The influence of improvisation activities on speaking confidence of EFL student teachers

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to explore the application of improvisation activities in English teacher education, specifically to investigate their influence on the student teachers' confidence when speaking English spontaneously. The improvisation activities consisted of storytelling, conversations and status expressions. Data were drawn from both pre- and post-questionnaires and retrospective texts. The statistical findings showed significant improvements in the student teachers' level of speaking confidence and degree of relaxation while speaking English. The findings of the qualitative analysis confirmed this, and participants stated that the fun, collaboration and high degree of engagement had helped to increase their speaking confidence. The combination of the findings indicated that the improvisation activities had been a valuable method for increasing the speaking confidence of the EFL student teachers. The pedagogical implication is that teacher educators should consider including improvisation activities in their EFL courses.

Keywords: *teacher education, EFL/ELT, reluctant speaker, speaking confidence, improvisation activities, oral communication*

SAMMENDRAG

Virkningen av improvisasjonsaktiviteter på lærerstudentenes selvtillit ved spontan engelsk tale

Målet med denne studien var å undersøke bruken av improvisasjonsaktiviteter i engelskfaget i lærerutdanningen. Dette ble gjort gjennom å undersøke virkningen aktivitetene hadde på lærerstudentenes selvtillit ved spontan engelsk tale. Improvisasjonsaktivitetene besto av historiefortelling, samtaler og status. Data ble hentet fra både pre- og post-spørreskjemaer og retrospektive tekster. De statistiske funnene viste signifikante forbedringer i studentenes nivå av selvtillit og grad av avslapning mens de snakket engelsk. Funnene i den kvalitative

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analysen bekreftet de kvantitative resultatene, og deltakerne uttalte også at den høye graden av engasjement, fokus på moro og generell aksept for å gjøre feil bidro til å øke deres selvtillit ved spontan engelsk tale. Funnene indikerer at improvisasjonsaktivitetene var en verdifull metode for å øke lærerstudentenes selvtillit. Den pedagogiske implikasjonen er at lærerutdannere bør vurdere å inkludere improvisasjonsaktiviteter for å gi lærerstudentene øvelse i spontan engelsk tale.

Nøkkelord: *lærerutdanning, reluctant speaker, improvisasjonsaktiviteter, spontan engelsk tale*

1 Introduction

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the influence of improvisation activities on the speaking confidence of English as a Foreign Language (EFL)[1] student teachers. Traditionally, improvisation activities have been part of a drama curriculum in drama rooms (McKnight & Scruggs, 2008). During the present study, however, the improvisation activities took place with student teachers of English in university classrooms. Despite the fact that drama, with its focus on textual interpretation and performance, is well established as a beneficial method to learn foreign languages (Kao & O'Neill, 1998; Maley, Ur, & Duff, 2005; Manuel, 2008; Stinson, 2008; Winston & Stinson, 2014), few studies have researched the potential of improvisation activities within foreign language learning (FLL) (Kurtz, 2011). To our knowledge, none of these studies have examined the influence of improvisation activities on speaking confidence within EFL teacher education.

Our article reports on the findings after a short series of improvisation activities was implemented during English didactics courses. The present study adheres to Stinson's definition of improvisation (2008), which states that players (here: student teachers) do not use a script nor a predetermined scenario but make up words and/or actions. Spontaneous speech was defined as unplanned, immediate oral communication. The following research questions were investigated:

> Do improvisation activities influence student teachers' confidence when speaking spontaneous English? If so, what could explain this influence?

2 Relevant research

Attitude and motivation, language anxiety and self-confidence are among the affective factors in FLL (MacIntyre, 2002). Since the 1970s, research on affect in FLL

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1 Even though English is taught from the age of six, Norwegian children do not learn English as a second language in an English-speaking country as immigrant children would (Tomlinson, 2005). To distinguish the participants of the present study from learners in second language contexts, we use the term English as a foreign language (EFL).

has mainly focused on foreign language anxiety (FLA) (Dewaele, Witney, Saito, & Dewaele, 2017). Extensive research has established that learners may display high Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). FLCA was originally defined as 'a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process' (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986, p. 128). FLCA is situation specific to the foreign language classroom and often related to assessment or judgement; particularly oral classroom activities are likely to cause anxiety (Young, 1990). Another model to explain variables regarding FLL is Willingness to Communicate (WTC), a manifestation of a readiness to engage in FL discourse pointing out that despite good communicative competence spontaneous use of the FL is not guaranteed (MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, & Noels, 1998). Clément, Baker and MacIntyre (2003) define self-confidence in FLL as a lack of anxiety combined with a perceived communication competence, a definition that informed the present study. Due to their central position in the FLL field, questions related to FLCA and WTC have inspired the questionnaires in the present study.

