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## ***'Performative reading' hits the stage - an educational perspective***

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### **Abstract**

Dal 2014 oltre 140 studenti dell'università di Bordeaux hanno partecipato al Festival TiLLiT. I loro spettacoli sono più che semplici produzioni studentesche. Sono il culmine artistico di un emozionante processo di scoperta che inizia nel campus all'inizio del semestre. Gli intermezzi coreografici, le conferenze-spettacolo e gli adattamenti creativi di opere classiche di narrativa sono il culmine di un processo di scoperta che inizia con l'esplorazione della fisicità e della natura performativa dell'espressione umana. In questo capitolo forniamo argomenti solidi e strumenti pratici per l'apprendimento incarnato delle lingue e la lettura performativa nelle classi di lingue straniere, a tutte le età e a tutti i livelli di competenza, sia nell'istruzione secondaria che in quella universitaria. Offriamo illustrazioni concrete basate sulle sessioni di laboratorio che teniamo in Francia all'UBM e sulle performance TiLLiT presentate all'UPO in Italia.

### **1. Introduction**

Ever since their first visit to Vercelli in 2014, students from *Université Bordeaux Montaigne* (UBM) have been taking part in TiLLiT, an international drama festival that was founded by Marco Pustianaz in 2004 at *Università degli studi del Piemonte Orientale* (UPO). Over the years, TiLLiT has established itself as a friendly place for "drama-based pedagogy" where "performative approaches to language teaching and learning" (Schewe 2013) may be showcased to the educational world and ideas exchanged with contagious enthusiasm. The students from Bordeaux have designed and performed powerful stage adaptations of novels or novellas by Virginia Woolf, Henry James and Oscar Wilde, using simple props and delivery techniques. They have occasionally composed "choreographic interludes" between numbers and also presented lively "lecture-performances" to responsive audiences (Lapaire 2016).

Our traveling company is officially registered as "Choreographers of Speech" in the TiLLiT Festival annals, but is more simply known as *Il gruppo di Bordeaux*, locally. The *gruppo* has 12 to 16 members aged 21-28. All are graduate students who have just completed the first year of their respective master's programs in drama or modern languages. All are volunteers who may only apply once to take part in the TiLLiT project. Two thirds of them are English Studies or General Linguistics students at UBM who have enrolled in a special module entitled "The Choreography of Speech: Introducing Gesture Studies". The others are drama students who normally study dance, theatre and performance theory in French, yet are expected to take acting classes in English to fulfil the foreign language requirement of their course. Most participants have a French educational background but it is not uncommon for visiting students from the University of California or ERASMUS+ mobility programs to join and benefit from the generous travel grant allocated by the UBM Council.

A striking feature of our TiLLiT projects is the autonomous and distributed organizational framework that students manage to set up, and the collaborative atmosphere that characterizes their creative process. During the 6-week rehearsal period from mid-April to late May, the drama students take the initiative and share their acting skills efficiently with the language specialists. The language students, in return, offer peer-to-peer coaching in English grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, while sharing their own literary insights. Everyone has something to learn from others, and everyone does

indeed acquire new skills quickly and effortlessly through peer-to-peer coaching. Adapting a foreign literary work for the stage, while making its form and content immediately accessible to the general public, requires insight, discipline and enthusiasm. Drama students always act responsibly and may be therefore trusted in all the artistic decisions they make. Roles are cast, responsibilities assigned, and rehearsal schedules drawn up in a matter of days. The process is remarkably fast and smooth. Nothing, it seems, can ever spoil the joy of transposition, re-creation, and, ultimately, performance.

