvisation has written: *Everyone can do improvisation or theatre. Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise. Anyone who wishes to play in the theatre and learn to become "stage-worthy"* (Spolin 1963, 3).

⁸ Berry & Sahlberg, 2006: 6.

⁹ Sahlberg 2007: 156.

¹⁰ Tiusanen 1969: 31-32; Toivanen 2012: 227.

¹¹ Toivanen 2012: 228.

¹² Johnstone 1981: *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*.

According to Spolin everyone can learn whatever they choose to learn and the environment of improvisation will teach the students everything available. Even though the language and the action taking place in an improvised scene are unpredictable even to the teachers themselves, the environment permits the student to learn from the material being provided by the other participants and the life-like communication that happens in interaction. The environment will teach the students whatever there is to learn. As Spolin has stated, ‘talent’ or the lack of it has nothing to do with the ability to practice improvisation¹³.

Mistakes are not errors but points to learn and increase confidence.¹⁴

In accordance with Gary Peter’s Philosophy of Improvisation (2009) mistakes or pauses within improvisation are necessary and provide possible moments of learning within the improvisational frame. In general, the philosophy of improvisation doesn’t see mistakes as errors, *but as a particular articulation of a distance from the truth.*¹⁵ For teachers it is important and liberating to lose the strict following of the grammar rules of language and instead see the gaps and pauses within improvisation as possibilities to learn new words or strategies to stay in the communicational frame with the other improvisators. Beside this, teachers cannot always solve the problem being at hand. As Spolin has stated, there is not always one way to surpass an awkward pause within an improvisational scene. *“A teacher of wide past experience may know a hundred ways to solve a particular problem, and a student may turn up with the hundred and first. This is particularly true in the arts.”*¹⁶ In improvisation trying and failing are seen as merits, since the students are meant to be guided to learning-by-doing. The only moments of contemplating with new words or other kinds of struggling within an improvised scene can come visible to the researcher only through pauses during the improvisation.

¹³ Spolin 1963: 3.

¹⁴ Peters 2009: 162.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Spolin: 1963: 8.

Acceptance and saying “Yes” to all the ideas that show up in the improvisation.¹⁷

According to Bergen et al. (2002) and one of the founders of improvisation, Keith Johnstone (1981; 1999), acceptance/saying ‘yes’ to every idea in the course of the improvisational scene is the most important rule of improvisation. This rule also applies to the teacher when students provide their ideas and suggestions to the improvisational scenes. Acceptance also means regarding the other participant’s ideas as always better than your own. This means letting go of your own idea when the other participant comes up with a continuation of the scene. When students or teachers don’t end up blocking each other’s ideas, the scene goes on continually to the common goal.¹⁸

The scene disappears and becomes unattainable to the participants afterwards

The teacher provides possibilities to learn and to practically engage with the language being learned but leaves as well the students without any concrete results of their learning when the improvised scene disappears¹⁹. The phenomenon being taught to the students via improvisation opens itself to the teacher and improvisators only afterwards.²⁰ In this way improvisation is not necessarily a systematic way of teaching grammar for example. The focus of learning is on the communicative skills and learning happening in interaction. Improvisation hasn’t set the goals of the class visible, and the learning and strengthening the Finnish communication skills happen through playing and trying. The frames of improvisational scenes are broad and students can try different strategies to seek for help in a moment they feel stuck. Behind the ideology of improvisation an error and creative rebellion against the educational system are rather seen as merits than as a source of conflict in the classroom.²¹

¹⁷ Johnstone 1981; 1999; Bergen, Cox, & Detmar 2002.

¹⁸ These games between actors Keith Johnstone called offer-block-accept games (Johnstone 1981).

¹⁹ Peters 2009: 73.

²⁰ Peters 2009: 154.

²¹ Peters 2009; Johnstone 1981; 1999.

