



The dynamic of being: awareness of the body for a liberated voice

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Abstract

As part of the IDEFI-ANR Innovalangues project, the THEMPPPO group (THEMatique Prosodie et Production Orale) is carrying out action-research based upon two complementary praxes which aim at liberating the voice in both second language teachers and their learners. The first praxis is the Silent Experience, which facilitates an embodied oral communication, relying upon the awareness of what is happening within the body, at every stage of the learning process. Work on breathing and the organs of articulation is followed by voiceless speaking aloud activities, before further exploration is brought in via the dimensions of emotion, play and imagination. The second praxis is the Engaged Body (in the interactional space). Here, the aim is to increase awareness of the impact and the quality of the nature of the space “in between” (the teacher and the learner, two speakers) and to use the voice as a bridge across that space. It means being in relationship with the environment, without losing contact with one’s own body. This article shows how the two praxes can be interconnected in our ongoing teacher training programmes, the aim of which is to help teachers to be more confident in their own bodies and to give them a new perspective for feeling more at ease with oral production activities in the classroom.

Keywords: Silent experience, engaged body, awareness, voice, self confidence

Introduction

Oral communication is a physical act linking body, voice and language. Yet this link is seldom recognized in second language teaching and learning (Jourdan, 2014: 105). How can a better knowledge of the body and the voice, and a more conscious involvement of both, help and improve language learning?

The role of gesture-s- in language learning has already been the subject of numerous studies in language learning (Tellier, 2013 : 62-63 ; Colletta & Batista, 2010 : 21-34). However, this role has been limited to gesture as being yet one more tool to master. Our aim is to allow teachers to focus on their own bodies and to draw their attention to what is happening within, where gestures their origin. In so doing, gesture will emerge spontaneously, rooted in a real link between body and language. The reinforcement of this link is central to the action-research work of the THEMPPPO group (THEMatique Prosodie et Production Orale). Our approach is based on two complementary praxes, the Silent Experience and the Engaged Body. These two praxes will be developed here, along with their integration into an ongoing teacher training program, which is one of the main tasks of the group.

Context

THEMPPO is part of the large IDEFI - ANR Innovalangues project, whose purpose is to 'initiate, support and deploy action research aiming at transforming and consolidating new practices in foreign language teaching and learning in higher education' (Innovalangues, 2011). THEMPPPO focuses specifically on oral production, and particularly on prosody, otherwise known as the musicality of language. Action research began by looking at the role, and the prominence, of the link between body, voice, and prosody. This work then led to an examination of finding ways to develop this link as a support for second language learning and teaching.

We have observed that most of the studies on the role of the body in teaching (Jourdan, 2014 : 105-116), and more specifically in language teaching, focus on (iconic) gestures. Marion Tellier (2013 : 62-63) describes three different aspects of the use of gestures in language teaching: gesture as a pedagogical practice (a means to capture and maintain the learners' attention), gesture as a means to facilitate access to meaning, and gesture as a memorization facilitator (a multimodal association of voice and gesture will help the learner to remember better). This last example is interesting as it shows that the learners memorize a word more easily when it is spoken in association with the appropriate gesture. This refers to the motor memory, as an indication of the importance of the role of the body in learning.

However, in our work we take this focus on gesture further by returning the body to its proper place, that is to say at the origin of the production of sound preceding language, whether verbal or non-verbal. We have observed that oral communication is often less effective, and thus remains limited, when there is an absence of awareness of what is happening within the body, whether it be that of the teacher or the learner. THEMPPO is developing pedagogical tools based on a greater physical engagement, thus providing the scaffolding for an increased level of achievement in foreign language learning

A major part of THEMPPO's work consists of providing ongoing teacher training programmes. In order to teach and apply innovative pedagogical approaches, the teachers should have the opportunity to become familiar with these techniques, and assimilate them through practice before they introduce them to their learners.

Originally designed as a face-to-face training programme, these courses will in the future be completed by an online learning path. A series of videos has been produced that respond to specific pedagogical criteria and provide English language teachers with appropriate activities. They serve two purposes: firstly, they allow teachers to recall activities from the face-to-face workshops and to continue practicing autonomously, secondly, they enable teachers who have not attended a workshop to discover and try out, at their own rhythm, body and voice activities in order to inspire them to use such work in the classroom. A handbook will also be available, giving background information and explanations, and a guide to the videos, so that autonomous training is possible for teachers who are willing to practise.

Two thematic approaches

Our pedagogical method is based on two central thematics or praxes: the Silent Experience and the Engaged Body. These are aimed at restoring awareness of the discovery, imaginary and sensoriality dimensions which are crucially present with the language immersion of our mother-tongue acquisition. These two praxes are complementary and respond to the need of both teachers and learners to have a greater awareness of the body and increased self-confidence. Although in general the voice is correctly linked to speech, THEMPPPO focuses on the origins of the voice, linking it to breath and the production of sound before language comes into play. Drawing attention to the origin of voice has a positive impact on the acquisition of vocal confidence which is so necessary for freeing up oral communication.