## 2. From page to stage: producing “reworkings” of Anglo-American literature

The script for the UBM workshops and the TiLLiT performances is always designed beforehand. I usually choose to rework a classic of Anglo-American fiction that reflects its time, yet speaks to our modern sensitivities. All the novels or novellas we explore during the workshop sessions and ultimately present on the TiLLiT stage were once seen as experimental, like *Jacob’s Room* (1922) and *The Waves* (1931), or else viewed as highly provocative, like *Daisy Miller* (1878), or even regarded as utterly “immoral”, like *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). One thing is certain: the stories left no one indifferent when they were first published, attracting equal amounts of praise and criticism. They address issues that are still very much with us today, such as gender and identity (*Orlando* [1928]), grief and remembrance (*To the Lighthouse* [1927]), trauma, depression, and social alienation (*Mrs Dalloway* [1925]).

### 2.1 Striving for brevity and simplicity

One of the main challenges we face when designing stage adaptations is translating complex mental states into something short, simple and powerful. The simplest solution is to use *bare nouns*, *elliptical sentences*, and *verbless constructions* to replace full sentences. This is usually done to the relief of students who can’t handle syntactic complexity well and struggle with grammar. *Syntactic reduction* is an efficient way of *packing complex meanings into short poetic utterances* that are both forceful and easy to deliver on the stage. As this is done, the key words and core imagery that are characteristic of the original work of fiction acquire greater salience and meaningfulness. Below is an example of the *syntactic reduction* and *poetic essentialization* of Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927) from 69000 to just 900 words. The script was originally conceived for the TiLLiT 2017 project. Since then, it has been revived several times to serve as performance material for numerous "Literature in the Flesh" workshops in French schools, European universities and teacher training colleges. The lines are taken from the 3 main sections of the novel, which were turned into "acts" for the performance: "The Window", " Time Passes" and "The Lighthouse". The titles are those that Woolf herself used in the novel (see Lapaire & Duval 2017).

*The Window.*

(Lily Briscoe, a painter, is standing in front of her easel, trying to compose herself)

‘To be silent. To be alone.’

...

(Mrs. Ramsay is suddenly overcome with self-doubt, while serving the family meal)

‘But what have I done with my life?’

...

*Time Passes.*

(The war has broken out. The house is no longer used by family and guests).

Cleaning Lady 1: They never come.

Cleaning Lady 2: They never send.

Cleaning Lady 1: They never write.

Cleaning Lady 2: The war! Der Krieg! C'est la guerre!

...

Chorus 1: Darkness. Darkness in the staircase. Darkness in the bedrooms.

Chorus 2: Night. Night succeeds to night.

Chorus 3: Mrs. Ramsay died in London, last night

Chorus 4: But what, after all, is one night?

...

*The Lighthouse.*

(Lily Briscoe wants to finish her picture but is overcome with artist's block)

'I can't paint. I can't write! Where to begin?'

(A voice from the chorus exclaims)

'Life, stand still!'

...

(Friends and family are back in the summer house, after many years of absence. Mrs. Ramsay has been dead for some time, but her presence can still be felt, and memories start to flood back)

Chorus 1: Mrs. Ramsay on the beach. Do you remember?

Chorus 2: Mrs. Ramsay in all her beauty.

Chorus 3: Mrs. Ramsay resolved everything into simplicity.

Chorus 4: Mrs. Ramsay has faded and gone.

Lily: Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!

*To the Lighthouse* (TILLIT 2017)

“Syntactic compression” and “poetic essentialization” at work

## 2.2 Matching bare words with simple moves

I usually produce a script of short to medium length (1000-4000 words). Precise references to the source text are systematically listed in the footnotes. Students are encouraged to explore the connections between key passages in the original novel and the script. It is up to them to decide whether they want to add anything or, on the contrary, abridge and further “essentialize” the story. It is important that they have a hand in the writing process, however limited, and that they find their own meanings in the story, which they always do with remarkable insight. In the example below, the sudden, unexpected death of Jacob at the very beginning of the First World War (“Darkness dropping like a knife over the continent”) is expressed with concision and maximum efficiency. The mood-shift from Jacob's ecstasy, as he watches the sun set, to his final collapse on the stage is abrupt. There

is no direct expression of grief. The dominant emotions are anger and bafflement. This is faithful to what we read in the novel but further condensed and dramatized in the final script established by the students.

Chorus 1: Jacob is twenty-six but still a small boy really.