Despite ample research into FL anxiety, few studies propose methods to help learners deal with it. Krashen (1987) argued that lowering the affective filter by creating a relaxing atmosphere may have a positive influence on language learning due to factors such as self-confidence and anxiety which are derived from FLL beliefs (Young, 1991). The general conclusion is that confident foreign language learners feel low anxiety (Matsuda & Gobel, 2004). In their own study, Matsuda and Gobel found self-confidence to be a strong predictor of success in FLL, leading them to advocate a sense of achievement as the major objective for FLL. Dewaele et al. (2017) investigated FLCA and Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) among high school students and concluded that teachers should not be too concerned about FLCA, but that general FL proficiency and attitude towards FL was the origin of FLCA among the learners. Consequently, Dewaele et al. (2017) recommended teachers to concentrate on learners' enthusiasm and enjoyment in a low-anxiety learning environment.

Group work seems to be an important factor in lowering anxiety levels in FLL. In a survey of over 200 university and high school students, Young (1990) found that they generally preferred small group oral activities. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) found that smaller groups resulted in a better atmosphere, more individual use of the foreign language and closer social connections. In a study with 12 freshman students, spontaneous speaking activities such as games and role plays were found to decrease the students' language anxiety levels, due to the sense of being unprepared and the collaborative group work (Yalçın & İnceçay, 2014). The importance of small group work has also been emphasised by Matsuda and Gobel (2004) who pointed out that, apart from increased comfort, the group work setting increased peer interaction in the target language.

Speaking reluctance is one of the greatest challenges widely confronted in EFL settings (Savaşçı, 2014). For the purposes of the present study, the *reluctant speaker*

will be defined as an EFL learner who regularly and consciously avoids speaking English spontaneously despite advanced language competence. This reluctance does not only affect the speaker's own language learning but may affect the overall learning environment. Speech reluctance may be interpreted as a lack of vocabulary. Ultimately, reduced oral participation impedes the development of conversational skills (Sawyer, 2001). Adolescents are found to be especially susceptible to social anxiety (Felsman, Seifert, & Himle, 2018). They may become particularly conscious of their own mistakes and experience the FL classroom as a high-anxiety learning environment. Even young adult learners, such as student teachers, can display such reluctance. In an action research study (Savaşçı, 2014), EFL teacher students gave *fear of mistakes*, *lack of confidence* and *cultural influences* as reasons for their speaking reluctance. Because speaking reluctance regularly occurs it should be considered a critical matter within modern EFL methodology, such as modern communicative language teaching (CLT) which emphasises linguistic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic competency. Although the challenge with reluctant speakers has instigated the present study, the purpose of this article is not specifically to explore the complex psychological issues related to EFL. According to MacIntyre (2007), an advanced learner who is reluctant to communicate might have high anxiety about communicating yet a high motivation for learning. The EFL learner must be given the option to practise spontaneous speech using real-time, more unpredictable interaction that reflects genuine communication (Byram & Méndez García, 2009; Christie, 2016).

Improvisational theatre is used worldwide as a tool for writing new material, a method for training actors and a type of performance (Napier, 2004). The major improvisation theorists Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone have each separately shaped contemporary improvisational theatre (Holdhus et al., 2016). The Spolin methodology (1983) focuses on spontaneity and intuition and was originally developed to promote social interaction among peers (McKnight & Scruggs, 2008) whereas Johnstone (1999) initially devised improvisation games and exercises to facilitate the creation of narrative material for the theatre. Theory and practice from improvisational theatre have inspired other areas, particularly education and organisational theory (Holdhus et al., 2016). Improvisation activities may provide opportunities for both creativity and unpredictability because the essence of improvisational theatre is to interact with others in a collective creative process (Holdhus et al., 2016). They may offer a similar experience to an authentic foreign language dialogue through the immediacy of improvisation and its requirement of spontaneous responses (Sawyer, 2003; Waterman, 2015; Winston & Stinson, 2014).

In recent years, approaches based on improvisational theatre have demonstrated beneficial effects within the field of mental health. According to Phillips Sheesley, Pfeffer, and Barish (2016), comedic improv therapy may provide a corrective emotional experience for those suffering from a social anxiety disorder. They identified group cohesiveness, play, exposure and humour as the helpful elements of the improv therapy. Krueger, Murphy, and Bink (2017) found that improvisational

theatre intervention reduced symptoms of anxiety and improved self-esteem. Similar results were reported in a large study of adolescents (Felsman et al., 2018). Finally, an intervention study found that taking a theatre improvisation course increased the interpersonal confidence of less confident student teachers (Seppänen, Tiippana, Jääskeläinen, Saari, & Toivanen, 2019). Collectively, these findings support the idea that improvisation activities can be a method for increasing speaking confidence.

