

IMPROVISATION IN THEATRE-IN-EDUCATION: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES AND PERFORMATIVE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Theatre-in-Education (TIE) has long been recognised as a dynamic medium for facilitating interactive learning, social awareness, and critical thinking. At the heart of many successful TIE interventions lies the improvisation technique, a creative, unscripted process that fosters spontaneity, collaboration, and embodied participation. This article explores the transformative potential of improvisation within TIE as a strategy for reimagining pedagogy, particularly within Nigerian classrooms. Anchored in Paulo Freire's theory of dialogic education and John Dewey's experiential learning model, the paper argues that improvisation shifts the classroom from a site of passive knowledge transfer to one of co-construction, reflection, and democratic engagement. The study highlights how improvisational techniques enhance learner cognition, emotional expression, social empathy, and civic consciousness through a literature-based analysis and illustrative references to initiatives such as Footprints of David Arts Academy and Kininso Concepts Production. It also examines the historical evolution of improvisation in educational theatre, its resonance with constructivist pedagogy, and its adaptability across diverse cultural and curricular contexts. While acknowledging structural barriers such as inadequate teacher training, rigid curricula, and policy inertia, the paper affirms that improvisation offers a flexible,

inclusive, and impactful pedagogical model when purposefully integrated into TIE practice. Ultimately, the study contends that improvisation is not merely a theatrical device but a vital educational tool that fosters creativity, critical thinking, and participatory learning in Nigerian education.

Keywords: Theatre-in-Education, Improvisation, Pedagogy, Performative Learning, Creative Teaching

INTRODUCTION

Theatre-in-Education (TIE) represents a vital intersection between performance and pedagogy, utilising theatrical strategies to stimulate learning, foster critical thinking, and provoke dialogue within educational contexts. Developed in the United Kingdom in the 1960s and adopted worldwide, TIE has evolved into a powerful instructional model emphasising learner engagement, empathy, and social awareness through dramatisation. Jackson (2007) posits that, unlike conventional classroom instruction, TIE prioritises active participation, often employing dramatic scenarios, role-play, and interactive performances to create student experiential learning opportunities.

A central technique within the TIE methodology is improvisation, which entails spontaneous, unscripted performance rooted in imagination and immediate decision-making. Improvisation is not merely a performance tool but a pedagogical strategy that allows learners to construct knowledge dynamically. Through improvisation, as observed by Courtney (1990) and O'Toole (1992), students are invited to co-create content, negotiate meaning, and respond to unfolding scenarios, strengthening communication skills, emotional intelligence, and collaborative problem-solving. This strategy promotes learner autonomy in educational settings and deepens understanding by anchoring abstract ideas in lived performative experiences.

In Nigeria, where conventional rote learning dominates many classrooms, integrating improvisational techniques within TIE practices holds significant potential. Scholars like Obafemi (2008) and Ayodabo (2017) have drawn attention to the need for more engaging, inclusive, and contextually relevant teaching approaches, especially in civic education, health awareness, and social development.

Although improvisation has demonstrated significant educational value, its use within Nigerian Theatre-in-Education (TIE) contexts remains largely under-theorised and unevenly implemented. This paper, therefore, offers a critical review of improvisation as a pedagogical practice within Theatre-in-Education, focusing on its educational implications, benefits, and challenges. It relies exclusively on secondary sources, drawing from Nigerian and global literature to evaluate how improvisation contributes to effective learning within performative educational frameworks. By

situating this discussion within a broader educational and cultural context, the paper seeks to advocate for the systematic inclusion of improvisation as a core element in TIE programs in Nigeria and beyond.

IMPROVISATION AS A CATALYST FOR ACTIVE AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Improvisation, a central element in Theatre-in-Education (TIE), has been recognised as a powerful catalyst for active and experiential learning. It shifts the educational process from passive knowledge absorption to dynamic, learner-centered engagement. As Lobman and Lundquist (2007) observe, improvisation, rooted in spontaneity and co-creation, invites learners to construct meaning through direct experience, critical reflection, and embodied expression. This approach aligns with constructivist learning theories, which, according to Fosnot (2013), emphasise that knowledge is not transmitted but constructed through meaningful activity and social interaction.

In educational theatre, improvisation allows students to step into imagined situations, make real-time decisions, and respond to evolving contexts. These moments of unpredictability challenge learners to think critically, listen attentively, and collaborate effectively. Neelands (2009) argues that such engagement promotes dialogic learning, where knowledge emerges from shared inquiry rather than didactic instruction. Through this approach, learners are not merely passive recipients but active participants in shaping content and outcomes.

