

Engaging the ‘learning body’ in language education

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Introduction

We are social actors - not just speakers - performing on the interactional stage (Lapaire 2019). As we engage in oral communication, we necessarily “bring our bodies and their accouterments with us” (Goffman 1983: 4). We also comply with the *conventional patterning of linguistic expression* - phonological, gestural, morphosyntactic, and socio-pragmatic (Gumperz 1967, Birdwhistell 1970, Langacker 2008). This means that the sounds we produce are not wild but *articulated*, that the movements we make are not disorderly but *controlled*, and that the sentences we form are not jumbled but *structured*. This also means that our interaction with fellow humans is not free but *rule-governed* and largely *ritualized* (Goffman 1967, Schechner 1988, Gebauer & Wulf 1998).

Viewing *embodiment* and *patterning* as inseparable components of language raises a number of issues in language education. Is the *physicality of speech* given due consideration in language teaching? How is the *learning body* expected to behave in *learning space* during lessons? Are auditory perception, vocal articulation, voice projection and movement part of language instruction? Is *active listenership* cultivated as a relevant language skill? Are the sound, stress and intonation “patterns” of speech related to other forms of “patterning” in morphology, grammar and social behaviour (Whorf 1945)? What exactly is the interplay between spoken and written discourse? Should reading and writing - not just speaking - be viewed as physical activities? More generally, should educators “incorporate” the body more in the learning activities they design?¹

Recent research in embodied cognition and clinical neuropsychology has established that “interactivity and multimodality are fundamental features of brain functioning” (Cardona 2017: 3). This would suggest that a more “integrative view of mental functions” is needed in education, in which perception, movement, emotion, memory, language work closer together. This article discusses ways in which this might be done in language education. Examples are given of workshop sessions that have been successfully integrated with regular classes or seminars to develop body-based strategies for language learning and more generally for interpreting complex meanings.

¹ In disembodied conceptions of understanding, abstract meanings are processed “without the body (...) playing any significant role” (Lakoff 2012: 774).

1. A matter of interpretation?

All forms of instruction and learning are grounded in *interpretation*:² problems and equations need to be solved, meanings elucidated, phenomena explained (Lapaire 2019). Teaching rooms are usually conceived as “learning places” where successful conditions are created for meanings to be construed, connections established, and inferences drawn. This is usually done through a combination of *mental, vocal and scriptural activities*: participants interact together; collective forms of reasoning are orchestrated; letters, numbers and diagrams are traced and displayed. A lot may be happening, but the learner’s *interpretive potential* is in fact contained and restrained in this classic configuration. The claim made here is that other strategies exist that teachers and students might want to apply to enrich their *interpretive experience*; “interpretation” being understood here in a mixed *cognitive, performative and translational* sense (Lapaire 2018b). Those three senses are definitely present in everyday usage, but tend to be handled separately in education:

- Interpretation as *explanation / elucidation*. The interpreter is cast in the role of scholar whose job is to decide on the meaning or significance of something. Clarification and rational understanding are sought and cognitive ability at stake.
- Interpretation as *performance*. The interpreter behaves like an actor or musician performing an existing piece (of art). The expression of subjectivity (or personal sensitivity) is here expected.
- Interpretation as *translation*. Typically, the interpreter is a language specialist whose role is to mediate (*inter-*) between different idioms, like English and Russian. Sometimes, a radically different sign system is used. For instance, English may be manually translated into ASL or BSL (American / British Sign Language). A text may also be turned into to a drawing or painting, a story (spoken or written) into a dance. When this happens, the translation is called “intersemiotic.” The process of “intersemiotic translation or transmutation” was first theorized by Jakobson (1959: 233) and later refined by O’Halloran et al. (2016) as “multimodal resemiotisation.” What matters here is that another medium of expression should be called upon to make meaning more accessible.

Language teachers typically use *interpretation* in the last sense, with a narrow focus on “inter-lingual translation”: “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language” (Jakobson 1959: 233). Art teachers show a preference for the second performative meaning, while teachers of other subjects value the first cognitive sense, which they usually treat as “disembodied” (Lakoff 2012: 774). The ultimate purpose of learning, they feel, is the rationalization of experience, the formation and manipulation of abstract symbols and notions, and eventually the production of falsifiable statements about reality.

² “The act or process of interpreting or explaining; elucidating. From Lat. *interpretes* negotiator, one who explains.” (Collins English Dictionary).

My current working hypothesis is that interpretation is a single, three-dimensional process, and that the three components can be made to work together for the benefit of learners.

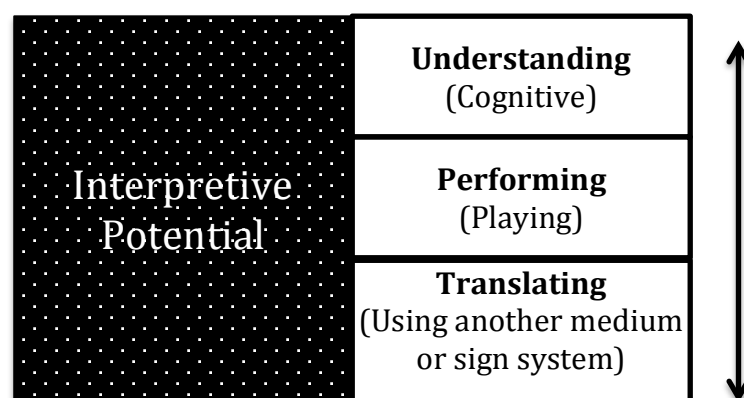


Figure 1 – The human *interpretive potential*

The reason why embodiment is such “a powerful force for learning” (Lindgren & Johnson-Glenberg, 2013: 445) is that humans are essentially *interpretive creatures*. This means that all students, at all ages and levels of instruction, are physically and mentally equipped to *interpret* experience in a joint cognitive, performative and translational sense. It is the union of at least two (and possibly three) modalities that enriches the interpretive process and empowers learners.

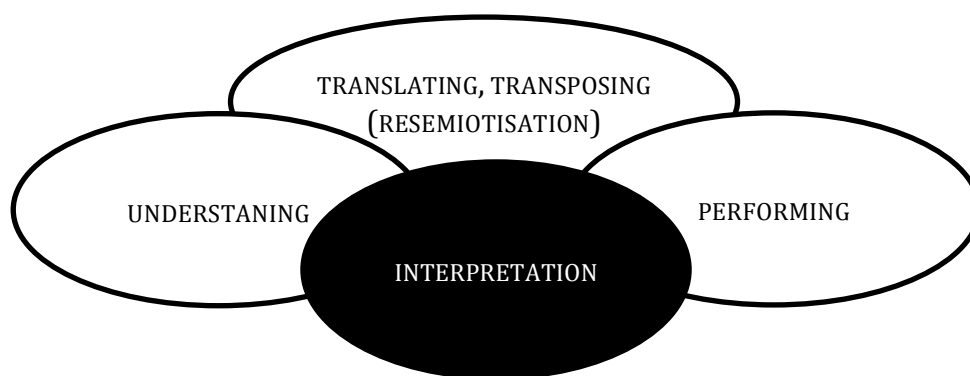


Figure 2 – Interpretation : an integrated conception

The workshops described in the next sections have been designed to supplement – not replace – standard teaching methods. The idea is for learners to engage in the interpretation of texts, facts and processes more fully. The expectation is that a higher degree of physical and mental involvement should improve attitudes to language learning and, more generally, to academic study. Still, more research is needed to assess the true benefits of the method, in terms of motivation, acquisition and retention.