Despite a lack of universal agreement on the rules of improvisational theatre, some concepts are widely acknowledged. In their article about using improvisation in university, Berk and Trieber (2009) present seven improvisation principles. *Trust* (1) is an essential condition for creating a safe space in which risk-taking and creativity can evolve. Berk and Trieber use *acceptance* (2) to denote the central 'Yes, and' improvisation concept (Johnstone, 2007; Spolin, 1983). This concept means agreement on offers (Yes) and expansion on the story (and). Through *attentive listening* (3), a joint story is developed through the negotiation of meaning. *Spontaneity* (4) means immediate contributions without any critical (self) judgement. Through improvisation, learners apply verbal and *non-verbal language* (6) to create a *collaborative narrative* (5). Our improvisation activities scored on most of the principles:

Table 1: Overview of the improvisation activities scored according to Berk and Trieber's improvisation principles.

	Trust	Acceptance	Attentive listening	Spontaneity	Storytelling	Nonverbal comm.
Zip, zap, zop	x		x			x
One word story	x	x	x	x	x	
Three sentence story	x	x	x	x	x	
Dice based story	x	x	x	x	x	
Man-on-the-street	x	x	x	x	x	x
Customer service	x	x	x	x	x	x
Noah's ark			x	x	x	x

	Trust	Acceptance	Attentive listening	Spontaneity	Storytelling	Nonverbal comm.
Status walk						x
Downton Abbey	x	x	x	x	x	x
Meeting	x	x	x	x	x	x
Park bench	x	x	x	x	x	x

Their seventh principle was *warming ups* (7), i.e. activities that transition the learners into an improvisational mode (Berk & Trieber, 2009). The table does not include that principle because it deals more with form than content and it relates to only two improvisation activities in the present study, e.g. *Zip, Zap, Zop* which is a warm-up activity that increases the listening focus of the players (McKnight & Scruggs, 2008). The other warm-up activity was *Status Walk* which is an embodiment of status to understand the theatrical concept of status expression which is defined as the conscious manipulation of our level of dominance in improvised situations (Johnstone, 1999).

Many of the improvisation principles have a clear connection to communicative language teaching (CLT). Savignon defines the essence of CLT to be 'the engagement of learners in communication in order to allow them to develop their communicative competence' (Savignon, 2007, p. 209). The ultimate goal of CLT is to speak accurately and fluently, but the learning process provides a safe risk-taking haven as during improvisation. Spontaneity enables players to initiate words and actions quickly, based on trusting and accepting the other players' suggestions (Berk & Trieber, 2009). This ability to create in the moment clearly relates to the trial and error assumption of modern CLT. Negotiation of meaning is central in attentive listening as well as in spontaneous speech (Berk & Trieber, 2009; Christie, 2016). This principle strongly corresponds to the core values of CLT, i.e. collaboration through an engagement in interaction and meaningful communication (Richards, 2006).

Speakers of a foreign language must practice the immediate communication skill consciously (Bygate, 2001). EFL learners meet many communicative obstacles because their cognitive skills are much further developed than their English language competence. Stern's research (1980) assumed that drama activities in the EFL classroom had helped university students improve oral communication skills. A study by Galante and Thomson (2017) confirmed that the use of drama-based techniques

can have a positive effect on oral fluency among L2 speakers, showing a significant impact relative to other communicative language practices. Due to the element of unpredictability and its unscripted format (Sawyer, 2003), improvisation activities can offer a close parallel to authentic foreign language dialogue and a playful approach to develop speaking confidence.

3 Method

3.1 Approach

Throughout the present study, quantitative and qualitative methods were applied. Data were gathered through a pre- and post-questionnaire using a Likert scale (ordinal data) before and after the full series of improvisation activities. After the three sessions were completed, participants in some of the courses wrote a retrospective text (textual data). The data sets were analysed separately by two different researchers. By gathering closed and open-ended data, this approach provided the opportunity to combine findings and draw conclusions based on the combined strengths of both data sets (Creswell, 2014), though it is not a full mixed-method study.

3.2 Participants

Participants (N = 57) were recruited from the student teachers of a Norwegian university. The participants were informed of the research project. Consent was obtained and the project was carried out according to the ethical guidelines of the Norwegian Data Protection Services (NSD).

