

Exploring the speaking body in the performance of spoken language: A theatre pedagogy for English language learning

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Abstract: Plasticity in language acquisition is typically associated with the brain and studied through neuroimaging research to examine how neural circuits connect with the mind in/for language development (Zhang and Wang, 2009). This paper introduces language learning plasticity in relation to the body where the quality of being plastic or pliable is shaped by movement and gesture. Drawing on my dissertation, this is a focus that examines proprioceptive awareness (or the sense of proprioception) and motor activity as the motivation for language learning. In recalling Brent Davis and Dennis Sumara's (2008) notion of transdisciplinary practice, the research intersects three independent areas of English language learning (ELL), settlement integration for newcomer-to-Canada youth (N2CY), and the evocative object of Jacques Lecoq's neutral mask (NM). In the realm of this study, transdisciplinary is defined as a research strategy that integrates divergent disciplines to act as a methodological exploration toward new developments of a whole project.¹ To address what, at first blush, may appear rather disparate areas of study, this paper offers a brief overview of each to demonstrate how the sum of their parts—when combined—can offer a viable applied language learning resource for contemporary ELL practice.

Keywords: Jacques Lecoq, Neutral Mask, Embodied Language, Nonverbal, Gesture, Newcomer-to-Canada Youth

1 Jacques Lecoq and the neutral mask

I begin with Jacques Lecoq's neutral mask as perhaps the aspect least familiar to readers outside alternative theatre and performance circles. Lecoq significantly influenced the development of 20th century actor training and practice. More than fifty years ago Lecoq, together with the expertise of sculptor Amedeo Sartori, designed the neutral mask. This fundamental object-exercise was developed as a pedagogical tool to reflect his founding principle that the body *knows* well before the mind is aware (Lecoq, 2000). At his renowned physical theatre school in Paris, France, the NM is used as the starting point for the 'journey' into the 'poetic language' of the body (Lecoq, 2000). It is deliberately referred to as a 'journey' for its metaphoric resemblance to an expedition into unknown terrain. The journey is also unique in that it is situated within the historical, socio-cultural, gendered, linguistic scripts that influence how each of our bodies move, re/act, imitate, and permeate the living expressions of our being-in-the-world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

¹In its more commonly recognized use, transdisciplinary research unites the expertise of different investigative teams, where each contributes their specific field 'know-how' to a study. Working in collaboration, the disciplines collectively trouble-shoot complexities that arise as result of coming together as a whole. The new assemblage, now a transformed entity, exceeds ('to go beyond' hence the prefix 'trans') the parameters of what each individual field contributed.

In the first semester of the first year, Lecoq suspends the facility of verbal language in order to begin a process of *disponibilité*² (both a state of openness and the freedom to receive) through the body *in* the mask. Facility here is meant in the sense of speech reflex as the foremost method of expression. The full-faced design of the mask covers the cavity of the mouth, preventing it from audible speech or sound. By insisting on the physical realities, Lecoq’s methodology attempts to completely bypass the influence of psychological impositions placed on ‘being’ our body (Bradby, 2006, xv). At the School, the body is regarded as the student-actor’s instrument. It is a place of learning that attempts to dispel notions of the body as the object below the view of the mind. The body does not reveal itself merely through the reach of vision nor of an interpretation of ‘self’ from the purview of the ‘mind’s eye’. Lecoq’s training conveys that, first and foremost, we are *embodied* beings and our physical experience—“laws of movement”—in the world, shapes meaning-making (for thought) that is then further articulated and expressed through verbal language (Lecoq, 2000; Kemp, 2012, p. 78). The NM demonstrates how, in the absence of words—and consequently a thinking process—language already exists in the body.



Figure 1 The Neutral Mask originally conceived and designed by Jacques Lecoq and Ameleto Sartori

My interests in Lecoq’s work are not solely academic. I am a practitioner and alumni of his international physical theatre school and bring two decades of practical experience to support the theory of my research. I believe revisioning the NM for ELL education can serve as a transformative teaching and learning resource to assist issues of acculturation *vis-à-vis* the growing student diversity in our schools.

² Taken from the noun *disponibilité*, to be *disponible* is a word commonly used at the Lecoq School. Its English translation ‘availability’ does not do it much justice. In the Lecoquian sense, it pertains more to a “state of discovery, of openness, of freedom to receive” (Lecoq, 2000, 38). Emphasis is placed on *disponibilité* of the body from which to inform artistic decisions formed in the mind. *Disponibilité* works in association with its companion word *complicité*.