Chorus 2: Darkness dropping like a knife over the continent.

Jacob: Such a sunset!

(Loud sound of machine guns, bombs exploding, screams, war planes. Jacob collapses. The recorded voices of Jacob's mother, Betty Flanders, and Jacob's friend, Bonamy, are heard. They have come to vacate Jacob's flat in London)

Mrs. Flanders: He left everything just as it was.

Bonamy: What did he expect? Did he think he would come back?

*Jacob's Room* (TiLLiT 2021), final scene  
Passing abruptly from unbridled youth to war and bereavement

Brevity, simplicity and efficiency are of the essence, as the performance must fit into a strict 25-to-30-minute time frame for TiLLiT. No props are used (apart from the odd fan, hat or scarf). It is the *feeling, moving and vocalizing bodies* of the performers that count. All must learn to be *fully engaged* in what they are doing: to be *connected* and *present to others and to themselves*, with *attitude*.



Figure 1 –*Jacob's Room: from page to stage* (TiLLiT 2021)  
“Darkness, dropping like a knife over the continent”

The bodies need to be *alert, anchored* and *aligned* as they stand out on the bare stage in simple clothing. They appear sitting, lying, walking, running, occasionally dancing or striking a pose. They strive to *match character to situation*, paying attention to the fundamental contrast and interplay between *stillness* and *movement, silence* and *sound, action* and *reaction*. This is exactly what Lecoq (2019) advocates in "physical theatre". *Movement*, he claims, arises out of *immobility*, so working on stillness matters just as much as working on quality of motion. *Sound* arises out of *silence*, so managing silent moments during acting exercises matters just as much as training the actor's voice to articulate and project sounds on a stage. Many of the vocal and physical actions that we perform are in fact *reactions* to some initial stimulus—things we see, hear, or imagine. It is therefore important to work on *reception* and *feedback*, to pay explicit attention to verbal as well as non-verbal phenomena,

to use language or subtle forms of body-motion communication in order to show one's reaction to a particular event – material, mental, perceptual, social, behavioural, etc.



Figure 2 (triptych) – *S/he Orlando in performance* (TiLLiT 2022). Sex-change scene from M to F  
Orlando-M is agentive, while Orlando-F remains neutral and unresponsive  
Then, Orlando-F reacts to Orlando-M's presence and actions (eye expression, head tilt)

Equally relevant is the contrast between *rising* and *falling*, *contracting* and *expanding*, which are the very essence of organic life, and should accordingly be integrated into actor training.



Figure 3 – *Breaking Virginia's Waves* (TILLIT 2019)  
Bodies and arms rising, falling, swinging

### 2.3 Changing the semiotic codes

In addition to acting, the main performative genres that we use are dance, (poetic) recitation and *tableau vivant* (as illustrated in Figure 3 below). The conversion of printed pages into oral, visual and kinetic displays of meanings amounts to a form of “intersemiotic translation” (Jakobson 1959). Decoding and recoding a piece, using a *different sign system*, is a powerful semiotic mechanism that has produced the greatest forms of art. Many of the great paintings, sculptures, ballets, musical pieces that we admire in Western culture were originally based on some spoken or written narrative that was eventually *resemiotised*: a different semiotic system and expressive genre were used; different verbal or non-verbal means were called upon to rework the original form and content. Asking students to design a (silent) *tableau vivant* that physically expresses their interpretation of the text, forces them to *give a bodily shape* to concrete and abstract meanings; to *enact* social interactions and emotional connections; in short, to behave like visual artists who find themselves “painting” or “sculpting” a scene from a source story.