  The participants were 44 pre-service and 13 in-service student teachers completing a Teaching English course for grades 5–10 (10–15 years of age). The pre-service groups (mean age 22 years old) consisted of primary education student teachers. The in-service participants were experienced primary education teachers (mean age of 38 years). The qualitative analysis was performed for a sample, see section 3.4. Students were expected to have adequate English language proficiency to enrol in the course. Following Clément, Baker and MacIntyre's definition of self-confidence in FLL (2003), participants assessed their perceived English language proficiency in the questionnaires.

3.3 Procedures

The improvisation activities were adapted for the EFL classroom from improvisational theatre techniques. The main author had acquired these techniques during several years of improvisational theatre courses, seminars and reading, mainly on improvisation methods created by Johnstone (1999, 2007) and Spolin (1983, 1986). The main author taught the activities at the start of the courses and the sessions consisted of *storytelling*, *conversations* and *status expressions*. She provided participants

with a total of three hours of improvisation over the course of three days. Sessions began with the overall reassurance that 'anything said during improvisation was right'. This positively-phrased instruction frames a non-judgemental environment because people commonly remember the last word best. Before improvising in small groups, participants received oral instructions for each activity. Because the presence of an audience, even of peers, could increase participant anxiety, it was important for all participants to be active simultaneously.

Even though nearly every improvisation activity can be said to teach listening and speaking (McKnight & Scruggs, 2008), the following improvisation activities were selected:

1. Storytelling: *Zip, Zap Zop, One Word Story, Three Sentence Story, Dice Based Stories*
2. Conversations: *Man-on-the-Street, Customer Service, Noah's Ark*
3. Status expressions: *Status Walk, Downton Abbey, Meeting, Park Bench*

This selection was based on several considerations. First, the activities needed to encourage spontaneous oral communication. This included an element of interactivity where both listening and speaking skills were required to complete the task. Second, the activities had to be suitable for regular classrooms containing many tables and chairs as opposed to a spacious drama room. Each session focused on a different theme: storytelling, polite conversation or status expression. In the activity *One Word Story*, for example, the student teachers collectively told a fairy tale by each adding one word at a time. This activity encouraged participants to accept any suggestion from the other participants and to trust each other to tell the story together through attentive listening and building on earlier elements (Yes, and).

Moreover, the sessions contained unscripted activities with partially-defined or undefined characters. For example, in *Man-on-the-Street*, the participant herself chose her character. In the next round, the reporter defined the stranger in their greeting, e.g. "Hello, old man …" or "Good afternoon, Mr. President". The participant would then react in character. During this activity, participants were able to practice not being in control (Crossan, 1998) as well as having to adjust their language to the characters and the context.

3.4 Data Collection

The data was gathered at different intervals and contained participants' perspectives only. The 57 participants filled out a pre- and post-questionnaire that used a six-point Likert scale. The answers, which denoted the subject's level of agreement, were scored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The items covered, for example, the participant's perceived anxiety and self-confidence, and self-assessment of language proficiency before the first and after the last improvisation session. The questionnaire consisted of 20 items, all closed questions. Due to the lack of a valid scale for speaking

confidence, the items were inspired by the items from the FLCA Scale (Horwitz et al., 1986) and Cao and Philp's participant interview questions examining WTC (Cao & Philp, 2006; MacIntyre et al., 1998). To increase the sensitivity of the scale, the middle values in our study were *slightly disagree* and *partly agree*.

Immediately after each improvisation session, participants wrote a learning diary in English. One week after the final session, participants wrote a retrospective text based on these diaries under semi-structured guidance (see App. A). The initial two groups of participants were filmed improvising in an on-campus studio after the final session. Participants' feedback was negative due to the added challenge of being filmed in an unfamiliar setting. Some reported that this experience may have reduced their self-confidence during the filming. In addition, some participants had technical challenges when accessing the recordings because of security measures. This method of filming was discontinued. Consequently, the retrospective texts from the initial 23 participants were selected as the sample for the qualitative analysis.

3.5 Analysis

Since the answers in the questionnaire were given on an ordinal scale and the Shapiro-Wilk test did not show a normal distribution of the answers, a non-parametric test, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks, was used to assess the differences between the pre- and post-questionnaires. Statistical significance was accepted at a value of $p<0.05$. The pre-and post-questionnaires were analysed in SPSS version 25.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). Reliability was tested with Cronbach's Alpha on each item in the pre- and post-test, which were all between 0.751–0.893. These findings can be classified as highly reliable (Hopkins, Marshall, Batterham, & Hanin, 2009).