4. Improvisation in Finnish language as a foreign language

The following examples occur in a Finnish language as a foreign language class in a Romanian university. The students have studied Finnish for 2.5 years and they improvise in an optional language course, in which they practice improvisation and drama in Finnish language for 3 months. The group had five students of Finnish language, two assistants from Finland and one Romanian volunteer, who knows Finnish and two teachers.²²

In my research I view the philosophy and values of improvisation to conform the same creative and student-based values of the Finnish educational system, but as well provide an area of safe play, whereas students challenge the hierarchy and their own thinking while still practicing Finnish language in interaction. Even though improvisation happens in the frame of so-called school theatre, it also enables an area of safe anarchism against the system compared to cognitive language teaching. As Adorno puts it, art has its own rules. *“Expression nowadays lives on only in art. - - Art is thus able to speak in itself. This is its realization through mimesis”*.²³

I focus on the pauses or gaps in the improvisational scene and how limitations appear within the frame of the improvised scene and with students' gestures. During these scenes and specific gaps in the communication a student has a pause in the scene, which is caused by hesitation, word search or even insecurity or shame about the subject or the theme of the improvised scene. The pauses indicate that the students set their own limitations to the improvisation whereas the teacher accepts even the most audacious ideas.

a. Talk show with Nazis

A student, Ana, comes with an idea that the improvised talk-show should be about neo-Nazis and the teacher accepts the idea according to the rules of improvisation.²⁴ The teacher accepts the idea even though the subject is

²² I will refer to the teachers as Teacher 1 and Teacher 2.

²³ Adorno 1984: 163–164.

²⁴ Acceptance and saying “Yes” (Johnstone 1998; Bergren, Cox, & Detmar, 2002).

sensitive and questionable. The point is to always approve someone else's idea no matter what. The improvisational game is built as a talk-show. The three students were sitting on the chairs and Teacher 1 is going to be the talk-show host, where she's interviewing the guests of the show.

Teacher: We would like to know, what do you think about Nazis?

What kind of ideas? Let's start with you, Erlend. Do you like Nazis?

Ana: aa, hmmm, a little.

Teacher 1: OKAY! A little? Why?

Ana: mmmmmmm because.....hmmm

Teacher 1: Are you a Nazi?

Ana: No!

Teacher 1: So, you're not. Okay. What good can you find...

Ana: But, my family is **really** Nazi.

Teacher 1: Okay, so your mum and dad?

Teacher 2: Booooo!

Teacher 1: Hey, hey, hey, no comments! So, your family is very Nazi.

Ana: *covers her face*

Teacher: Okay, let's leave this for now. Let's talk more about this later. It was a very interesting point. Well, hey...

The improvisation starts with Ana saying that she likes Nazis a little, right afterwards denying firmly that she's a neo-Nazi. However, she strives back to the topic by saying that her family was really Nazi. The moment of hesitation and pausing within the improvised role can be visibly seen when the student covers her face and turns away from the interviewer and does not answer the question about her parents. Improvising and creating the scene with the sensitive topic of Nazism is in the hands of the students and their teacher. The teacher allows the scene to go on and approves the student's idea no matter the sensitivity and off-limits the topic and the conversation might be.

Ana covers her face during the improvisation, right after hearing the booing from the audience. The booing comes from the other teacher,

which the student might also find coming as a negative feedback from the other authority in the drama course. The hesitation causes the reaction of covering the face and stepping out of the role for a moment, which might be an indicator of shame or insecurity continuing within the role or the sensitive topic. This stepping out of the fictional role can be called *a change in footing*, which indicates to a change in the role of the participant during the interaction.²⁵

The student is allowed to set his/her limits in the improvised scene but they also have the ability to stop the improvised scene and interaction, where they feel the subject is getting unsafe for them or they're crossing the line. Gaps within improvisational interaction might also derive from word searches in a foreign language, which are causing a pause in the improvisational frame. Word searches are rather common when communicating in foreign languages and the participants generally trust those with more knowledge or professionalism to solve the word search.²⁶

b. Drunken Man in the Car

In the following scene the students are placed as in a car with four chairs for four participants. One of them is the driver while the others are passengers. One student joins the others as a hitchhiker and improvises a visible role that others in the car start to imitate. The idea is that everyone in the car changes into the same person with the same body language, gestures, language and personality. The passengers change constantly in the car when a new hitchhiker with a new role steps in and one passenger leaves the car. Also the roles and personalities of the passengers change through the role of the hitchhiker.

Teacher (*to the students*): No, no, no! It doesn't matter. You can improvise it on the way here.