Improvisation fosters embodied learning, integrating cognition with physical, emotional, and social experiences. Research by Gallagher and Staunton (2019) highlights how improvised drama encourages learners to explore complex ideas, such as identity, ethics, and power, through movement, voice, and space. This performative exploration deepens understanding by linking abstract concepts to lived sensations and emotional insights. For instance, role-playing scenarios, like assuming the roles of a refugee, a judge, or a historical figure, facilitate the development of empathy and moral reasoning by immersing students in diverse perspectives, as Nicholson (2014) asserts.

Recent scholarship further emphasises the value of improvisation in enhancing problem-solving skills and creative thinking. In a study of drama-based pedagogy in South African and Nigerian classrooms, Ebewo and Motsaathebe (2021) found that improvisational activities enabled learners to adapt quickly to new information, generate solutions collaboratively, and express complex emotions that traditional methods often overlook. These benefits are particularly relevant in settings where rote learning and teacher-centred instruction dominate, limiting students' capacity for independent thought and expression.

Improvisation also supports differentiated learning, accommodating diverse learning styles and linguistic backgrounds. According to Odusote and Adeyemi (2020), improvisational strategies in Nigerian TIE settings have helped bridge communication gaps among multilingual students,

enabling inclusive participation regardless of academic ability or fluency. By encouraging learners to express themselves through gesture, image, and metaphor, improvisation levels the classroom and values multiple intelligences.

Moreover, as Trilling and Fadel (2009) note, improvisation aligns seamlessly with the pedagogical priorities of 21st-century education, which emphasise adaptability, effective communication, creativity, and collaboration. In an era of rapid technological change and increasing cultural complexity, improvisational learning fosters essential soft skills such as critical thinking, empathy, and teamwork, preparing students for meaningful civic participation and lifelong learning.

In essence, improvisation transforms the classroom into a rehearsal space for real life. It encourages learners to engage critically with the world around them, to listen and respond, to lead and follow, and to embrace uncertainty as an opportunity for growth. Within the framework of Theatre-in-Education, it is not just a performance technique but a philosophy of learning that champions agency, empathy, and inquiry.

BENEFITS OF IMPROVISATION IN THEATRE-IN-EDUCATION (TIE)

Improvisation plays a transformative role in Theatre-in-Education (TIE), particularly in advancing active, learner-centred experiences that resonate with the goals of 21st-century education. Its spontaneous and participatory nature cultivates a broad spectrum of cognitive, emotional, and social competencies essential for holistic learner development.

Cognitively, improvisation enhances creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving. As Sawyer (2004) argues, when students are invited to create dialogue, develop characters, or resolve scenarios on the spot, they engage in higher-order thinking that challenges the rote learning models standard in formal education. Within a TIE context, this might involve role-playing historical figures, enacting moral dilemmas, or interpreting abstract concepts through action, thus transforming passive content into lived experience. Students learn to generate multiple solutions to problems, embrace ambiguity, and think divergently. These skills are crucial in a rapidly changing world.

Emotionally, improvisation promotes empathy, emotional regulation, and self-expression. By embodying diverse roles and situations, students understand perspectives beyond their own. This emotional engagement is compelling in Nigerian classrooms when addressing conflict resolution, gender dynamics, or civic responsibility. As Nicholson (2005) observes, through improvised dramatisations, learners can process emotions, reflect on societal values, and gain confidence in articulating their thoughts within safe, structured environments.

Socially, improvisation cultivates collaboration, listening skills, and mutual respect. TIE projects typically depend on group dynamics; students must build scenes together, respond to one another in real-time, and co-construct narratives. This encourages active listening, adaptability, and shared

ownership of learning outcomes, as Spolin (1999) posited. These social benefits are critical for fostering inclusion and collective learning in diverse Nigerian classrooms, often marked by linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic differences.

Moreover, improvisation breaks down traditional hierarchies between teacher and student. Rather than acting as the sole authority, the teacher in a TIE environment becomes a facilitator or co-learner, inviting students into a shared space of exploration and creativity. This shift in classroom power dynamics empowers students to take the initiative and voice their opinions, a necessary step toward cultivating democratic and participatory citizenship.

CHALLENGES OF INTEGRATING IMPROVISATION IN THEATRE-IN-EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Despite its evident benefits, integrating improvisation into Theatre-in-Education (TIE) practices in Nigeria has several institutional and pedagogical challenges. These challenges often hinder its widespread adoption in formal and non-formal educational systems, limiting its transformative potential.

One of the most prominent challenges is the rigidity of Nigeria's formal education system. The national curriculum is largely examination-driven, overwhelmingly emphasising rote learning and memorisation rather than inquiry-based or experiential learning approaches (Ibiwoye, 2020). This inflexible structure leaves little room for improvisational or interactive pedagogies, which thrive on spontaneity, creativity, and open-ended exploration. Consequently, teachers under pressure to "complete the syllabus" may view improvisation as a diversion rather than a complementary educational strategy.

Closely related is the issue of teacher preparedness. Many teachers lack formal training in theatre or drama-based methods. While they may be experts in their subject areas, they are often unfamiliar with improvisational techniques and the facilitation skills required to manage participatory learning environments (Ayodabo, 2017). The absence of drama education in most teacher training curricula further compounds the problem. Even when teachers are willing to adopt creative instructional methods, their use of improvisation is often limited by insufficient training and professional development in this area (Dave-Ugwu et al., 2025). Institutional resistance is another obstacle. As Ibiwoye (2020) argues, the education system prioritises rote memorisation and exam preparation over interactive, learner-centred practices. School administrators and policymakers often underestimate the educational value of theatre and improvisation, perceiving them as extracurricular or recreational activities rather than core pedagogical tools. As a result, funding for theatre projects is limited, drama programs are sidelined, and TIE is often excluded from mainstream academic discourse (Obafemi, 2008). This undervaluation stifles innovation and discourages teachers and students from investing energy in theatre-based learning.

Infrastructural limitations further inhibit improvisational practice. Many public schools in Nigeria operate under resource-constrained conditions, with overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teaching materials, and a lack of performance spaces (Ogunba, 2015). Although improvisation thrives on minimalism, the absence of supportive environments, such as open classroom layouts or flexible seating arrangements, can restrict movement, hinder group interaction, and limit students' ability to engage fully in role-play or dramatic expression.

Moreover, cultural and religious sensitivities sometimes pose barriers. In conservative communities, certain theatrical practices, such as miming, character embodiment, or dramatic expression, may be viewed with suspicion or disapproval. Parents and school authorities may object to students taking on roles that challenge social norms or explore taboo subjects, even when these are crucial to civic or health education (Nicholson, 2014). Teachers must, therefore, navigate complex socio-cultural terrains, balancing creative freedom with sensitivity to local beliefs.

While these challenges pose significant barriers to integrating improvisation in Nigerian classrooms, they have also spurred innovation. Rather than abandoning improvisational methods entirely, many educators and theatre practitioners have begun exploring alternative ways to implement them within their contexts. These adaptive strategies reflect both resilience and creativity, demonstrating how improvisation can be reshaped to suit the realities of Nigeria's educational environment.

ADAPTING IMPROVISATION IN NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

In response to systemic limitations, many educators and theatre practitioners in Nigeria have adopted and innovated improvisational strategies to reflect cultural relevance and pedagogical creativity. Improvisation within Theatre-in-Education (TIE) has thus evolved from a reactive necessity to a deliberate pedagogical approach, flexible enough to thrive in resource-constrained environments while resonating with learners' lived experiences (Nicholson, 2014).

One of the most widespread adaptations is using every day, locally available materials, such as wrappers, sticks, mats, and chalk, as substitutes for conventional stage props. In the absence of formal infrastructure, this minimalist approach aligns with the participatory ethos of TIE, encouraging students to contribute creatively to the learning process. Neelands (2009) notes that resourcefulness fosters deeper student engagement and cultivates problem-solving, collaboration, and critical thinking.

Linguistic flexibility also plays a significant role in adaptation. Given Nigeria's multilingual reality, facilitators often encourage code-switching between English and indigenous languages. Facilitators often adopt code-switching, shifting between English and indigenous languages, a strategic improvisational tool in Nigeria's multilingual classrooms. This approach fosters authentic expression and deeper engagement, especially when students can relate more personally to the

language. Ayodabo (2017) highlights how such linguistic flexibility enhances inclusivity. In classrooms with diverse linguistic profiles, improvisation becomes a bridge for communication, often employing non-verbal performance, symbolic gestures, and collaborative meaning-making to surmount language barriers (Odusote & Adeyemi, 2020).

Teachers in many Nigerian schools and community learning centres often resort to improvisation out of necessity, especially in rural and underserved areas. Where formal teaching aids are scarce, educators creatively utilise oral traditions, folktales, and environmental resources to enrich classroom instruction. For instance, a civic education lesson may be transformed into a town hall debate enacted by students, allowing them to simulate public discourse and internalise civic responsibilities experientially (Ogunba, 2015). This approach makes abstract concepts concrete and reflects students' socio-cultural realities, fostering a more meaningful and participatory learning process.

Community-based theatre initiatives have also contributed significantly to adapting improvisation in education. Notably, groups such as Footprints of David Arts Academy in Bariga and Kininso Koncepts Production in Lagos have pioneered the use of improvisational Theatre-in-Education (TIE) formats to engage students and address social issues, including gender equity, sanitation, civic responsibility, and children's rights. Footprints of David, for instance, employs community-rooted, performance-based pedagogy that fuses dance, drama, and storytelling to foster youth development in urban slums (Oikelome, 2021). Similarly, Kininso Koncepts, led by Joshua Alabi, has developed participatory workshops and street performances to facilitate critical engagement on pressing civic and cultural topics among school-aged audiences (Kininso Koncepts, n.d.). These interventions often occur in public schools or open community spaces and involve collaborative role-play exercises grounded in lived experiences. By embedding learning in real-life contexts, these groups strengthen the relevance of theatre as a tool for social transformation.

Crucially, these adaptations also help bridge the gap between formal schooling and Indigenous knowledge systems. Adelugba and Obafemi (2004) argue that improvisation validates community epistemologies often sidelined in mainstream education. When learning materials and dramatic content are drawn from local realities, students feel seen and heard, thus improving motivation, empathy, and participation.

IMPROVISATION AND THE REIMAGINATION OF PEDAGOGY THROUGH THEATRE-IN-EDUCATION

Improvisation, within the context of Theatre-in-Education (TIE), functions as a subversive pedagogical tool that interrogates traditional approaches to teaching and learning. It enables a radical reimagination of the classroom, not as a space of passive reception but as a creative arena where knowledge is co-constructed through spontaneity, critical inquiry, and embodied expression. This learning approach is particularly critical in the Nigerian context, where the

dominant model of instruction often privileges rote memorisation, hierarchical teacher-student relationships, and high-stakes examinations at the expense of creativity and critical thinking.

Grounded in Paulo Freire's (1970) dialogic pedagogy, improvisation allows for a participatory educational model in which learners are not recipients of imposed knowledge but are co-investigators in the learning process. Freire argues that the "banking" model of education dehumanises students by treating them as repositories of information. Improvisation actively counters this by promoting dialogue, imagination, and mutual exchange. Similarly, John Dewey's (1938) experiential learning theory positions experience at the centre of meaningful education. In improvisational TIE settings, students learn by doing and reflecting on their doing, thus completing the cycle of experience, reflection, and application.

Improvisation fosters cognitive and social competencies, including problem-solving, empathy, communication, and emotional resilience. In a Nigerian classroom, this might be enacted through a prompt like: "Imagine you are parents and teachers negotiating how to stop children from hawking during school hours." Assuming diverse roles, students would create dialogue, negotiate viewpoints, and improvise possible resolutions. This simple activity addresses cross-cutting themes such as child rights, access to education, civic responsibility, and ethical leadership while developing core life skills such as empathy, negotiation, critical thinking, and collaborative problem-solving. It allows learners to examine the socio-economic pressures behind child labour and reflect on community-driven solutions within a safe, dramatic framework.

Moreover, improvisation offers an inclusive model of instruction. Its openness to unpredictability allows students across diverse learning abilities to participate without fear of failure. For learners in under-resourced or overcrowded Nigerian schools, this flexibility is crucial. Rather than relying on expensive materials or rigid lesson plans, teachers can activate learning using students' lived experiences, local idioms, and oral traditions, thus aligning the classroom with culturally responsive pedagogy.

Significantly, these ideals are not merely theoretical. Several Nigerian organisations have adopted improvisation through TIE to drive transformative learning. Footprints of David Arts Academy in Bariga, Lagos, exemplifies this. Working with children from marginalised communities, the academy facilitates devised performances that emerge from improvisational workshops. In one such project, *Ile Aiye*, children collaboratively built scenes around sanitation, child abuse, and economic hardship. The performance became a platform for public engagement and policy reflection (Akinwale, 2019).

Likewise, Kininso Concepts Production's *My School, My Story* initiative in Lagos public schools employed improvisation to address bullying, cultism, and drug abuse. According to Alabi (2018), students co-created scripts based on personal experiences, rehearsed in peer-led groups, and

conducted post-performance dialogues. Teachers observed marked improvements in student confidence, collaboration, and civic awareness.

Academic studies also affirm these outcomes. Adelakun (2020) observes that when strategically embedded in school curricula, improvisation enhances content retention and fosters students' capacity for ethical reasoning and social critique. Importantly, these results are not isolated. Improvisational Theatre-in-Education (TIE) has demonstrated remarkable adaptability across global contexts. In South Africa, it has been integrated into post-apartheid civic education programmes to promote reconciliation, democracy, and social justice. In Brazil, Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre has empowered youth in marginalised communities to engage critically with issues such as poverty and police violence. Similarly, in India, gender-sensitive theatre workshops in rural schools have used improvisation to challenge patriarchal norms, encourage dialogue on girls' education, and promote gender equity (Boal, 2002; Prentki & Preston, 2009). These international models underscore the potential of improvisational TIE as a tool for inclusive, participatory learning. This approach resonates deeply with Nigeria's multicultural and resource-constrained educational environment, where similar strategies are increasingly being explored to address civic, social, and developmental challenges.

Despite its promise, improvisation is not without challenges. Some critics argue that it lacks structure, may lead to disciplinary issues, or undermines academic seriousness. In Nigerian settings where examination performance often determines funding and promotion, school authorities may resist drama-based methods, seeing them as distractions rather than legitimate pedagogy. Furthermore, many teachers, having been trained in conventional didactic styles, lack the confidence or expertise to implement improvisational strategies.

These concerns are valid but not insurmountable. Research indicates that with appropriate training and scaffolding, improvisation can be structured to meet curricular objectives while retaining creative openness (Adelakun, 2020). Teacher training institutions must, therefore, incorporate improvisation and drama-in-education as core components of professional development. Notably, the National Policy on Education highlights creativity and critical thinking as key objectives of the Nigerian education system. However, these remain inadequately operationalised in classroom practice (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014). Educators can address this gap through participatory and learner-centred methods by integrating improvisation more deliberately into subject schemes of work, particularly in civic education, literature, and social studies.

Furthermore, improvisation offers a rare fusion of cognitive, emotional, and social learning. TIE powered by improvisation provides a counter-narrative in a nation grappling with youth restiveness, cultural intolerance, and political apathy. It models democratic dialogue, validates diverse perspectives, and restores agency to the learner. Schools reimaged through this lens become not just sites of instruction but laboratories of citizenship and transformation.

In sum, improvisation within TIE is not simply a method but a philosophy of education rooted in participation, empathy, and critical awareness. Decentering the teacher and valorising the learner's voice destabilises oppressive pedagogical norms and nurtures classrooms where inquiry, imagination, and identity flourish.

CONCLUSION

Improvisation within Theatre-in-Education (TIE) offers a robust framework for transforming pedagogy in Nigerian classrooms. Rooted in the theories of Freire and Dewey, it challenges traditional, rigid instructional models by promoting active, experiential, and dialogic learning. As demonstrated through initiatives like Footprints of David and Kininso Concepts, improvisation enhances learner engagement, critical thinking, and social awareness. Despite its potential, the widespread application of improvisational methods faces challenges, including limited teacher training, rigid curricula, and policy constraints. Addressing these barriers is essential for unlocking the full benefits of this approach. Ultimately, this paper affirms that when purposefully applied, improvisation in TIE can reshape educational experiences, making learning more inclusive, participatory, and responsive to Nigeria's evolving educational needs.

Recommendations

1. Colleges of education should include improvisational techniques as part of pre-service and in-service teacher education, equipping educators with practical tools for learner-centred teaching.
2. National and state education boards should revise curricula to permit creative and interactive approaches such as TIE and improvisation, especially in language arts, social studies, and civic education.
3. Education ministries and school administrators should formally recognise and support arts-in-education programmes by allocating resources, time, and infrastructure for theatre-based activities within the school system.
4. Further empirical studies should be encouraged to assess the long-term impact of improvisation on learning outcomes in diverse Nigerian classroom contexts. Such data will help shape policy and pedagogy.
5. National education policy documents should explicitly endorse alternative pedagogical approaches, including TIE and improvisation, as viable strategies for improving engagement and retention in basic and secondary education.

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