The retrospective texts were analysed using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach (Smith, Larkin, & Flowers, 2009). The main author read the retrospective texts holistically and manually annotated meaningful statements about the improvisation experience in NVivo. She then condensed these statements into descriptive meaning units, e.g. 'increase in speaking confidence' and 'more comfortable talking'. Finally, these meaning units were categorised under the theme *speaking confidence.* A write-up of the theme was made based on applying a phenomenological perspective on the empirical data taken from the sample (Smith et al., 2009). The main author compiled a file containing all meaning units concerning the theme *speaking confidence.* She read and reread this file before writing a summary from memory. Afterwards, she returned to the file to supply the summary with details and add citations from participants' statements to illustrate the findings.

3.6 Limitations and Ethical Considerations

The main author's position as a teacher educator is one of the premises of this practitioner research. Being practitioner research, our study may contribute to the

understanding of teacher educators' practice (Ellis, 2012). In this section, we will address some ethical considerations regarding the dual roles of the researcher as well as some methodological limitations.

The study took place within the main author's university classrooms. This insider position is regarded as an advantage for deep insights into practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). The study relied on the main author's practical knowledge as an improvisation instructor, as well as her expertise as an educator of English teachers. This premise guaranteed near identical classroom instructions with limited side coaching and a similar yet dynamic classroom organisation, e.g. absent participants and adjustments for group size. The brevity of the project aimed to limit other didactic influences, e.g. pedagogical and linguistic sessions, on the findings. Yet, there may still have been confounding variables influencing the student teachers' answers in the questionnaires.

Ample care has been taken considering the ethical ramifications of the study. The consent form emphasised that participation was voluntary and would not influence the student teachers' grades. The participants were informed that their views and reflections generated the knowledge base for the study. Moreover, all student teachers returned the blank or signed consent form so the teacher would not know who among the student teachers were participants during the improvisation sessions. All data were anonymised, and the analysis took place *after* the semester and examinations had been rounded off.

The quantitative analysis was performed by a co-author. The findings are representative, yet generalisation is limited to similar practices. The study took place with small student groups based on voluntary participation, an important ethical consideration in any study and particularly in practitioner studies. This resulted in relatively small numbers of participants.

The qualitative analysis of the texts aimed to investigate what participants communicate as themes for the shared experience (Smith et al., 2009). The phenomenological approach (IPA) enabled a sensitivity to the experience of participants who have undergone improvisation activities in EFL. The truth claims of an IPA approach are tentative (Smith et al., 2009). The teacher and researcher are still one and the same person, and the practitioner must therefore be conscious of her own beliefs and values during the analysis. We hold with Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) in our position of regarding the insider as a knowledge facilitator.

4 Findings

This section presents the quantitative and qualitative findings separately before they are discussed together in the next section. The retrospective texts provided explanations for the reported increase in speaking confidence that was found in the quantitative and qualitative methods.

4.1 Statistical Findings

The pre- and post-questionnaires from the 57 participants were analysed and a significant effect was found in the pre- to post-tests for items 3, 5, 7, 8, 9 14, 16 and 20 (see Table 2). No significant increase was found for the evident item about speaking confidence (18), yet the ratings directly relating to speaking confidence in the English classroom (9 and 16) showed a significant increase. The ratings concerning safety and relaxation (7 and 14) also showed a significant increase from pre- to post-test.

Table 2: Mean score ± standard deviation of answers on questionnaires during the pre- and post-tests.

Items	Pre-test	Post-test	*p*-value
1. My level of English (in general) is high.	4.25 ± 0.83	4.28 ± 0.82	0.897
2. My listening skills in English are good.	4.78 ± 0.73	4.93 ± 0.72	0.076
3. My speaking skills in English are good.	4.25 ± 0.89	4.44 ± 0.85*	**0.032**
4. My motivation for learning English is strong.	5.37 ± 0.67	5.34 ± 0.67	0.642
5. I like learning together with other people.	4.55 ± 0.92	4.89 ± 0.79*	**0.002**
6. I can express myself fluently in English.	4.13 ± 0.98	4.32 ± 0.96	0.063
7. I generally feel relaxed when speaking English.	3.96 ± 1.15	4.46 ± 0.95*	**0.000**
8. I prefer to have preparation time before speaking English.	3.50 ± 1.42	3.95 ± 1.29*	**0.003**
9. I feel confident when speaking English with a few people (e.g. group work).	4.26 ± 1.20	4.68 ± 0.89*	**0.002**
10. I feel safe when speaking Norwegian in front a group.	4.75 ± 1.32	4.75 ± 1.20	0.985
11. I generally feel that other people around me speak English better than I do.	3.82 ± 1.35	3.63 ± 1.35	0.112
12. I feel confident when an English teacher suddenly asks me a question.	3.59 ± 1.21	3.75 ± 1.22	0.140
13. I feel afraid that other people may laugh at me when I speak English.	2.66 ± 1.29	2.64 ± 1.26	0.962
14. I feel safe when speaking English in front of a group.	3.80 ± 1.24	4.11 ± 1.13*	**0.019**
15. I am good at starting a conversation in English about familiar topics.	4.38 ± 1.01	4.33 ± 0.87	0.698
16. I feel confident when volunteering to speak in the English classroom.	3.92 ± 1.14	4.11 ± 1.03*	**0.049**
17. I am afraid my English teacher may correct every mistake when I speak.	2.39 ± 1.24	2.43 ± 1.09	0.717
18. I feel confident when speaking English spontaneously.	4.03 ± 1.12	4.12 ± 0.92	0.521
19. I am good at keeping conversations in English going.	4.06 ± 0.98	4.07 ± 0.92	0.894
20. I can express and justify my own opinions in English.	4.40 ± 0.99	4.63 ± 0.77*	**0.049**