Maija: aaaargh

Sandor: Hey! I want to go (*pause*) in the stadium (sic).

Teacher: To the stadium! Yeah good! Football god damned!

²⁵ Goffman 2012: 261– 299.

²⁶ Keränen 2018; f.e. Eskildsen & Majlesi 2018: 5; Kim 2012: 721, Brouwer 2003: 535–536.

Maija: To the stadium!

In this scene Sandor improvises and uses his body gestures to indicate the behavior of a person under the influence of alcohol or other substances. The person walks unbalanced and uncontrolled and his language is inarticulate and unclear. The pause appears when he is looking for a word to express his will to go to the stadium. The student uses an incorrect suffix after the pause (fin. '*stadionissa*' → *in the stadium* when the correct form would be to the stadium, fin. '*stadionille*'). In this scene the pause within the improvisation might indicate a word search rather than hesitating about the questionable role of being drunk and later driving the vehicle under the influence of alcohol. However, the word search is not directed clearly to the teacher nor to the colleagues in the class even though the teacher and the assistant teacher repeat the word *stadion* with its right suffix after (fin. '*stadionille*'). The error in choosing the suffix with the word '*stadium*' indicates that the student was hesitating about the continuation, but one cannot assume the pause in the improvisation happening necessarily because of the sensitive nature of the scene. The teacher's feedback and conforming to the right form of the suffix comes right after the student's turn. However, the teacher and the other participants in the car accept the drunkenness theme by imitating Sandor's language and gestures and continuing the scene as four drunken people in the car. In this way, the accepting and saying 'Yes' can happen through conforming the initial idea of Sandor.

c. Flirting in the gym

In the following scene, the students start to play in a fictional and improvised scene that is located in a gym. The teachers haven't given any location or any instructions on how to build the scene, but they were supposed to start improvising based on physical activity. Tibor starts the scene by lifting a mimetic weight with his left hand while sitting in a chair. Clara joins him in the scene and starts the conversation.

Clara: how are you?

Tibor: hahahaha

Clara: you are very (*turns to the teacher*) *cum se zice?*

Teacher 1: strong

Teacher 2: strong

Tibor: my arm is.... big

Clara: can you help me.. to (*turns to the teacher*) *exercise?*

Teacher 1: to exercise (*harjoitella*)

Clara: to exercise (*harjoitella*)

Tibor: yeah that

Clara: I am a little bit **sexy** but I wanna be really **sexy**.

Tibor: it's not hard, it's not hard.

In this scene moments with the delicate nature of flirting and sexualism can be seen. The other student Clara pauses within the improvisation to ask for the word *strong* (fin. '*vahva*') and *exercise*. She turns away from Tibor for word searches and changing the participation framework²⁷ from Tibor to teacher and back to him. Besides Clara also returns to the improvised role and the flirty character of her fictional role. One can witness that for example from when she raises her hand in a gesture that can be considered ironic and can be seen to play with the concept of femininity and superficiality. After the second returning to the role after a word search from the teacher, she touches her breast and says that she feels sexy but that she wants to become really sexy²⁸. After this Clara starts laughing and hits her knees with her hands turning away from Tibor. It also cuts the contact between the two actors and makes them turn back to their student roles. The improvised scene has a bold start which is erupted by the laughter of the audience and Tibor and ends with Clara turning herself towards the audience and laughing and hitting her knees. The changes are apparent when Clara talks to Tibor and when she talks to the teachers. One can see from how she changes her gestures and body language and the change in footing. The changes indicate a shift between

²⁷ Goffman 1981: 128.

²⁸ in Finnish Clara says '*seksi*' which is not the correct form of '*seksikäs*' which would mean sexy, but from the utterance it can be assumed that she means the adjective '*sexy*' instead of '*sex*'.

the student's role and the fictional role she has created inside the improvisational scene²⁹. The *change in footing*³⁰ and the *change in participation* framework³¹. Clara moves between her student's role and her fictional role and changes the participation framework between the teacher and Tibor.