Figure 4 – *The courage to be herself: Daisy Miller unbowed*. Final tableau. (TiLLiT 2023)

A vision of Daisy Miller and Winterbourne united in holy matrimony:  
Moral barriers start to dissolve and public hostility gives way to acceptance

The *tableau vivant* is essentially a selective and compressive narrative genre. It highlights a striking or meaningful “moment” in the story that is emblematic of attitudes, interactions and relationships. The statuesque composition can be a still or animated sculpture / picture. It can be focused on a single scene, or present a series of interconnected “panels,” in the logic of the diptych, triptych, or polyptych. Once a *tableau vivant* has been designed and performed by the students, it is interesting to have successive runs to internalize it and enjoy it to the full. Members of a different group may be asked to act as “guides,” “narrators” or “commentators” reading directly from the script. If the *tableau vivant* is performed in front of a theatre audience, the voice can be recorded and played on speakers, with added sound effects. Alternatively, some other character in the play or some member of the chorus may be asked to speak the lines directly from the stage.



Figure 5 – *Dorian Gray goes Wilde* (TiLLiT 2024)

“Dorian, you were made to be worshipped”  
A visual-kinetic rendition of “artistic idolatry”

If the *tableau vivant* is simply used as a pedagogical tool for performative language-teaching, the workshop facilitator may ask students from the other groups to pick the lines that they deem most relevant and then read them out expressively to make the meaning of the composition clear to

everyone in the room. The best options for delivering the message are: (1) standing by the picture / sculpture and acting as a museum guide; (2) walking around the “installation” and quoting the lines that have inspired it. Everyone understands the importance of providing *textual cues* that will help viewers make sense of the piece. Students are therefore willing to engage in both the performance of the *tableau vivant* and its elicitation. They accept the fact that *oral reading* requires some fluency, and that they must be ready to work on articulation, projection, and intonation to be understood.

## 2.4 Acting in a “poor manner”

Although technically distinct from “poor theatre” (Grotowski 2002), our general philosophy of acting is one that favours “a poor manner.” This means relying almost exclusively on one’s “own body and craft”, for the truth is that one may symbolize and express just about anything through “the controlled use of gesture (...), intonations, (and) the association of sounds” (21).



Figure 6 – *Dorian Gray goes Wilde* (UBM workshops 2024)  
Relying on one’s own body and craft to embody meanings powerfully

In the public performances that we give in Vercelli, musical excerpts, voice recordings and special sound effects are used sparingly. Lighting is the only artifice of “rich theatre” that we value and show any indulgence for.



Figure 7 – *Dorian Gray goes Wilde* (TiLLiT 2024)  
Making Hell glow: highlighting the corruption of Dorian’s character and the damnation of his soul

Our main objective is to ensure that the narrative is instantly accessible to the entire audience. The original storyline is preserved but the plot is simplified and refocused on a small set of meaningful themes, characters, and episodes. Sentence structure and verbal constructions (tense, aspect, modality) undergo significant restructuring to achieve a kind of elemental simplicity.

Can you see him?  
The boy with dark hair.  
Sitting by the oak tree,  
Writing poetry.

*S/he: Orlando in performance* (TiLLiT 2022)  
Introducing the solitary figure of young Orlando on his father's estate

Key lexical and stylistic features are preserved. Descriptive passages and analytic statements are transformed into verbless utterances or brief sentences that are typically delivered by members of the chorus. These utterances serve to establish a setting, to advance the narrative, to comment on a particular action or emotion, or to make some "profound" statement about the human condition.

*Chorus voice 1*  
Vevey, Switzerland.  
The lake, the shore and the snowy crests.

*Chorus voice 2*  
The old luxury hotels,  
With a hundred balconies.

*Chorus voice 3*  
The *Trois Couronnes*  
And its neat German waiters.

*The courage to be herself: Daisy Miller unbowed* (TiLLiT 2023)  
setting the stage for the encounter between Winterbourne and Daisy Miller

Chorus voice 1  
How pleasant to be alone, out of England.

Chorus voice 2  
But aren't all people lonely?