* indicates a **significant** difference from pre- to post-test on a p < 0.05 level.

Table 3: Categorised findings.

Category	Items without significant change	Items with significant change
General English language proficiency	1, 6	20
Oral communication skills	2, 15, 19	3, 8
Fear and anxiety in FL	13, 17	
Confidence and safety in FL	12, 18	7, 9, 14, 16

Looking at the findings per category, we observe that the participants' self-assessed English language proficiency has remained mostly unchanged. Items 1 and 6 showed no significant change and item 20 only just showed significant difference (0.049). Concerning oral communication, participants' self-assessed speaking skills showed a significant increase (3), but their listening, expression and conversational skills (2, 6, 15 and 19) remained stable. Furthermore, participants reported more enjoyment while learning collaboratively (5). Finally, participants preferred more preparation time than they did previously (8). No significant results were found for the other statements. Pre- and post-test ratings for item 1 (general English level), 4 (motivation) and 10 (safety in Norwegian) showed no significant change. These findings could be regarded as strengthening the reliability of the questionnaire findings because these items concern quite static features, especially within the short time span. The general level of English language proficiency is the sum of many language skills of which only the oral skill was practised. Broadly speaking, learners' motivation can be regarded as being quite stable because it is connected to their personal values. The sessions took place in English so these experiences would, in general, not be expected to affect a native-language-related issue.

4.2 Textual Findings

To investigate the influence of improvisation activities on speaking confidence further, an inductive analysis was performed on the 23 retrospective texts. A finding that clearly emerged was an increase in speaking confidence, which is consistent with the statistical analysis. Most participants (16 out of 23) reported a positive influence on their speaking confidence, described as an increase or boost in self-confidence during speech. The instructions requested participants to write about their confidence in spontaneous speech, so the theme *speaking confidence* may be considered an expected rather than emergent theme. However, an interesting finding was that most participants reported an increase and explained the increase:

> I am not a person who raises my hand to answer, not even in classes where we talk Norwegian. But I feel more confident to talk English now, but not more competent, I think. But again, I think by doing all these activities, you learn to use the language to make stories, doing interview etc. and you get to practice your language. (Student 102)

The didactic method by improvisation has absolutely improved my confidence in speaking English. Especially spontaneously. The activities we did are perfect for both learning English and to be more confident in class. I would say that all the activities are perfect for improving confidence in speaking English spontaneously. It was a little scary at first, but when you got a little in to it, it became fun! (Student 106)

In the last session, I found the exercises to be a lot of fun. I even think I got better at speaking spontaneous English; at least more confident. (Student 206)

I was more and more relaxed after each exercise. My confidence and competence as a speaker of English got better already after the first session. Yes, my English knowledge has not increased much, but I could speak spontaneously with or without mistakes. (Student 211)

The main explanations for the increased *speaking confidence* were the high degree of engagement, having fun and collaboration. Other participants mentioned that the practice had made them more competent which then made them more confident:

I have learned so many new words, so I feel my vocabulary have expanded, and that makes it easier to talk English. I also feel some of my pronunciation has developed, and these things make me more confident when I speak English. (Student 107)

The improvisation sessions lasted a total of only three hours; nevertheless, participants were constantly engaged as either a speaker or an active listener within their small groups:

One-word fairy tale was absolutely my favourite. We made a story together! It was fun and there were a lot of laughter. Stories that we made were lots of fun and sometimes didn't make any sense. These activities and a lot more have made me more confident in speaking English spontaneously. I feel more confident and surer about myself and my English skills. (Student 115)

Many participants had been quite nervous and anxious about speaking English. Two reasons were mentioned several times: it had been years since they had spoken a lot of English and they felt their English was not good enough. Many in-service participants described that improvising these everyday situations made them more confident as EFL speakers:

Since this is some years ago, I felt unsecure and nervous starting the English course. And top of all, we were thrown into spontaneous activities every day!