2. Interpretation in action: designing the workshops

Each workshop has specific objectives and is meant to feel “special and unique.” Yet, all workshops share at least two stable features: the title makes systematic reference to embodiment³ and a basic pattern or scenario is consistently used that leads participants to explore, enact and experience meanings kinesthetically (Figure 1).

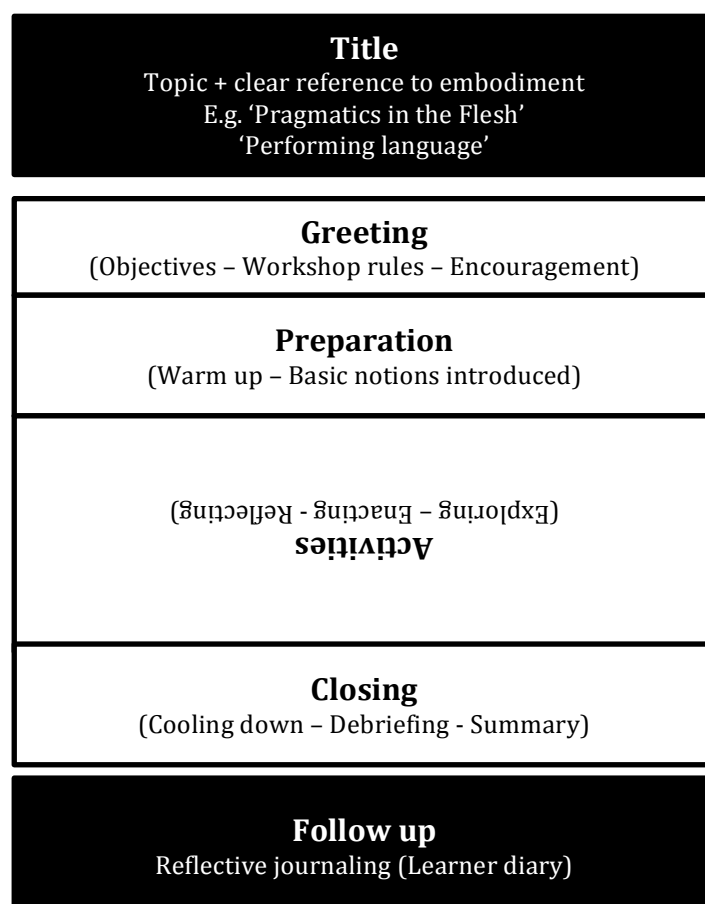


Figure 3 – Workshop structure: blocks and activities

One of the main challenges of embodied learning is to get students to transition from the familiar classroom setting to a more dynamic and creative learning environment⁴ that promotes different *stances*, *attitudes* or *behaviors* in relation to knowledge. For the shift to be smooth, a transition zone (TZ) must be established between the ordinary teaching room set up (or *standard educational practice zone* – SEPZ) and the workshop space (or *temporary kinesthetic learning zone* TKLZ), as shown in the model below (Figure 2):

³ E.g. “Performing Language”; “Performing *Mrs Dalloway*”; “Pragmatics in the Flesh”; “Literature in the Flesh”; “Grammar in Motion”; “Quotations in Motion.”

⁴ Finding adequate workshop space in a school or university building is not easy. Most of the money spent on modernization goes to digital technology. Most institutions pride themselves on having state-of-the-art computer labs and refurbished lecture halls. The difficulty of finding large teaching rooms with light, removable furniture, let alone a real stage or rehearsal studio, is real. But solutions can always be found like converting a lobby, corridor or dining hall into some kind of activity space, and (weather allowing) moving to a quiet spot outdoors, on the school or campus grounds.

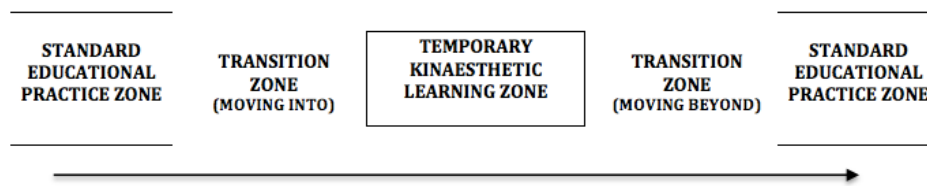


Figure 4 – Moving and transitioning across educational practice zones (EPZs)

Workshops follow a strict routine. Students are asked to circle up and stick together, shoulder to shoulder. Beginners usually wonder what sort of “interaction” to expect after such a close “body to body starting point” (Goffman 1983: 3).⁵ Many report feeling shy or self-conscious in the first place. To dispel the uneasiness, the main rules and objective(s) of the workshop are spelled out with simplicity and humor. Short breaks are promised, water and light snacks permitted, and participants advised to disengage if some exercise feels stressful (physically, mentally or emotionally). Pieces of instruction offering basic guidance and reassurance are given. Yet, some information needs to be withheld at this early stage to keep participants expectant and allow personal discovery. Also, connections are set up between the present workshop session and past classes or seminars so as to create a sense of unity and consistency. The message is clear: embodied learning *is* learning. Happy and relaxed as it may seem, it does require high levels of concentration and an ability to make a “total physical response” to oral instructions (Asher 1966). “Bodily engagement” is as much fun as it is demanding, and the knowledge acquired in the process is part of the course content, whatever “challenges” have to be met (Skulmowski & Rey 2018).

Once the guidelines have been issued, the circle breaks up and the warm-up may begin. This is a pivotal moment that largely determines the quality and intensity of student involvement throughout the workshop, as well as general wellbeing. Participants must realize that “socially organized co-presence” makes a whole range of cognitive or communicative “events” possible (Goffman 1967: 228). Spontaneous physical engagement and the ability to respond holistically to verbal stimuli are rapidly obtained through simple exercises: lying on the floor, leaning against the walls, travelling across the room - turning, stopping, freezing, with eyes closed or looking around, gently oscillating from side to side, raising then dropping their arms, etc. Basic stretching, flexing, rotating exercises are also useful to develop an awareness of how joints work in the human body. Warm-ups may contain useful instruction on the types, qualities and dimensions of physical moves in everyday life (including speech), or dance, or sport. Other relevant parameters like space and gravity may be explored. Finally, it is always good to prepare students for upcoming exercises by introducing some of the sounds, moves or postures that will be used later during the main activities.⁶ In short, warm ups are an indispensable component of the successful workshop. Most of the time,

⁵ “Social interaction can be identified narrowly as that which uniquely transpires in social situations, that is, environments in which two or more individuals are physically in one another’s response presence.” (Goffman 1983: 2).