In the Silent Experience, attention is focused on an awareness of what is happening within the body (in terms of perceptions and physical sensations) and to the role of verticality in acquiring presence. In the Engaged Body praxis, the focus is on the immediate environment and our ability to project ourselves into and within the space around us: how the relation with the environment can generate a physical response, thus transforming what is happening within the body into a dynamic relationship, which is necessary for a liberated oral production and access to appropriate prosody. This can be seen as the opening of presence on a horizontal scale.

In our workshops, participants have the opportunity to try out this innovative approach for themselves, but also to acquire perspectives on how to adapt it into the classroom with their learners. We explore many different ways of introducing activities which involve the learner's body in a simple and fun way something which is perhaps unfamiliar in many language classrooms.

The THEMPPPO ongoing teacher training programme

Before discussing the content of a typical workshop, it should be specified that our approach is also based on a complementary interaction between active practical moments and theoretical interludes which, in addition to theory, include analysis and conceptualisation.

When theory is associated with practice, it is more likely to be “understood” and integrated, because the brain will recognize it (Kervan, 1996 : 163).

In adhering to our main objective, that of freeing the voice through a liberation of the body, the workshops follow a specific progression. An exploration of what is happening within the body, in order to reinforce self-awareness, is followed progressively by more visible and audible stages, when the focus becomes more outwards, and the reference becomes the presence with the other, in interaction. Thus both the Silent Experience and the Engaged Body praxes are integrated.

The Silent Experience begins with the three physical supports : posture, breathing, and the articulators. The emotional dimension is then introduced as a factor that brings melodic changes in spoken language: first silently and then aloud. It is this stage which brings us directly to prosody.

The Engaged Body follows, with its perspective on the role of space within the context of language learning. We then see how the voice, once liberated and sustained by a corporal presence situated in the spatial environment, plays an essential role in language teaching and learning, specifically in oral comprehension and production.

Silent Experience

The Silent Experience refers to everything that is happening within the body before and during speech, but which is not producing audible sound. In other words, it is the physical support which enables sustains and enables speech. We regard the Silent Experience as being a crucial stage in the establishment of body awareness: when treated thus, it will contribute to the scaffolding of oral production. The Silent Experience allows the learner to become aware of the interdependency between the spoken word and the physiological and psycho-affective dimensions of the body.

As Linklater (2006 : 327) points out, the awareness of this link has receded since language started to appear increasingly in a written form in manuscripts, thus becoming increasingly exterior to the body. This phenomenon has accelerated over the past decade with the advent arrival of tablets and smartphones. Technology takes us outside our own bodies, and thus it seems necessary to restore the link between our body and the spoken word. Linklater speaks of the need to restore the direct ‘neurophysiological pathways for the voice to travel through the body, arousing physical, sensory, sensual, and emotional response’ (2006 : 328).

Often in our workshops, when participants enter the room, the ‘activity’ has already started silently : the THEMPPPO trainers are standing silently in the space, welcoming the participants with their presence and their look. The trainers then look at each other, exchange places and finally address the participants orally by presenting themselves. The participants are then asked to consider the following questions: what is happening when there is no speech? How did they perceive the trainers and their silent presence? What are the trainers doing when they welcome the participants without saying a word? What are they focusing on, in order to be fully present?

The participants are then asked to think about a word that is important to them: their first name. They should then say it ‘silently aloud’, by articulating and tasting it a *dégustation* of the word. In doing so, they focus their attention on what is happening in their mouths and in the organs of articulation, in sensory terms. They are then asked to play with their first name: to sing it, to whisper it, to vary the speed at which they say it, but still without making any sound, and also to observe what is happening in the other parts of the body , including the rib cage, the abdomen, the pelvis, and even the legs and feet. This exercise concludes with the participants introducing themselves to their neighbour by saying their first name aloud. They are then asked to give feedback on the exercise: what they perceived in terms of sensations and emotions, whether the silent experience changed anything, and if so, what.

The three physical supports

After this initial work participants are introduced to the three physical supports for the Silent Experience: posture, breathing and the organs of articulation.

The role of posture is the starting point for all work on body awareness. A good posture brings alignment and the means to feel grounded, through the conscious perception of the support coming from the floor, while remaining flexible and ready to move.

Nowadays, maybe even more than in the past, focusing attention on posture is important. The negative effect of modern technology (smartphones and tablets) on the body has been mentioned above. Repeated bending forward of the head to look at the screen can have harmful consequences not only on the posture, but also on the general health of the user (Hansraj, 2014 : 277–279). Work on posture will also reinforce self-confidence, by strengthening floor anchoring and physical stability.