> After three days with a lot of different pair/group work, I can say that I know myself a bit better when it comes to speaking, so my self-confidence has grown – I did all these scary activities (they were at first) and I am still alive! (Student 201)

> To sum up, I believe I am more confident on using English spontaneously after the gathering. The variety of games and activities has helped me to think of spontaneous speech as not so frightening. (student 213)

Some participants mentioned that they were taught in an age where correct grammar and correct pronunciation were the focal areas of English classes:

> When I learnt English at school, grammar was very important. You had to read, write and talk grammatical correct. It was also nothing, or a very small part we had to put away the book and talk spontaneous. I think it is from that time I am very afraid of saying something wrong and I have to think for a long time how to say it in the right way. To be a little bit shy is either not an advantage to do spontaneous speech in the class. Throughout this exercises I have learnt that it isn't dangerous to do mistakes. (student 208)

The collaborative nature of the improvisation activities also seems to have had a positive influence:

> By dividing us into small groups and giving us different things to do, we needed to talk to everyone, but not in front of the whole class. We also got to know each other better and I feel much more confident by talking English in the class. (student 102)

5 Discussion

The present study investigated whether the improvisation activities influenced the student teachers' speaking confidence. The quantitative findings were that participants reported positive effects when asked indirectly about improvements in confidence and about the degree of safety during spontaneous speech production (items 7, 9, 14, 16). These effects were validated by the findings of the qualitative analysis which revealed that most participants in the sample (16 out of 23) reported a positive influence on their speaking confidence. Triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative findings indicates that the improvisation activities had a positive influence on the student teachers' speaking confidence.

These findings could indicate that participants have slightly changed their attitudes through a decrease of self-judgement and a sense of achievement. Their speaking confidence may have increased due to the mastery of the improvisation activities, e.g. solving the guessing games, which demanded circumlocution and clarifying

questions. Following the premise that self-confidence is a predictor of FLL success (Matsuda & Gobel, 2004), the findings related to speaking confidence are quite promising. A significant increase was reported in the ability to speak English which could be explained as a logical consequence of the spontaneous speech practice. The significant increase in their already strong ability to express and justify their own opinions could have been caused by the improvisation activities in which participants practised expressing opinions. There was a large increase in the category of feeling generally relaxed while speaking English and feeling more confident while speaking English in small groups. In their texts, participants explained that they had fun, which created a relaxed learning environment and a safe space for making mistakes (Felsman et al., 2018). These explanations confirm the significant findings of items 14 and 16, indicating that these improvisation activities provided a low-anxiety learning environment with high degrees of enjoyment (Dewaele et al., 2017).

However, no significant effect was found when participants were asked directly about an increase in their speaking confidence (item 18). This could be regarded as a contradictory finding. Interestingly, the majority of participants reported an increase in their speaking confidence in their retrospective texts. This contradiction shows similarities with another study (Savaşçı, 2014) which found no speaking reluctance among participants in the questionnaire analysis but reported reluctance in the individual interviews. This leads us to wonder whether interviews provide a different platform for reporting speaking confidence and/or speaking reluctance. Considering Clément, Baker and MacIntyre's (2003) definition of self-confidence in FLL, we observe that anxiety-related scores remained low. This may indicate that participants felt safe, trusting both the teacher and fellow students. This finding resembles an earlier study that established that more experienced FL learners report less FLCA (Dewaele et al., 2017). The consistently low score concerning the fear of being laughed at could provide an explanation. We can only speculate that our participants experienced less FLCA as a consequence of their adequate English language proficiency, and that they did not identify with the explicit item about speaking confidence as relevant for their situation.

No significant change was found regarding listening skills nor conversation skills, which both began with a high score (see Table 2). Though participants practised conversations in the improvisation activities, they did not feel more capable of starting or keeping conversations going. They reported a higher preference for wanting preparation time before speaking (see Table 2). This finding may seem contradictory, but it provides insight into some of the difficulties participants experienced when forced to fully improvise. The act of seeking a manner to express themselves in character or in an unusual situation may have shown participants certain gaps in their language competency (Swain, 2000), as some participants described in their texts.