⁶ In our experience of workshops, the preparatory activities must truly be “preparatory”: they must allow participants to transition from one space and learning style to the other, and develop of general state of readiness for the upcoming activities.

participants enjoy the exercises enormously, and find them both useful and relaxing, as comments made in the learner diaries attest (cf. 2.):

<i>We started the workshop with a warming up session. It was dynamic and fast paced yet peaceful. It had a soothing effect upon me. I was not just about walking and moving across the room: there were some silent moments too, slow or still. So it also had a kind of meditative quality that was conducive to peace and later opened the door into creativity.</i>
<i>The warm up session was a good way to loosen up for first timers. I noticed that travelling across an empty room was not that easy because we tend to think too much and don't really live in the moment. I also liked the way in which we reconnected with the present.</i>
<i>(What I liked best was) the warm-up. I found I needed this moment to get into the mood of the session and understand the purpose of it. Also it was quite relaxing for me to focus on my own senses (vision and gesture) rather than think about courses, exams and personal issues.</i>
<i>One of the activities I liked most was the warming up session, because we left behind all the tensions, problems and questions. I found myself focusing only on what we were doing and a kind of "inner-peace" set in.</i>
<i>I really enjoyed the warm up because it helped us realize the importance of bodily moves in the teaching profession and how we can use gesture in a more controlled way with our students in the future. I enjoyed the artistic variations too: choosing a movement pattern, making it bigger, smaller, softer, etc.</i>
<i>I truly adored the warm ups, particularly the instruction given on gesture phases which helped me relax and gave me peace of my mind.</i>

Table 1 – Why warm ups make (so much) sense to (most) participants
Excerpts from learner diaries ("The Leaning Tower" workshop 20.11.2018)

The embodied learning sessions described in sections 1.1. to 1.4. were repeatedly tested in French elementary schools (pupils aged 10-11) [ELEM], junior high (ages 13-15) [JHS], High school (ages 16-18) [HS], and with graduate students from various European universities in France, Italy and Switzerland (ages 21-30) [GRAD].

Professional artists– but also graduate students from the department of theatre arts at UBM - were invited to teach (or co-teach) many of the workshops: "Let's dance (around language)"; "Grammar in motion"; "Wh- moves"; "Performing language"; "Moved by language"; "The choreography / physicality of speech"; "Wandering through time and remembrance"; "Pragmatics in the flesh"; "The Presentation of Self"; "Performing *To the Lighthouse* / *Mrs Dalloway* / *The Waves* (by Virginia Woolf)" and many more. All guest instructors contributed to the development of kinesthetic learning in language pedagogy while visiting, providing useful training and precious expertise in their fields: Melissa Blanc, Annie Bourdié, Pascale Etcheto, Hélène Duval, Claire Gabriel, Jose Luis Londoño Santander, Jean Magnard, Jean Masse, Kathleen Reynolds, Stéphane Soullaine (dance, choreography, movement); Oliver Borowski, Louise Bernard, Clémence Biensan, Chloé Dagois, Marieke de Koning, Chris Mitchell, Fabienne Paris, Cyril Tellier (drama, voice technique).⁷

⁷ School teachers and fellow academics, in France or abroad, have also made useful contributions, by expressing interest in my research and inviting me to co-teach seminars or classes with them: Joelle Aden,

1.1. Grammar and grammatical theory in motion

The workshops described in this section have a simple, straightforward objective: *understanding the formal and interactional properties of language by physically enacting (abstract) grammatical concepts and processes*. Conscious forms of “replay” (Fr. *rejeu*) (Jousse 2000) and “choreographic thinking” (Forsythe 2009) are staged. For this to happen, authentic material must be used that easily lends itself to observation and (re)-enactment. For example, a group of school children (aged 10-11) [ELEM] explore the use of “may,” “might” and “maybe” in literal or polite expressions of uncertainty in English (e.g. “I may be late”; “Maybe she doesn’t like you”). An authentic gestural form is first introduced: a short video is screened that shows an Australian reporter interviewing a visiting US musician and asking “You might be doing a film clip *maybe*?” As the question is uttered, a state of mental wavering is physically displayed, using an oscillating hand movement. The children have no difficulty spotting and mimicking the bodily expression and soon engage in *perform-and-transform activities* under the guidance of a dance instructor. The movement is extended to the whole body. The children and the dancer add their own examples (“Maybe I will / I won’t” “You may be right, you may be wrong”). Once the kinetic activities are over, participants repair to the classroom, have a short group discussion then individually “draw the meaning of *maybe*.” Some come up with clever schematic drawings. Interestingly, most children understand the tentative use of *maybe* in “Maybe you should...” and might in “It might be a good idea to...” which are less abrupt and face threatening than “*You must...*”

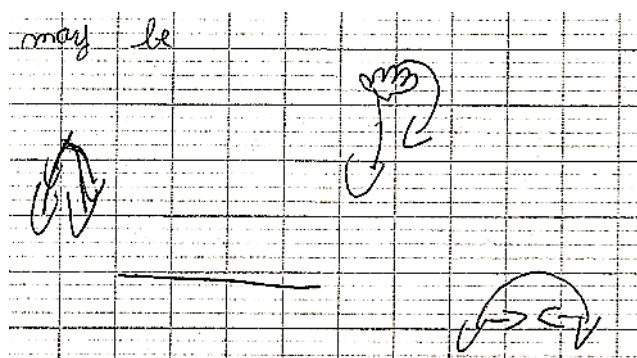


Figure 5 – Maybe: Nasser’s clever line drawing (2012)

Later, the same group explores the grammar of desire and interpersonal manipulation: how people sometimes “stand in our way” when we want to do something; how we “get around them,” “convince them” or “confront them”; how we “force” others or “resist,” etc. The vocabulary used is conducive to physical action. After the persuasion-and-resistance scenes have been played out, the children sit down in a circle, discuss the experience and the strategies they have applied: “soft” “neutral” or “brutal”; successful or unsuccessful. Lexical and grammatical forms that express the interactional patterns are then introduced (e.g. “Go away!” “Please, leave me alone!” “I need you to clean this for me!”). A final collective re-enactment, combining language and movement, is staged.