Awareness of breathing then follows. Breathing is a natural action, of which we are not even conscious most of the time, but it is also the foundation of speaking. Therefore, in order to free its flow and have optimum usage of breathing, it is important to know how it works both physiologically and in relationship with emotions. We thus put into practice very simple exercises based on abdominal breathing, always starting with a release of breath and a “let it happen” attitude. Participants are then asked to add a sound, and to consciously feel the link between breath and the production of sound (as with wind instruments).

This is followed by work on the organs of articulation, the role of which is obvious when working on oral language. The specific nature of our approach is to activate them even before speech, as using them without any production of sound (or with the limited sound of our breath) allows us to focus our attention on the sensation of contact and how the different organs interact. We start with a relaxation of the mask of the face, then of the jaw (massage of the temporo-mandibular joint), continuing with lip movement, the tongue (movements and stretching), ending with the soft palate by the production of guttural sounds.

The following is intended to be a synthetic Silent Experience activity: saying several times a simple sentence aloud, without making any sound (for instance: ‘I’m really sorry, but you’ll have to come back tomorrow’). Participants are at first asked to ‘say’ this sentence in a neutral way, as most such sentences would be delivered in the context of a language class. Here the objective is to ‘feel’ or ‘taste’ the sentence, in terms of physical sensations. We invite our participants to feel what is happening in the mouth, the throat and the airways, and with the diaphragm, the whole abdomen, the back and even with the legs and feet.

The emotional dimension

We cannot observe spoken language without mentioning the psycho-affective dimension to which it is related to words in conveying meaning, also convey emotions. And in return, emotions have an impact on the way we perceive our body, our sensations (Hansraj, 2014 : 277–279). So the exercise continues, using the same sentence, but this time putting it into a context. Thus we appeal to the imagination of the participants, by guiding them towards experiencing an imagined scenario. They say the same sentence, silently aloud in the same way, but this time having been given a context (for instance: ‘at the desk of an administration office, you are the employee and are saying the sentence to someone who has already been here twice, and once again, hasn’t brought the right documents’).

Participants will observe what is happening in the body in terms of sensations: locate and define the type of sensation, its level of intensity, and if there is an impact on breathing.

Finally, the participants speak the sentence aloud, whilst maintaining an awareness of what is happening in the body, and of the prosody, the melody of their speech. The prosody of a sentence will vary according to the context and meaning.

Prosody

Prosody is at the centre of our approach, and all our activities merge into the scaffolding of prosodic skills, that is to say the musicality of language, the variations in rhythm, syllable duration, pitch, and intonation in the voice. Prosody is one of the main pillars in language acquisition. It is the very first element of speech that the foetus internalises in the mother's womb (Castarède, 2005) and becomes the key element that will enabling the child to distinguish its mother tongue from any other language (Moon et al, 1993: 495-500). Throughout language development, as John Locke puts it (Locke, 1993: 6). Thus prosody has a direct link both with meaning and with grammatical forms. A good mastery of prosody is essential to be understood, especially in English. It is also the main emotional, psycho-affective and social marker in speech and plays a fundamental role in language acquisition, in all languages.

Colletta (2004 : 15) refers to the multimodal aspect of speech which requires 'a behaviour associating articulated sounds and body movements'. He recognises that there is a link between prosody and the body when it comes to language production: '... not only do you recognise the words that are being pronounced, but you hear their music (called prosody), and at the same time you can perceive ... the physical movements that are produced by the speaker.'

Colletta is talking about the listener, who will recognise and also read the body language. What we suggest in return to the speaker's point of view, and to how awareness can be developed of what is happening to the speaker's own body, linked with prosody. It is by reinforcing this link that speaking skills can be improved.

The Engaged Body

When we look at the social dimension of language, in relation to the others, the body is to be seen in the context of space. When we are speaking to someone, we enter the field of the 'space in between': this space between the speaker and the listener is a reality that is made tangible through the sound of our voice which fills that space. Oral expression can be seen as the projection of our body in the space through the voice. Auzéau, 'Le corps, un allié de l'enseignant souvent oublié' (2016 : 83-90), talks about the major importance of the spatial dimension when looking at the body and the voice in language teaching. One of the aspects she mentions, referring to Hall (1966) is the notion of proxemics, she mentions the fact of taking into account and interpreting the spatial distance between speakers as a social marker. We see it as the interconnection, in speech, of the notions of space, movement and interaction. What is happening in our body when the spatial dimension (inside the body/outside the body) is considered in any interaction? How can we name and encourage the dynamic that will thus be generated and even use it as a pedagogical scaffolding for teachers?