*Jacob's Room: from page to stage* (TiLLiT 2021)  
Jacob has left his work and friends in London, and is now travelling to Greece

The method can be applied to any literary work, regardless of its complexity—thematic, dramatic, structural or lexical-semantic. This means that all plays, novels, and essays are potentially open to syntactic reduction and lexical simplification; that all learners may be exposed to masterworks at all

stages of their language-learning journey, including those with a low language proficiency (A1-A2). So much can be expressed, dramatically, through one-word utterances or elliptical constructions (e.g. *Darkness! Darkness in the bedrooms!*). Extremely productive work can be carried out on voice, articulation, projection, meaning, etc. that is quite fulfilling for teachers and learners.

### 3. Getting there

*Performative reading* is unusual and therefore likely to be perceived as strange and unsettling by the vast majority of ordinary readers who normally stay “glued to the ink of the text” (Jousse 2000: 107). Although compatible with background music and small postural shifts, the activity of reading is typically a private, subdued experience, not an animated display of sound, movement and emotion for others to watch. Ordinary readers are expected to sit (or lie) quietly somewhere, not to stand, gesticulate and move around. When Melissa Blanc (a professional choreographer) and I worked on the workshop version of *Dorian Gray goes Wilde* with 30 students, we set aside some time to explore the prototypical “reading stance” before switching to a more dynamic “physical reading mode.”



Figure 8 – *Dorian Gray goes Wilde* (UBM 2024)  
Aligning with reading conventions...

Even in progressive educational settings, where students respond to what they read and engage in lively classroom discussions, no one is supposed to “embody language in action” (Piazzoli 2018). Who would ever think of *giving physical shape to textual meanings* through a combination of sound, gesture and controlled movement? Who, if anyone, would dare to engage physically in interpretive action in a crowded classroom?

So, the question a (language) teacher might legitimately ask is this: How can I make a difference in my own professional practice? How can I transform the regular *teaching and learning space* (the classroom) into a temporary *performance space* where dynamic modes of textual interpretation can be staged, even if I have no previous drama and theatre experience? How do I manage the transition from the usual “read and discuss” strategy to the “read and perform” scenario? How do I move from “lesson plan” to “workshop design”? How should I proceed to include special moments of being and feeling in the foreign language classroom? How do you connect the mind with the “phenomenal body” (Merleau-Ponty 2000) to process sounds and images during a language lesson? How do you achieve a rebirth of meaning? There is no single answer, no canonical method, but there are simple tools and strategies that we have tried and which have proven effective.

### 3.1 Spelling out the methods and objectives clearly

It is important to state the logic and goals of a *performance-based approach to language learning* very clearly: (1) developing an awareness of the *physical dimension of speech production*; (2) *de-alienating foreign sounds and structures* in order to internalize them; (3) building on our *common capacity for recall and re-enactment* to produce *physical displays of understanding*. Students need to understand that the process of "textual interpretation" is conceived as a form of action–mental and physical–that generates *embodied displays of form and meaning*. The goal is to create a more intense and complete "language experience" for all the participants, regardless of their proficiency level. Memorizing and reciting simple lines is easy but requires focused attention, physical engagement, and risk-taking. The expected result is a new awareness of the *physical and interactional dynamics of language*, a liberation of expressive skills, and a new sense of intimacy with "strange" or "foreign" sounds and structures.



Figure 9 – “The *slings* and arrows of outrageous fortune” (UBM 2024)  
Exploring Shakespeare’s imagery in Hamlet’s soliloquy (Act 3, scene 1)  
Reading, articulating and projecting the metaphor in comic mode

In all of the suggested activities, the process of reading, discussing, and understanding is inseparable from observing, remembering or imagining, and ultimately (re)enacting things. Students should have nothing to fear: very simple warm-up exercises will be used to “get into it” and friendly guidance by the teacher (or a guest artist) is guaranteed throughout. There will also be time, in the last moments of each class, for a *vocal and kinetic recapitulation* of the work done together, a *bodily scan* of the sensations experienced, and personal feedback.