2 The how, what, and why

Prior to, and independent of, relatively new (scholarly) research endeavours into somatic study, neuroscience and embodied linguistics, Lecoq was developing a, rather radical (for the times), physical theatre training. He believed the actor's *lingua franca* is the body. Regarding the primacy of movement as the foundation for language meaning, the NM technique is used to re-sensitize (bring awareness) to the micro-processes of (non) conscious physical engagement that help evolve unique expression.

What neuroscience identifies as sensorimotor neural patterns, Lecoq called “circuits laid down in the body”, integral in the physiology, musculature and individual body memory of the student-actor (Kemp, 2012; Lecoq, 2000, p. 45). Memory in this sense does not refer to the psychology of personal histories, but more to the body as storehouse of experiential knowledge triggering the imagination necessary to stimulate artistic creation. Lecoq asserted that by implanting new physical circuits, new movement patterns could be shaped and integrated.

Detached from your own face and words, both of which you can usually master in a social context, the body emerges as the only thing to guide you through the silence...There's no cheating with just your body. The neutral mask, which had originally allowed you to feel hidden, now exposes you. The mask that you wear in everyday life is gone, devoid of any purpose. You can feel each movement more intensely than before. You can no longer use your eyes to play psychological games and your whole head must now turn for you to look. Your gestures become bigger and slower. (Bradby, 2006, p. 105)

However, in order to attune to the language *of* the body, the student must first become familiar with the habits particular to their movements. Lecoq's pedagogy was a kind of reverse learning whereby a 'return to zero' (neutral) guides the student through a process of demystifying movement (Lecoq 2000). In the French language, *démystifier* shares the same English definition—to make less mysterious or clarify. Lecoq used *démystifier* (verb) as a way to get students to break down (demystify) complex thought and language processes that can inhibit movement by exploring physical equivalents to express the same sentiments. Why? The macro objective of the mask is to unpack social and cultural, practices that are reflected and etched on the body, to instead begin an awareness of self in relation to others. In other words, when stripped away from the divisions of verbal language, culture, class and gender, there is a universal³ focus in which we identify basic shared human similarities that demonstrate where we are alike and how similar, we differ (Powell, 2007, 1084). The basic premise of the NM exercise is to become aware of “enculturated habits of socialized movement” from which to juxtapose neutral movement (return to zero) in

³ Lecoq often addressed aspects of his pedagogy with/in a 'universal' sense. This is in reference to the theatre's 'universal human needs', 'universal laws', 'universal language'. Lecoq is acknowledging on the one hand, the traditions and historical conventions upon which his teaching is based...of a dramatic landscape constructed upon common principles – and also what Lecoq's works necessitates the 'driving motors' – which have an ethical preoccupation with the power of theatre to break down barriers, to act as a unifying force—in/for the social. See Lecoq, 2000.

order to establish a unified oneness of “rediscovery” (Chamberlain and Yarrow, 2002, 27; Felner, 1972).

The mask is designed in such a way that it interprets no defining life expression or recognizable characteristics. It does not laugh or cry, nor is it sad or happy. It quite simply emits a sense of calmness and of balanced emotions, ‘neutral’ in nature. By identifying (in the sense of bringing awareness to) the repetition of movement, e.g. idiosyncratic movement, students begin to connect to the uniqueness of their physical instrument informed through biographical experience (Kemp, 2012).

In the context of theatre, the relationship between movement and memory can act as conduit for informing the actor’s bodily disposition in the world for the stage (Murray 2003, p. 54). The significance of this approach is that by consciously choosing to reshape “muscular activity”, implicates the physical circuits that, in turn, determine how we move to serve as a transformative process in altering a sense of self (Kemp 2012, p. 81). Herein lies what I know can be a strong intersectional correlation that links English language acquisition and proficiency as the dominant method of settlement integration with acculturative issues in the physiological *becoming* of hyphenated Canadian identity for newcomer youth.

3 ‘Enter text through the body’⁴



Figure 2 Field study: a reordering of linguistic meaning, here newcomer students in a mainstream English language learning (ELL) classroom explore speech-movement through the neutral mask. (Pascetta, 2015)

This research builds upon my Master’s thesis (2009) titled, *Making Meaning through Movement: Language Learning in Refugee Youth Settlement*. There, I sought to shed

⁴ Speaking on the process of work, