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Performing Arts in Language Learning

Proceedings of
the International Conference
Rome 24/24 October 2014

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Agencia di Ricerca & Formazione Linguistica Research & Language Training Agency



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Combining foreign, native and national languages through theater in schools: an “enactive approach“ to education

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At a time when our societies are becoming more and more hybrid as they interrelate and are enhanced thanks to the new media, this paper stresses the need to take a step back to consider the ever growing use of ICTE (Information and Communication Technology for Education) in standardized evaluation system. In this article, we are looking at the contribution of aesthetic and languaging (Varela) [1] dimensions of the arts, and in particular of theater, to the teaching of foreign languages. In this respect we are considering the skills of mediation, which are neglected in French curricula. Neurosciences have shown that aesthetic responses are based on the activation of physiologically universal embodied mechanisms, which integrate actions, emotions and sensory perception (Freedberg and Gallese) [2]. Creative emergence would therefore be right at the root of human language as put forward by Lecoq, Brook and many other theatrical artists who have shown an interest in education. In this context we suggest that the socio-biological roots of learning and language should be taken into account through transversal skills, such as creativity, emotional competence and mediation or “relational intelligence” skills in language curricula.

The AiLES experimental project (Arts in Language Education for an Empathic Society) has been designed to test this hypothesis. It stands at the crossroads between innovative practical teaching and research. It is a longitudinal, four-year study (2011-2015) in a dual language class (German/English) carried out in a multicultural secondary school in a Parisian suburb. Two actors (one English-speaking, and one German-speaking), come into the classroom on a regular basis. The study analyses if and how theater, as a physical, cultural and linguistic means of expression, facilitates speech and how it can stimulate sensory, kinesthetic, emotional and linguistic forms of expression and perception. Given such a holistic view of the teaching-learning process, I hypothesize that the language of the theatre plays a role of mediation and facilitates “relational intelligence”, as it allows students to delve into all their language repertoires in order to switch from

one language to another (that of their family, of their school context, and of modern languages learnt at school).

This article is therefore an invitation to move from disciplinary language teaching to “translanguage” teaching without boundaries, so that tomorrow’s children will build together an empathic society.

“What is unique to culture is that (...) it always stands apart, by turns dis-identifying and reidentifying itself” (François Jullien)

1. Introduction

According to neuroscientists, the global hyperconnected world carries its own risks: virtual contacts, which tend to partially replace real meetings, subject our brains to dramatic changes whose effects are still underresearched in education. Cyrulnik [3] affirms that “Our brains are neurosocial (...) This means that our neural circuitry is made to resonate with that of others. (...) We therefore have a strong interest in developing our ‘relational intelligence’”(p. 67-76). He also alerts us to the increasing inability of humans to develop an altruistic attitude, which numerous studies have confirmed to be vital for existence. So we find ourselves faced with a paradox; globalization runs the risk of turning us into isolated and de-socialized individuals. It reduces local cultures to standardized norms, which go against the grain of human nature.

We urgently need to take these issues into account within the field of education. How does the European linguistic policy, reflected in the CEFRL, deal with such questions?

“Innovation and Evaluation” are currently the main official terms in education. In this context, the Common European Framework of Reference for the teaching of modern languages is mainly associated to the use of ITCE tools, which evaluate performance and competence according to compartmentalized levels and often emphasize form over content. As a consequence, within institutions, test preparation prevails over the development of relational intelligence and the holistic aims that the CEFR encourages are excluded.

In the AiLES experimentation we put strategies for relationships with the self and others at the center of our pedagogy. The multicultural profile of the pupils is taken into account in the joint teaching of English and German, creating links between the different worlds of school, family and the community. We observe how “theatrical language” (Aden) [4] plays a mediating role in languages learning and how pupils are “translanguaging” (Garcia) [5] with all their repertoires (*translangager*, Aden) [6].

In this article I propose to reconsider language in the context of its biological roots [1]. I will show how an enactive pedagogy of emergence [7] [8] relies on and maximizes the potential of the student to “translanguage”. I will describe the way we put this approach into practice in a multilingual class.

2. Taking into account the biological roots of “relational intelligence” in the language classroom

Despite much research, especially in the field of cognitive neuroscience, modern language teaching too often ignores the corporeity of languages [9] [10]. The “action-based approach”, adopted since the introduction of the CEFRL, refers to those actions needed to complete tasks, not the acts of language themselves through which the pupil learns.

The AiLES research is based on Varela’s paradigm of “enaction”. For Varela [11], as for all neurologists concerned with cognition, to act is to learn. Knowledge is emergent and *embodied*, as it is not separate from emotion [12] or sensory-motor response (interaction). It is by drawing on all the existing language repertoires (corporal, emotional, cultural, and linguistic) in order to interact with others and with the environment that the individual can access knowledge. “We are made up of language” [1] This knowledge includes all of the non-verbal, co-verbal and verbal repertoires. As a *mediator*, the individual constantly makes reinvented, shared meaning emerge [6]. Languages have recognizable shapes and sometimes even graphical sounds. They are made up of breaths, rhythms and sounds and not just rules. Their codes and norms evolve with the speakers, changing according to context and shifting in relation to cultural hybridization [13].

The teaching of language-culture should take into account the complexity of language at the core of interaction which is “emotional and sensorial exchange (...) We should learn a new language desiring to meet the self through meeting another, there where meaning emerges without words, there where “for the spoken word often forgets the roots from which it grew (Lecoq, 1997) ” [8] (p.111).



(Fig.1. AiLES ©Fred Furgol)

The vital processes of *interrelatedness* [14] run the risk of dematerializing on the screen and in the classroom, instead of being reinforced by real intersubjective meetings. This will occur if institutions continue to perceive languages as being compartmentalized, despite the injunction of the CEFRL to introduce a multicultural approach with mediation at the heart of the educational system. Studies carried out in ethno-psychiatry (Marie-Rose Moro) and linguistics, have shown the risk of loss of identity linked to society's non-recognition of the family language.

"Language acquisition is always embedded in concrete social, historical, and individual biographical situations and that it is heavily emotionally charged." [15] (p.167)

This is why, in our AiLES study, we have chosen to take into consideration *all* the pupils' languages including those they dream of learning.

3. Developing relational intelligence through "*translanguaging*": the language of mediation – theater

How can we develop this "relational intelligence" which is so necessary for the survival of our species? We have previously seen how mediation training is at the heart of strategies of interrelatedness. In our project this is achieved by using theater practice, which is "polyaesthetic" [16] (p.108) and social. To learn a foreign language is to weave new links between the known and the unknown. To enable the pupils to access this knowledge, it is necessary to integrate the notion of emergence in language teaching. The AiLES project is an experiment in putting emergence-based teaching into practice [17] in order to promote "*translanguaging*".

One of the central aims of the AiLES project is to introduce skills of emotional intelligence and to practice cultivating an empathic attitude. Thirioux [18], a neuro-phenomenologist, defines empathy as "feeling into" (from the German "ein [into] – fühlen [to feel] "). For her, it is "a sort of awareness of being outside the other person and having 'to reach [her/him]' (...). It enables us to understand the other's current experience as the experience of someone else, while distinguishing oneself from the other (...)." (p. 88). This is precisely what actors do. Like Piccardo and Aden [13], we believe that attitudes of empathy enable the learner to understand the other person and new situations more easily as well as to *translanguage* (*translangager*).

"*Translangageance*" according to Aden's definition of "*translangager*" [8] is "a dynamic act which interconnects self to others and the environment and through which meaning shared between humans is constantly emerging" (p.115). "*-ance*" expresses the latency period necessary in learning [7], the period of imitation, reproduction and then autonomous production. In our study we propose to mine the organic nature of *translanguaging* through its potential, which contains all kinds of language - rather than its utilitarian qualities like García does.

Translangageance [...] is physical (resonance, mimicry), cultural and linguistic (code-switching), and holistic (autonomy and de-centering) [19] (p. 7-8).

The language of theater enables *trans*-langaguaging in a safe “space of possibility” (Winnicott) somewhere between simulation and reality. It is mediated through the body, aesthetics, and the imagination. For Wolfgang Sting [16], theater, by allowing us to play at being other people, makes the foreign familiar (p.106). This is why theater practice can be so beneficial within the context of foreign language learning.

4. The first results of the AiLES study in building relational intelligence

AiLES is founded on the hitherto outlined principles. Two actors (one English-speaking, and one German-speaking), come into the classroom on a regular basis. The teachers, used to task-oriented lesson plans, which often include expected answers, have had to learn to let go in order to allow the space needed for emergence of the creative process. A balance has had to be found between the pairing of theater practitioner and teacher, and it is gradually being redefined as the project advances. This freedom of being in between, or in the “empty space” (Brook) also enables the pupils to change their perspective and envisage language learning as something that belongs to them individually and as a group. They start with non-verbal expression to gradually move towards oral production and then written expression in languages, taking as starting points, stories which have meaning for them because they come from their own experience, and have affected them.

The first results of the study are promising. We have noted positive changes in the following:

- *Autonomy* (in languages and behaviour)
- *Interrelatedness* (languages-theatre/ school-family/project-other subjects)
- *Mediation* (translanguageance / between peers; between pupils and adults)
- *Disinhibition*
- *Curiosity* (openness towards languages and cultures, towards other pupils and adults)
- *Surpassing oneself*
- Awareness of the meaning of self-assessment
- Development of *transversal competences* (through creativity and the imagination)
- Removal of the divisions between *emotions and cognition*

These results support the notion that “all education, in the human sense of the term, is an education in language”. Let us bring back a human side to education, especially in language teaching.

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