Both statistical and qualitative analysis uncovered a rise in appreciation for collaborative learning. The retrospective texts confirmed that when the activity allows

for a great deal of freedom, e.g. in the storytelling activities, participants must collaboratively improvise the direction of their communication (Sawyer, 2001). This finding could also be explained as a social development, as some students expressed in their retrospective texts; they wrote that the learning environment became safer after a while because the inhibition characteristic of being strangers decreased. This familiarisation may have been enabled by the improvisation activities, because the group of participants that had previously met also reported an increase in safety. Lastly, participants may have become more aware of the shared pleasure of mastering a collaborative narrative. This interpretation is supported by Johnstone's characterisation of improvisation practicing interpersonal skills (Johnstone, 1999). Some participants reported that they realised their English was not as poor as they previously believed and wrote that they were going to be more lenient towards themselves. This might explain the small, not significant decrease in item 11.

The retrospective texts provided some explanations for the reported increase in speaking confidence. They referred to an enjoyment of collaborative learning, a high degree of enjoyment and an intense engagement to the point where some participants forgot they were speaking English. As Crossan (1998) observed, the spontaneous nature of improvisation requires learners to devote their full attention to that moment rather than be distracted by what has occurred before or may occur after. This state of presence in play may form a counterweight to FLA. To a large extent, the findings of the present study resonate well with earlier identification of *group cohesiveness, play, exposure* and *humour* as the beneficial elements of comedic improv therapy (Phillips Sheesley et al., 2016). Play and humour created a relaxed environment for the practice of spontaneous speech in small, supportive groups. The exposure to the collaborative narrative (Yes, and) appears to have increased participants' speaking confidence.

There are certain limitations to the present study (see also 3.5). The dual role of teacher and researcher demands an awareness of the participants and the analysis; however, this unique position also facilitates insider insights. Though nearly every improvisation activity can be said to teach listening and speaking (McKnight & Scruggs, 2008), the practitioner's knowledge of both improvisational techniques and teaching EFL was central to the present study. We consider that the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods provides a degree of triangulation to support the findings; nevertheless, we acknowledge the limited generalisation of the findings as they are closely connected to their context.

6 Pedagogical Implications

In line with Dewaele et al.'s (2017) vision of focusing on learners' enthusiasm and enjoyment, we recommend concentrating on speaking confidence in EFL university courses. Savignon (2018) underlines the need for learners to participate in the expression and negotiation of meaning, a description that resembles Sawyer's views (2001)

on the essence of improvisation. Many improvisation activities contain a search for information and a fictive simulation of real life, making them suitable for modern foreign language methodology (Veine, 2006; Winston & Stinson, 2014). The present study found that improvisation activities may increase student teachers' speaking confidence. Consequently, we invite EFL teacher educators to include improvisation activities in their courses.

7 Conclusion

In the present study, we investigated the influence of improvisation activities on the speaking confidence of EFL student teachers. Our findings indicate that EFL student teachers could benefit from doing improvisation activities for spontaneous speech practice. The questionnaires revealed positive effects on participants' level of speaking confidence and degree of relaxation while speaking English. The qualitative analysis of a selection of participants' texts not only confirmed these findings, but indicated that levels of speaking confidence increased due to a high degree of engagement, a focus on fun and an enjoyment of collaboration. The qualitative findings validated and explained the quantitative findings. We find it plausible that these improvisation activities provided these student teachers with suitable circumstances for practising oral communicative competence and developing EFL speaking confidence. The findings are representative, yet generalisation is limited to similar practices.

The present study has contributed to our understanding of the potential of improvisation activities in EFL teacher education. As teacher educators, we are aware of the common occurrence of speaking reluctancy and regularly meet reluctant speakers in our university classrooms. In the past, researchers have mostly targeted a reduction of negative outcomes of FLA. The current trend is that of positive psychology relying on one's strengths in dealing with FLA (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Through the application of these improvisation activities in the university classroom we have gained an insight into a playful method for increasing speaking confidence. Based on these findings we consider improvisation activities to be a valuable method within EFL teacher education.

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Appendix A

Instructions for the retrospective text

Write a diary text (minimum 500 words) in which you reflect on whether and how the didactic method *Improvisation in the English classroom* has developed your confidence and competence as a speaker of English as a foreign language, especially spontaneous speech. Secondly, describe the effect of the improvisation activities on your competence as a teacher of English.

Special focus points

In the TEFL classroom, you have participated in improvisation sessions. Please read your own learning diary texts again and look back on the improvisation sessions you have attended. Do you have a favourite activity? Please explain why you liked that activity so much. Have the improvisation activities influenced your fluency and/or self-confidence in spontaneous speech? If so, please be specific how and why. If not, please explain why. Have you developed any other skills than speech?