### 3.2 Getting started

A good strategy is to begin with simple actions of walking and stopping, then thinking of a new destination to reach, and then moving on again. Or stopping and turning one’s head to the side, looking (up, down, sideways), standing, bending, stretching, shaking, swinging, giving, taking, holding, gazing. At this stage, nobody is expected to interact with anyone in particular but to cultivate a *sense of copresence* and adjust to the fact that others are there and constantly crossing their path, physically and socially. This is also a good time to work on *body alignment* (head up, shoulders down) and the neutral rest(ing) position with feet slightly apart (hip width) and a bland, expressionless gaze.

The warm-up also provides an opportunity to distinguish between different spaces and their divisions, from the farthest and most extended to the closest and narrowest: the universe (or Outer Space), the city, the school, the classroom, the “kinesphere” (Laban 1963) and the “gesture space” (McNeill 1992). At this early stage, it is the classroom (or workshop studio) that matters most, for it is the place

where the students are currently assembled—a space that can actually stand for anything. As they travel from one end of the room to the other, as they stop to breathe and to look up, down, and around, they should first consider the room for what it is, and focus their minds on their immediate surroundings. First things first: they should be alert and present to themselves, with their senses tuned to the *here and now of embodied experience*. Once this is done, the room may invisibly transform itself into anything: a garden, a city, a beach, or any place that exists out there in the world in someone’s imagination. The space can also be more abstract, like (the land of) the past, the future (horizon), which are filled with more elusive entities like memories, visions or insights.

### 3.3 Inhabiting a virtual world

It is now clear to everyone that the *surrounding space* stands for something other than itself. The hall, studio or classroom can be used *physically* and *symbolically* to create other worlds and explore other dimensions of being. Students are now free to direct their gaze and attention to some imaginary person, or object, or event, and point to it with their hand, chin, or head. The *teaching space* has become a *performance space* which functions as a *virtual world* that needs no sophisticated technology to exist as such. Within that bare “virtual world,” the boundaries that normally separate the *actual* from the *virtual*, the *tangible* from the *intangible*, *factive absence* from *fictive presence*, are temporarily abolished. Participants inhabit a space characterized by *symbolic fluidity* and plasticity. The human body and the space that surrounds it can represent or “signify” anything. The performers can use their eyes, arms, hands and fingers to suggest the virtual presence of any entity. They can harness the “formal properties of gesture” and its “shared semiotic modalities with speech” to produce “meaningful sign forms” (Haviland, 2006: 218).

At this stage, it might be a good idea to include a brief definition of *anatomical planes* (vertical, horizontal, sagittal), perspective and viewing angles, direction and line-types (straight, curved, diagonal). It might also be interesting to work on the *neutral rest position*, halfway between “natural” and “dignified”. The shoulders are down and the arms are free; the head feels like a “hot air balloon” being lifted into the sky, with the neck standing for the ropes (cables) and the chest for the basket. This is a quick and easy way to achieve bodily balance, emotional control, authority and elegance. Teachers should also be attentive to their own posture and attitude: confident, open chested, shoulders down, arms relaxed, head up (like the rest of the students in the room).



Figure 10 – Jacob’s Room (UBM 2021)  
Bodies aligned, standing still, ready to travel / migrate in a V formation

### 3.4 Gestural “replays” of lived experience

It is also a good idea to come to class with a small stock of *authentic speech and movement material*. I personally use selected excerpts from video recordings (speeches, interviews, public debates) or very short theatre and film clips. I find the vocal-gestural forms very useful for (1) developing an awareness of the "gesture space" (McNeill 1995) that surrounds the speaker (and where most gestures are performed); (2) understanding how "gesture phases" work (preparation - stroke - [post-stroke hold] - retraction); (3) identifying different types of gestural action: *depictive* (iconic, imitative); *symbolic* (abstract, metaphorical); *deictic* (pointing); *rhythmic* (beat) gestures. It is always handy to have some authentic movement material available for *creative variations* (bigger/smaller, faster/slower, firmer/softer, lighter/heavier, etc.) or for transferring movement forms to other parts of the body (nose, eyes, knee, right shoulder, etc.).