Superlatives can be fun too. Meanings are “stretched to the limit” as bodily movements and extensions are performed to the sound of *-st / the best...* Again, “grammatical drawings” are produced and (social) meanings discussed: what speakers are trying to say when they claim something is “on top of everything else.”

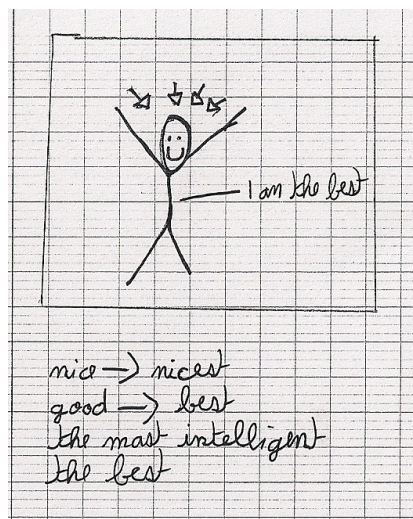


Figure 6 – Superlatives in motion: Pierre’s drawing (2012)

Metaphor and semantic complexity are no barriers to physical enactment. Children explore all the “things” – abstract or concrete - that can be “given” or “offered” to people: sweets, money, presents but also assistance or (pieces of) advice. What goes by the name of “conceptual reification” in cognitive grammar (Langacker 2008) is made accessible to young minds. This is also an opportunity to explore socio-pragmatic codes: how people make gifts or offers and how others accept or refuse them.

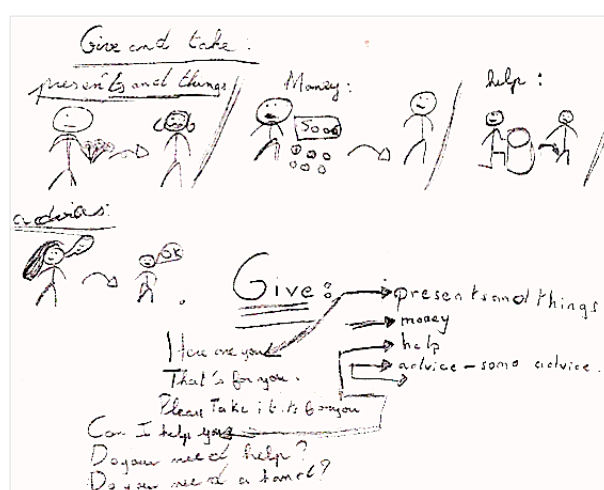


Figure 7 – Giving and taking: Mayra’s summary (2012)

Other workshops, especially designed for graduate students [GRAD], address morphological issues, like nominalization. Participants perform variations of the “globe

gesture” (Lapaire 2016) or draw their hands into a “frame configuration” (Calbris 2011) as they derive new nouns from nominal or adjectival bases (e.g. *kind* > *kindness*; *sister* > *sisterhood*; *difficult* > *difficulty*). Meanings are shaped and abstract concepts displayed. The basic gesture form used for this activity is the one that spontaneously accompanies the presentation of abstract ideas by public speakers, in expository or argumentative contexts.

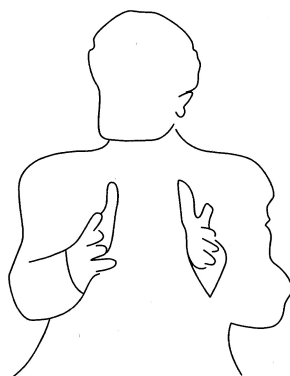


Figure 8 – The frame configuration (Calbris 2011: 334)

During the exercises, the gesture is made over and again, in a number of stylized variations. Each time a derivational suffix (e.g. *-ness*, *hood*, *-ty*) is added to a base, a new substantive is manually and verbally created (e.g. *polite-ness*), a new concept displayed in gesture space. Confirmation is given that “gesture has the power to schematize abstract notions and processes physically” (Guérin 2011).⁸

1.2. Pragmatics in the Flesh

The workshops allow (junior) high school [JHS] [HS] and university students [GRAD] to enact the categories and concepts that are commonly used by pragmaticians: for example, “(vertical) power and authority” vs. “(horizontal) collaboration”; “in-group” vs. “out-group” membership; “social cohesion,” “social contact,” “interaction ritual” and “the traffic rules of social interaction” (Goffman 1967). Short scenes provide an opportunity to dramatize “face work,” “greeting and parting rituals,” and “compliment strategies.” The performances can be naturalistic or stylized, purely kinetic or vocalized and dramatized.

In 2014, 24 French pupils aged 13-14, worked on *police interrogation scenes* in English, under their teacher’s and my own guidance (*Collège Cheverus*, Bordeaux). The workshops gave them an opportunity to explore question types, question intonation, and the head movements or facial expressions that typically go with interrogatives. Selected video excerpts were shown, and physical displays of meanings and intentions carefully observed. A whole session was then devoted to vocal and kinetic practice. The final task involved role-playing: pupils used the grammatical and pragmatic knowledge they had just acquired to write short powerful scripts and perform the interrogation scenes in an authentic way (2014). The result was quite spectacular.

⁸ “Le geste opère une schématisation par le corps de la pensée abstraite.” (Guérin, 2011: 19).

In a recent workshop with the actor, director and drama teacher Oliver Borowski (2018), 12 M.A. students from *Université Bordeaux Montaigne* explored the dramaturgy of social interaction (Goffman 1967, 1983), which they had read and spoken about during the seminar. The participants were drawn into acting out Goffman's concepts and terminology: "co-presence"; "positive / negative face"; "face-work"; "greeting / parting rituals"; "situations and their men," etc. Opening activities were designed in such a way that everyone would develop a gradual awareness of other people's physical presence through their senses. The subjects were blindfolded and left "groping" for knowledge about another person's body or position in space. Distinctions were later introduced between "friends and enemies." The relational status between speaker and addressee was reflected in stance, demeanor and interactional style: making contact or parting with someone; being cut dead or just ignored by someone else. Participants were eventually asked to work on the art of persuasion. Drawing on limited verbal resources, they had to get an ex-partner to hand back their keys after breaking up. A single entreaty (*Give me the keys!*) was repeated over and over again, with different bodily attitudes and voice inflections. Special attention was paid to the *interactional setting* - on a bus, at the swimming pool, in a private apartment - which they knew from reading Goffman (1967), had a decisive impact on the interactional style.⁹

1.3. Literature in the flesh

Participants [HS] [GRAD] are invited to use their reading, writing and acting skills creatively. A literary work is first reduced to bare essentials through a process of selection and compression then staged as a series of scenes or *tableaux*, with expressive pauses, silent kinetic episodes, and dramatic moments (that may or not include speech and other vocalizations). Participants follow Quintilian's method¹⁰ during the first phase: they compress and simplify the form of the original piece. They reflect and learn through the medium of "paraphrase" - an activity frequently and mistakenly construed as idle or sterile imitation by modern educationists. Abridgement and rewording lead them to reconsider the relationship between form and meaning, to recycle selectively and creatively rich discourse material. Compression forces them to grasp essentials, and performance to enact their understanding of the literary work being studied. When asked to assign a "kinetic and motor identity" to characters, or to find a spatial and postural arrangement that sums up an idea or situation, students produce *global synthetic interpretations of meaning*, physically, emotionally and intellectually: "dance movements prompt the dancing body to philosophize" (Ballanfât 2015).¹¹

As a group of English graduates was choreographing *To the Lighthouse* (Woolf 1927), it became apparent that the beaming and rotating lighthouse signal, as well as the waves tirelessly lashing against the shore, were meaningful background elements (Lapaire & Duval 2017). The perceptual salience of the lighthouse beam and the omnipresence of the sea waves breaking against the shore had to be manifested on the stage. A powerful "human swell" was thus formed, with bodies running in a line, some stopping and

⁹ "Not (...) men and their moments. Rather moments and their men." (Goffman, 1967: 3).

¹⁰ "They should begin by analyzing each verse, then give its meaning in different language, and finally proceed to a freer paraphrase in which they will be permitted now to abridge, now to embellish the original, so far as this may be done without losing the poet's meaning (...) The people who handles it successfully will be capable of learning everything." (Quintilian, *De institutione oratoria*, Book II, ix-2-3)

¹¹ "Danser amène le corps-danseur (...) à philosophe" (Ballanfât, 2015: 23). Literally: "Dance leads the dancing body (...) to philosophize."

spinning to evoke the Lighthouse, others running back again. The moves were subsequently used as a kinetic leitmotiv during the performance. Throughout the process, the lighthouse and the waves were experienced “in the flesh” by all members of the group. External elements belonging to some story “out there” were *set in motion* and *internalized*. Not a word was uttered, but the coordinated movements required that everyone be completely attentive and thoroughly immersed in the situation.

In a more recent project involving another group of graduate students [HS] (Lapaire 2018a), the decision was made to show the convergence between all the “threatening human aggregates” present in *Mrs Dalloway* (Woolf 1925): guests at Clarissa’s party, soldiers in the War, strollers in the London parks. Some form of “kinetic and thematic unity” was achieved, based on a coordinated movement pattern evocative of wolves hunting in packs, with frequent changes of direction. The group would sometimes freeze, or some member would “stand out” to deliver their “message to the world,” in an allusion to Septimus Warren Smith’s delirium.

In both projects, the shift from *text to stage* forced learners to deepen and broaden their *interpretive skills* (Lapaire 2019). Idleness, dreaminess and intellectual sloppiness were simply not possible: “moving” from the printed letter to living speech, from mental to kinetic imagery, *requires* physical engagement. Constant demands were made on all participants to convert *invisible thoughts* into *visible symbolic action*. Everyone had to come up with a solution and just “waiting” for peers or instructors to provide answers was not an option. Embodied learning is active learning.

1.4. Quotations in motion

Achieving fluency in public reading is difficult for language students. Few can spontaneously read out a text clearly and confidently in front of an audience (Lapaire 2018b). The “quotation in motion” workshops have been especially designed to help graduate students process and project short chunks of academic discourse. The idea is to fully experience concepts, to internalize and memorize them, and finally to deliver them efficiently with the right voice inflection. Quintilian’s method¹² is here again invoked: training “delivery, voice and memory” (*De institutione oratoria*, Book I, xi-14), “exalting the simplicity of ordinary speech by a touch of stage decoration” (Book II, xi-13).

Students perform a variety of exercises. First, they play around with “gestures of the abstract” (McNeill 1992): they manually locate different ideas in different areas of

¹² The treatises and letters of Aristotle (*Rhetoric*), Cicero (*De Oratore*) and Quintilian (*Institutio Oratoria*) are the backbone of Classical Rhetoric. Quintilian’s work stressed the central structuring role of rhetoric in education. His influence on European educational practice was immense and continued well into the 19th century (O’Neill 2008). Reference to Quintilian’s “five canons” (*inventio, dispositio, elocutio, memoria, and pronuntiatio*) is still deemed pertinent in contemporary drama, law and political science courses. It is to be regretted that professional training in education tends to shun rhetoric and has turned its back on oratory. Interestingly, the most prestigious universities in Europe like Oxford, Cambridge or Sciences Po Paris have public speaking clubs and contests. A recent documentary - *A Voix haute- La Force de la Parole* (Speak Up- The Power of Speech) - was unanimously praised by French critics and educationists (de Freitas & Ly 2016). The film shows how training disadvantaged students in oratory works as a powerful tool for academic success and social emancipation.

gesture space, as in “It is absurd to divide people into good₁ and bad₂: people are either charming₁ or tedious₂” (Wilde 1892). They use successive postural shifts (1-2-3) to mark thematic changes and argumentative progression, as in “Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit₁: touch it₂, and the bloom is gone₃” (Wilde 1895). Then, they run at full speed, stop abruptly and get ready to speak... but nothing comes out. They explore their “failed state of readiness.” They try again, this time successfully. Quotes are taken from articles and monographs, which were initially studied in class. For example: “Professional academics look upon their bodies as a kind of transport for their heads” (Robinson 2011: 117); “A human being is NOT a black box with an orifice for emitting a chunk of stuff called communication and another for receiving it” (Birdwhistell 1970: 3); “Viewed from the outside, man is a complexus of gestures” (Jousse 2000: 60); “Every person lives in a world of social encounters, involving face-to-face contact with other participants” (Goffman 1967: 5).

Different delivery styles are explored – plain and factual, engaged, bombastic, declamatory, etc. Moods and feelings help. These may vary between extremes, from aggressive, demented, hysterical, prophetic to hush-hush and confidential. Matters become trickier with noncommittal stances or manipulative intentions. True mastery is eventually achieved with the ability to deliver lines and articulate meanings naturally, in a clear and engaging way. Participants walk around in small groups, break sentences into smaller units, confront other groups, convert ideas into “weapons” or turn them into “soothing ointments,” first with and then without the help of gesture. The last messages are *exhaled* as students finally collapse: the “last message spoken to the world” has the profundity of some last intellectual will and testament.

2. *The Leaning Tower* (Woolf 1940): understanding as a performance experience

Literature now plays a diminished role in language education, so few language instructors would ever think of using the essay¹³ to develop the writing and argumentative skills of their students. Fewer still would consider using a literary essay to improve oral skills. In this section I would like to show that the contrary is in fact true, that essays are ideally suited to develop the *interpretive potential* of language students. The strategy described below is only one among many that may be envisaged.¹⁴

2.1. Description

On November 23, 2018, a group of 20 graduate students from the French as a Foreign Language program¹⁵ convened at the UBM Arts Centre¹⁶ for an extended¹⁷ “Foreign

¹³ An essay is usually defined as “a short literary composition of a reflective kind” dealing with its subject “in a nontechnical way” and “expressing the author’s outlook and personality.” *Webster’s New World College Dictionary, 4th Edition, 2010*. For a history of the essay as a literary form in Western literature, with specific reference to the Virginia Woolf, see Gualtieri (1998).

¹⁴ Critical essays may also be reframed as speeches, sermons, debates, short stories or plays.

¹⁵ M2 FLE – Year 2 of the MA program in French as a Foreign Language (*Français Langue Etrangère*).

¹⁶ *Maison des Arts, Université Bordeaux Montaigne*, Pessac, France.

¹⁷ The total duration of a workshop rarely exceeds 120 minutes. However, extended 180 minute sessions may be required for the following reasons: (1) lack of teaching space or student / teacher availability to organize a minimum of 2 sessions; (2) inclusion of a prolonged reading or (creative) writing phase; (3)

literature in the flesh” workshop: 18 French (F), 1 Cambodian (M), 1 Brazilian (M), aged 21-30. The two-hour session was part of a module entitled “English for professional needs in international language education.” The course combines face-to-face (6h) and on line (6h) instruction. The stated aim of the workshop was: “From text to stage: engaging the body in the performance of complex meanings.” None of the graduate students in the group¹⁸ had ever been asked to enact “knowledge and concepts through the activities of (their body)” (Lindgren & Johnson-Glenberg, 2013: 445). None had ever converted pieces of formal academic writing, like critical essays or research articles, into a series of *tableaux vivants*.¹⁹ Hard copies of “The Leaning Tower” by Virginia Woolf were handed out.

Woolf’s essay was initially “a paper read to the Workers’ Educational Association, Brighton, May 1940”.²⁰ It is a complex, politically engaged analysis of the social origin and educational background of British writers throughout English history. Woolf uses two metaphors to make her point: a writer’s education is the “chair” that he sits on to think and write about “life,” and a writer’s understanding of the world is very much like the view (or perspective) he gets from his observation deck - or “tower.” Woolf claims that the “towers of middle-class birth and expensive education” that English writers used to observe the world from are now “leaning” – which is not without consequence. First, authors come to realize that they are actually tower dwellers – a fact they were not aware of until then. Next, the “tower conscious” authors come to experience some kind of “discomfort”: they look at the world “sideways” and eventually feel “pity for themselves” as well as “anger against society.”

The group was randomly seated around a large wooden table in the foyer. Pairs were formed, numbers distributed and the main task assigned. Each pair was asked to study a small section of Woolf’s essay²¹ and “extract” key words or sentences that stood out and were particularly meaningful to them. The quoted excerpts from Woolf’s essay must fulfill at least two requirements: (a) they must sum up or exemplify the author’s main point in the passage; (b) they must inspire some scene or *tableau vivant*. The short movement sequence must be dynamic rather than static, and performed twice: first in silent mode, then with the corresponding quotation from “The Leaning Tower.”

“grand finale”, i.e. staging a recapitulation of all the work done during the semester. In the present case, reasons (1) and (2) applied.

¹⁸ Students held first degrees in French literature, Modern Languages or General Linguistics.

¹⁹ The *tableau vivant* – originally a French phrase meaning “a living picture” – was a very popular art form in the 18th and 19th centuries (Robert 2009). Amateur or professional actors would stage Biblical or mythological scenes, often inspired by famous artworks (etchings, paintings, sculptures). Actors in a *tableau* would typically be dressed in costume, posing silently and motionlessly. Today, tableaux are occasionally used in the (musical) theatre to create frozen stage pictures that suddenly come to life, with powerful visual effects. Tableaux are more rarely used in the classroom as an “arts-integrated teaching strategy” to help students “increase their understanding of a text” by forming “mental images” (Flynn 2018).

²⁰ Virginia Woolf took her own life in 1941 and her essay was posthumously published in *The Moment and other Essays* in 1947.

²¹ To speed up the process, an edited version (4592 words) of Virginia Woolf’s original paper (8276 words) was used (55 %). Literary quotations were removed and references to English literary history abridged.



Figure 9 – Sitting around the communal table in the foyer: pair-work

Each pair was expected to spend a minimum of 30 minutes reading, discussing options, “choreographing” movement patterns, and rehearsing. Their working language was English, not French. This means that most of the communicative interaction and language practice that took place during the workshop occurred *before* and *after* the main task, during the preparation and post-workshop recap phases. As the video footage testifies, the level of verbal and gestural engagement was extremely high – higher in fact than had been anticipated. A possible reason for this is that art had unexpectedly been “infused” in the curriculum (Garrett 2013). Although students were asked to step outside their comfort zone, they soon found themselves stimulated by a common creative endeavor that was new and challenging, yet perfectly manageable.



Figure 10 – Discussing choreographic options

Once the preparation phase was over, the participants positioned themselves in an orderly way around the rehearsal studio, sitting with their backs against the walls. When their numbers were called, the pairs rose and moved to the center to perform, then back to their places. The pieces were short, the transitions swift. The result was a *poetic and kinetic collage*, preserving the style and thematic unity of Woolf’s text.²² The trans-semiotic adaptation of the “The Leaning Tower” thus remained “tuned” to its input while providing *visual, vocal and kinetic access* to the essay’s content:

²² The 8276 words in Woolf’s essay were cut down to 197 (= 2,3%).

A writer is a person who sits at a desk
and keeps his eyes fixed upon a certain object.

A chair is a very important part of a writer's outfit.
It is the chair that decides what he sees of human life

Two words alone can cover all that a writer looks at: they are "human life"

A writer is an oyster. Feed him on gritty facts, and he will produce a pearl.

They [= authors in the 1910s and 1920s] were tower dwellers like their predecessors.
But when they looked at human life what a difference!
Everywhere change, everywhere revolution.

Trapped by their education they remain on top of their leaning tower.
(But) the leaning tower writers do not look at any class straight in the face.
They look either up, or down, or sidelong.

The great gift of the leaning tower group is the gift of consciousness.
And will there be no more towers, no more classes?
Shall we stand with no hedges between us?

England deserves to have no literature.
She deserves to have nothing but detective stories and patriotic songs.

We can help England greatly
to bridge the gulf between the two worlds.²³



Figure 11 – "England deserves to have no literature"

Some of the movements were clearly imitative or "iconic" (McNeill 1992): hand gestures and postural shifts were used to mimic the actions of sitting, writing, observing, feeding expressed in the sentences.

²³ Adapted from Virginia Woolf's essay "The Leaning Tower" (1940).