It might be a consequence after the bold and sensitive start of the improvisation which Clara didn't feel comfortable continuing. The feeling of hesitation and shame is easier to be released with laughter with the audience. In addition, the word search inside the sensitive and bold scene might be a way to signal to the others that the fictional role is not her real role, but she displays the difference between the student's role and her fictional role.

5. The Results

To which extent can the Finnish educational system and its values be applied to the values of improvisation theatre? In Finland the flexibility and creativity have been built upon all aspects of society including the educational system and that has led to the success of a small nation.³² The similarity with the philosophy of improvisation comes to the freedom and flexibility allowed to the students considering the themes and roles within the improvisational frame and proceeding in the communication based on their own pursuit inside the interaction.

The teacher is not aware of where the improvisational scenes lead, but accepts different kinds of ideas and suggestions without a hesitation. The students are also taught to accept each other's ideas besides their own conceptions by conforming even the questionable topics coming in the course of the improvisation. However, the students set their own limits inside the improvisation, which becomes visible in the moments of pauses during the improvised scene. The students stop the improvisation and step out of their role when they search for a word or they simply stop proceeding the communication like student Ana did when covering her face during the interaction within the fictional talk-show. As well as the

²⁹ Goffman 1971: 83.

³⁰ Goffman 2012: 261–299.

³¹ Goffman 1981: 147–153.

³² Sahlberg 2007: 166.

Finnish school class the improvisational scenes are testing-free zones, where all the ideas and suggestions are treated with a positive response. However, it doesn't mean that improvisation within a class is without rules or a space of total anarchy. The standards are very loose and even the goals of learning are genuinely open to the teacher and to the students themselves. The only objective is just to use the language the students have studied and practiced for 2.5 years. Practicing communicational skills, presentation skills and a different kind of language strategies are additional merits that might be practiced and improved during the course. Besides, the students are encouraged to use creativity in addition to their language learning process. Improvisation has its own rules of accepting others' ideas and continuing the scene and the story in interplay. Working all the time in changing pairs and teams also increases the equity among the students, which is considered to be one of the values of the Finnish educational system³³. Besides the trust the students have for each other, the trust has to concern the teacher as well. According to Spolin (1963) improvisation has no authority, but the players freely choose their self-discipline by accepting the rules of the game. This helps the individuals to make group-based decisions with enthusiasm and trust.³⁴ Nonetheless, in the examples the students trust the professionalism of the teacher in solving the word searches and passing the gaps like it happened with Clara doing the word searches with the word '*training*'. It has been proven that in an interaction where the other part is considered a professional or authority, their professionalism is rarely questioned.³⁵ Therefore, the trust in the teacher can be seen as a positive and empowering feature in the classroom, but on the other hand, it might set its limitations when the student hesitates regarding the continuation of the scene — as it happened with Ana when she improvised in the fictional talk-show about neo-Nazis.

The improvisational flow can be interrupted when the students hesitate with a view to the language or foreign word they search for (a word or the right suffix) or when they feel insecure or confused regarding the

³³ Sahlberg 2007: 154

³⁴ Spolin 1963: 6

³⁵ Reichert & Liebster 2012: 607; Kim 2012: 722

continuation of the scene. Nonetheless, it's hard to prove whether the pause indicates a word search or discomfort about the on-going scene. The pauses (changes in footing and word searches) are quite frequent when improvising with a foreign language, but they should be seen as moments that are signaling moments of learning new words instead of mistakes within the improvisational scene.

The improvisation and more extensively drama in school give the learners the possibility to study the phenomena operating in different roles and at the same time create more new ways of using Finnish language and altering situations in interaction. According to Toivanen (2012) using drama method can even improve the results in PISA tests when it comes to thriving in school, which have been unfortunately low end of the scale in the tests.³⁶ Nonetheless, using improvisation in language teaching does not give fast answers to pedagogy or language teaching, but instead it should be seen as one pragmatic method among others in language learning. As seen, the students might have to struggle with questionable, different and delicate themes and hesitation as well as stopping the scene for searching for a word or a suffix inside the improvisation, but on the other hand, the possible moments of learning and posing questions come visible to the teachers. The potential of the improvisation in different language learning classes is worth testing.

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³⁶ Toivanen 2012: 230; Konu, Lintonen & Rimpelä 2002; Konu & Lintonen 2005

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