What we call the Engaged Body is a response to these questions. Remaining faithful to our approach which places the framework of spoken language firstly within the body, and secondly in its visible, exterior manifestation, there are three types of movement/dynamics to be defined within this praxis:

- an amplification of what has been revealed by the Silent Experience (from within to the outer), that is to say the physical starting point of oral production, and the use of breathing and the voice.
- the need to orientate oral production, and to adapt it to the context: to address someone requires taking into account the direction, quality, nature of the environment, and the listeners-, by adjusting the voice volume and the focus.
- Finally, there is the aspect of receiving, which means the ability of being touched, in return, by the listener or by the environment (from the outer towards the inside).

To start this work, we ask the participants to notice the sensations within their body (in terms of position, temperature, type of sensation, intensity, change in rhythm for example) that precedes the relational momentum, because this is the moment that signals the involvement of the Engaged Body, and of the relational dynamic, be it physical or linguistic. The activity associated with this involves moving around in the room, individually but surrounded by all the other participants. They imagine they are in the middle of a crowd, in an airport or a train station, looking for someone they know. Sometimes they have to stop, and look all around them, at different distances. Then they imagine they suddenly see the person they've come to meet. At this very moment, just before they move towards the person, something is physically changing, and initiates the 'going towards'. It is this change, this specific moment, that we want them to identify; an inner movement, preceding the visible exterior movement, and accompanying the shift from a vertical to a horizontal dynamic.

The next step in this exercise is to add the vocal dimension. This is done first when standing still, by activating the diaphragm when it expels the air as if saying the short "ah" silently and then aloud. Then we repeat the previous exercise (moving in crowd, looking for and then locating someone), but this time, instead of going towards the person the participants should call: 'hey!', playing with various distances.

The workshop continues with the introduction of the notion of 'zones', inspired by the work of Patsy Rodenburg (2009). This activity is meant to lead participants to experience what we call the 'engagement zone', which is the correct positioning in oral communication (as opposed to the 'inner zone', when the speaker speaks for themselves and to the 'outer zone', when the speaker is addressing an outside world beyond the audience). When in the 'engagement zone', the speaker is perceived by the audience as 'having presence'. This 'presence' is successful when we establish a link with the audience through adjusted speech, focus, and intention towards them without losing contact with ourselves. This means being aware of our own body, its sensations, in the here and now.

One way to increase awareness the 'engagement zone' is to ask the participants to take it in turns to enter the space and stand in front of the others, facing them, and to simply take the time to be there, without *doing* anything, remaining aware simultaneously of themselves, of each person in the audience, and of the space in between. Meanwhile the other participants are asked to observe the person standing in front of the group (their posture, breathing, focus, non-verbal and co-verbal gestures). They are then asked to repeat this exercise, adding this

time the first few introduction words of an imagined speech. This is followed by a time of reflection and open discussion for both speaker and audience concerning the observations of all concerned.

Conclusion

This presentation shows in detail how a typical workshop in our on-going teacher training program follows the two main praxes of our approach. It clarifies the principles and pedagogical reasons underlying the choices of activities, the layout and the design of these workshops. Once these foundations are laid, we develop a whole series of activities built around the notions of pleasure and playing with sounds (in terms of duration, volume, pitch), aiming at encouraging creativity and imagination, linked to prosody. A large part of this work is what we call ‘nonsense makes sense’, in which we draw attention, in foreign language acquisition, to the sounds of speech more than on the meaning. We feel that the prioritization of content over form in second language studies can have a negative impact on oral production work.

Our workshops are highly adaptable to different contexts and publics - for instance, varying from one hour (as in the seminars for UPLEGESS 2017 and APLIUT 2017) to a two-day intensive training course, or even a more in-depth program of 5 half-days dispatched over a longer period.

These workshops require a large room, such as a (dance or theatre) rehearsal studio, because the trainees should have enough space to move around and play with their voices in the space. Beyond our own needs for such workshops, we also have our conception of the ideal language classroom: an open and empty space, encouraging physical engagement and movement, surrounded only by standing work-stations for when note-taking or other such more traditional learning behaviour if necessary.

A majority of language teachers who have attended our workshops observed that the Silent Experience enabled them to focus more easily on their feelings and self-awareness during speech. The impact of these exercises is observed in a slower speech rate and more pausing, both of which are difficult to achieve in oral production in second language acquisition.

Another aspect that participants noted is the awareness of the importance of the voice. For the teachers, it is obvious, but the voices of the learners should also be concerned. Our training offers the opportunity for the foreign language classroom to become a place where learners can focus on the use of their voice with a qualitative approach.

Even if asking teachers to experiment, through play, play more with their body and voice in the language classroom can be uncomfortable for some (and this has been expressed), we think that because our method is based on a reinforcement of resources that are already present within all, instead of having to learn yet new codes, a majority of teachers has expressed their wish to pursue with this approach.

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