Figure 12 – “It is the chair that decides what he sees of human life”

Other movements had a marked “metaphoric” component: the study of “human life” was staged as a visual and kinetic exploration of space; the “gift of consciousness” was construed as an invisible object that could be held and displayed in the palm of one’s hand; bridging the class divide was expressed as an unsuccessful attempt at connection and physical closeness.



Figure 13 – “The gift of consciousness”

Finally, some “emblems”²⁴ (Kendon 2004) were produced: bodies stood to attention at the mention of “patriotic songs,” while fists were raised angrily in protest against the established order (“Everywhere change, everywhere revolution”).

²⁴ Emblems (also called emblematic gestures) are culturally marked “gestural forms” that “vary according to the language spoken.” They form a repertoire of “quotable” signs that stand for “verbal expression” (Kendon, 2004: 334-35). All Western languages have emblems for expressing love, farewell, victory, good luck (e.g. thumbs-up), madness, and financial transactions. A remarkable property of emblems is that they can function as utterances in their own right (e.g. “Hurrah, we’ve won!” “He’s crazy!” “We need money”) but can also occur together with speech.

Interestingly, students never experienced the process of “resemiotisation” (O'Halloran et al. 2016) as unnatural or baffling. There seems to be a logical explanation for this: “global gesticulation” (or expression) – the use of coordinated, rhythmic movements of the entire body to convey meaning holistically – is a constituent feature of the “anthropos” (Jousse 2000: 90). Humans are essentially *performative creatures*, who physically enact their understanding of the world, using sound and movement, as attested by sacred or traditional dance forms, religious ritual, poetry and drama (Gebauer & Woolf 1998). The prevalence of “performance activities” and “performance genres” (Schechner 2003) in traditional societies is based on the *symbolic plasticity (or flexibility)*²⁵ of the moving human body. Any situation – be it real or fictive, specific or generic, abstract or concrete, mental or physical, literal or metaphorical – may receive gestural expression and be performed as a dramatic *scene*. The kinesthetic imagery produced is not only dynamic but schematic: simple shapes and patterns are abstracted away from *objects of perception or conception*²⁶ that “operate at the high cognitive level of concept formation” (Arnheim 1969: 29). Just as lines or diagrams give visible shape to abstract ideas and thought processes, bodily movements form patterns imbued with meaning.

Once the performance was over, students engaged in a rich and lively group discussion – a situation remarkable enough to deserve special mention here. French students tend to be reserved. Sitting quietly in class, listening and taking notes, are attitudes that express respect for what professors have to say. Silent, motionless concentration is thus the behavior that characteristically manifests intellectual involvement. The post-workshop debriefing was relatively short but intense. Everyone had something to contribute. The workshop activities had led all those present to *engage in dynamic acts of interpretation*, to physically enact their understanding of a complex essay, in the here and now of *embodied consciousness*.

2.2. The day after: reflective journaling

All the students are required to keep a learner diary. The main criteria used to assess the quality of their written work are “regularity,” “precision” and “perceptiveness.” Guidance for the weekly entries is provided through the Moodle learning platform. Answers may be given in a variety of formats – key words, isolated sentences, full paragraphs, prose poems or collage compositions – and styles: informal, academic, free and creative, with or without visual illustrations. The first entries are primarily designed to explore and capture personal responses to “classroom or workshop events.”²⁷ Students are typically asked to report any “moment” – small or big – that struck them as particularly “meaningful”: an incident, a mistake made by someone, a (personal) story told, a notion defined, a theory explained, an example given, a name or phrase quoted.

²⁵ Any body part, any bodily move, can stand for something else than itself. Thus hands may symbolically stand for concepts, events, objects or people, and hand movements for events and relationships that those entities are involved in (e.g. connection, opposition, hierarchy, etc.). The physical space around the speaker may also stand for something other than physical space. It may represent time, life, domains of experience, conceptual areas, etc. See Jousse (2000), McNeill (1992), Calbris (2011), Parrill & Stec (2018).

²⁶ Anything we experience with our senses or process with our minds.

²⁷ Other entries may be added that guide students through personal research activities: looking up definitions, gathering biographical material, reading academic papers, watching short documentary films, searching written corpora, etc.

The diary provides precious insight into a student's subjectivity, learning process, and general attitude to course content as the semester unfolds. Week after week, personal impressions are recorded and the instructor eventually gains a more intimate knowledge of how learners actually respond to the course – especially when non-standard teaching methods are applied. The suggested entries for “The Leaning Tower workshop” (as it came to be known) were the following:

Entry 1 – What are the first 3 words that spring to your mind as you reflect upon today's workshop?
Entry 2 – Was this your first “performing language” experience on campus? Have other instructors organized special acting / voice sessions emphasizing the <i>physicality of speech</i> during your (under)graduate years, at UBM or elsewhere? Please specify.
Entry 3 – Describe your feelings and expectations before the workshop. Did you feel shy, self-conscious, relaxed, or excited?
Entry 4 – How engaged were you? Fully, partly or not at all? Did you feel creative? Was the guidance provided fuzzy or clear, flexible enough or too constraining, just right or too long/ short / wordy?
Entry 5 – Which activities did you enjoy doing most? Here is a list of what we did to help you juggle your memory: warming up (including instruction on gesture phases; principles for developing choreographic variations; precision and sharpness of movement) – reading Virginia Woolf's essay <i>The Leaning Tower</i> (1940) in pairs, around the table, and deciding on a meaningful word or sentence to capture the essence of her ideas – rehearsing the tableau / gesture sequence and co-directing with your partner – watching the others perform – performing the first tableau / gesture sequence (based on <i>The Leaning Tower</i>) in front the others.
Entry 6 – How much did you enjoy this introduction to the physicality of learning? Does this make you want to explore the theory of “interpretive potential” further? Or do you have your own doubts or reservations?
Entry 7 – Write a piece in any style or format recapitulating your experience. You may use a “collage” technique and insert excerpts from Woolf's essay. A few words or lines are enough. You may also use this entry to add more personal comments of your own.

Table 2 – Post-workshop reflections: suggested entries for the Learner Diary

The three words that spontaneously occurred to students when asked to think about the workshop as a whole (Entry 1) may be grouped into the following meaning categories:

DOMAIN OR CATEGORY	EXAMPLES	NUMBER OF TOKENS
ART & CREATIVITY	'Art' 'Artistic' 'Creative' 'Creation' 'Inspiring' 'Inspiration'	14
ORIGINALITY	'Different' 'Exciting' 'New' 'Amazing' 'unique' 'Out of the ordinary'	14
WELL-BEING	'Relaxed' 'Relaxing' 'Fun'	8

		'Pleasure' 'Inner peace'	
PHYSICALITY & PERFORMATIVITY		'Gesture' 'Movement' 'Action' 'Performance' 'Physical expression' 'Energy'	8
ENGAGEMENT, & EMPOWERMENT		'Engagement' 'Powerful' 'Empowering'	5
GROUP COHESION & TOGETHERNESS		'Collaboration' 'Caring' 'Together'	4
KNOWLEDGE & SELF-CONTROL		'Thinking' 'Knowledge' 'Concentration' 'Self-control'	4
EMOTION		'Emotional' 'Moving' 'Detached'	3
TOTAL			60

Table 3 – How students summed up their workshop experience

19 students (out of 20) confirmed that it was the first time they had been offered a workshop of this kind at university level (Entry 2). Exploring the physicality of speech through vocal and movement exercises had not been part of their training, in Europe, America or Asia. One student did however mention a project at her former university (in Angers): “adapting and writing short stories by amateur writers, in English and French.” Two other students also remembered performing “Don Quixote and the windmills” in French as part of a literature class in High School, or staging a short play to promote French language lessons in a German Middle School. But these were short, isolated attempts at performing languages.