The exploration of *authentic gestural sequences* is first undertaken in *naturalistic mode*, using basic *re-enactment exercises and techniques*. The teacher first “quotes” the gestures then invites participants to re-enact and internalize them. The re-enactment is not a robotic imitation of bodily motion and lends itself to a series of *stylistic variations*. It also extends beyond co-speech gesticulation. The world is full of interesting motions to capture and rework as dance or drama material. There are innumerable shapes, motions and interactions that students have been exposed to in their lives, directly or through the medium of film, video, painting, drawing, and animation. The *shapes and movement patterns* that they have been exposed to in life have worked their way into “the body-mind compound” and left a mark (Jousse 2000). What individual subjects have internalized is potentially available for (guided) *recall and replay* (Lecoq 2009).

“Replay” occurs when subjects give back to the world, in gestural form, what the world has given them. This may be done in a variety of expressive formats that range from *manual gestures* to *full bodily displays*. Thus, anyone has the capacity to draw on immediate observation or stored life-experience to *re-enact naturalistically or expressively* someone cleaning or packing something, or beating eggs in a bowl, or picking and eating blackberries in the countryside, or pouring and drinking a glass of water, or running to catch a bus (but missing it), or pressing on the elevator button and waiting, or touring an art gallery and occasionally stopping to contemplate a particular piece, etc.

The human body can also reproduce with remarkable accuracy the shape and movement of smoke rising from a chimney, a windmill turning, a lighthouse shining, etc. The silent kinetic evocation of the object or "scene" can be further condensed and simplified: just a finger or a hand moving inside the gesture space. The movements are always schematic, as in a sketch or diagram. They are typically deictic (pointing) or iconic (depictive, imitative). A naturalistic approach will encourage students to return to real life experiences and free themselves from stereotypes (which never look good on a stage). Once this is done, the whole body can re-enact salient aspects of the focal shape, movement or scene, while developing variations (with or without spoken words). A pattern of movement may be reduced or intensified, a modal colouring added (e.g. strong vs. soft, assertive vs. tentative, factual vs. hypothetical), or an emotional and interactional dimension introduced (neutral vs. involved, calm vs. agitated, elated vs. depressed, public vs. secretive).

Throughout the composition exercises, Laban's 4 dimensions of "effort" can serve as a solid foundation for understanding the dynamics of the movement journey from a starting point to an ending point: *time* (e.g. long [sustained] vs. short [sudden]); *space* (e.g. near vs. far, large vs. small, straight vs. curved); *flow* (e.g. fluid vs. broken, free vs. bound); and *weight* (e.g. light vs. heavy or strong, suspended vs. pulled to the ground). The movements can be used alone, as choreographic background, or introduction or conclusion. They may also be performed in conjunction with speech, in synchronous, anticipatory or retrospective fashion.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

The *performative reading* scenario offers boundless opportunities to revivify language learning and fulfil ambitious cultural objectives. Learners are given the opportunity to experience the “stuff” that language is made of, physically, mentally and creatively. They can access and interpret complex literary works that have undergone a process of “essentialization” and “syntactic reduction.” As they engage together in the proposed activities, they start *experiencing* the sounds, the imagery, and the meanings of simple utterances more powerfully.

The approach we defend may seem odd and challenging at first sight, yet remains within everyone’s reach. We are all *social actors* performing on the *interactional stage*, wherever we live and whatever language we speak, in our ordinary dealings with family, friends, colleagues, neighbours, or strangers. As *native performers*, we come to the *performative reading* workshops already equipped with everything that it takes to act out meanings and interact with others. We have a daily experience and solid understanding of the “dramaturgy” of speech. We are acquainted with the “traffic rules” of human interaction (Goffman 1967). Perhaps more importantly, we have a *sensing and moving body* that has absorbed a vast collection of sounds, shapes and movements. All of these are available for “replay” (Jousse 2005), using a wide range of semiotic forms and a vast repertoire of expressive genres. In short, we have everything we need to turn the aridity of language learning into a transformative artistic experience, unless we choose to suppress our *performative instinct* and decide to leave our vast cognitive-semiotic resources unused.

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