Because the workshop was a novel experience for most students, the prevailing feelings were fear, tension, anxiety or self-consciousness,²⁸ or else curiosity, eagerness and excitement.²⁹ Interestingly, all the participants who experienced mixed or negative feelings at the beginning reported changes in attitude: “My feelings kept shifting with every step during this workshop. At first, I felt shy and a little nervous, because I am not at all familiar with this type of ‘acting.’ It was hard not to feel strange and awkward in the first place. But after some exercises, I successfully found peace and felt relaxed enough to engage in the activities and enjoy them” (Entry 3). Students unanimously reported that the warm-ups and exceptional in-group solidarity created favourable conditions for personal engagement: “we knew each other well”; “we felt strong and united working together”; “my classmates were very supportive.”

The guidance provided throughout the workshop was generally deemed “clear,” “helpful” and “flexible enough” to encourage “creativity,” although a few participants

²⁸ “To be 100% honest, I was really afraid of this workshop”; “I was a bit scared of this workshop. I am usually ill at ease with acting and any kind of drama practice for the reason that I am quite shy and inexperienced in that field”; I felt curious but nervous. I did feel some pressure at the idea of performing in front of the others because I am not used to acting in general.”

²⁹ “I felt very excited before the workshop, because I was aware we were about to do something completely different from the other classes, something real and practical, not just theoretical. I was full of curiosity”; “I was excited, I felt like I was going to discover another way of teaching languages”; “I was really curious about the way essays and novels could work together with theater. I was also tired of sitting on a chair, after so many weeks spent in teaching rooms.”

complained about information overload at times (Entry 4).³⁰ The activities or exercises that participants enjoyed most were warming up (as already noted in Table 1); watching others perform their piece; co-designing and co-directing one's own movement sequence with a partner (Entry 5).³¹

All in all, the "Leaning Tower workshop" proved to be a memorable, eye-opening experience that led students to respond physically and creatively to the fixity and complexity of a literary text (Entry 6). Departing from standard critical practice; interacting verbally and kinetically with other members of the class; sharing one's own subjective reading of a text publicly; engaging the learner's sensing, moving, and cognizing body in *dynamic displays of understanding*, were seen as remarkable gains:

"I realized I had always been studying literature in a 'receptive mode' and never asked to give my own interpretation, not just the teacher's. The exercises were strictly codified. During the workshop, we felt totally free to 'interpret' what an author had tried to say. This led us to think about the possible meanings of Woolf's words and how they resonated deep within us. It also forced us to share our intimate perceptions with everyone else, which was great." (Blandine)

"Too often in our education system we are asked to copy, listen, understand, but we are denied our visions, our feelings. We often forget that students are actors of their own learning, by denying them the possibility to express their own understanding and vision, we deny them their learning." (Anaïs)

The participants being in their final teacher-training year at university, many also expressed interest in exploring the physicality of speech in the classroom, and using multimodality to motivate less able or articulate students.

"This workshop came as a complete surprise and has changed my vision of language teaching, especially when learners have very low communication skills. They feel stupid because they can't say anything. But they often understand a lot. So using other means of expression and interpretation like movements and gestures must be liberating. To my mind, the body speaks definitely more than the mouth, and exploring this capacity in my classroom is something I will do for sure." (Estelle)

Finally, the "poetic collages" that summed up the "Leaning Tower" experience (Entry 7) offered some beautiful insights into what students had actually experienced:

"My mind was full of darkness. I couldn't see the truth, right in front of my eyes. Then, I couldn't run away from this force controlling me. I was impossible to stop. What was happening to me? This power was growing bigger and bigger inside my chest, and my heart was about to implode. What was it? What was this feeling

³⁰ "The guidance was very clear, helpful and appropriate"; "There were lots of instructions which made some exercises a bit confusing at times."

³¹ "I enjoyed working in pairs, trying to act out the words from Virginia Woolf's essay. I was surprised that we had so many ideas about how we wanted to perform"; "I particularly enjoyed co-directing and performing the tableau. I also enjoyed watching the other tableaux."

while I was performing? Feeling this music in my blood, expressing things with my body I don't even express to myself. And I've realized. Maybe it was Magic. Performing language was Magic." (Justine)

Concluding remarks

The positions, attitudes and movements of the *learning body* have not received the attention they deserve in mainstream educational practice (Lapaire 2019), despite exciting new research in the field of embodied cognition (Glenberg 2010, Willems & Francken 2012, Skumolwski et al. 2018). A major consequence of this is that the *interpretive potential* of learners remains largely underexplored, while the *uses and functions of space* are restricted in the classroom. Students in secondary or higher education are rarely invited to perform *multimodal acts of understanding* in *multidimensional space*.³² Sitting at their desks, few learners physically "operate as living human beings" (Jousse 2005: 46), which might explain why so many pupils in school become bored or restless during lessons, and eventually disengage. The limited range and relative fixity of classroom configurations not only reflect but perpetuate the rigidity of the learning process. Knowledge, as a result, runs the risk of becoming some kind of lifeless substance - a thing immobile, "parched and mummified" (Jousse 2005: 47).

The *disengaged learning body* is both an absurdity and a major obstacle to successful language education. No wonder few language learners create a "lively impression" (Goffman 1983) when they speak. But this can change. The senses can be awakened, and eyes, ears, tongues, lips, arms and legs trained to engage in a variety of learning activities. "Physical responses" (Asher 1963) - total or partial - may be given to verbal and nonverbal stimuli. Knowledge of the target language and culture can be built through a combination of regular class activities and embodied learning sessions. There is in fact no limit to what the *learning body* can physically and mentally produce in learning space, if properly guided and trained: from practicing articulatory movements in a foreign language to "problem solving," "abstract understanding" and "bringing about learning" (Goldin-Meadow 2015: 167-68).

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³² Humans are mentally equipped to make a literal or symbolic use of space. Space is made to (co-) signify at different levels : conceptual, narrative, and socio-interactional.

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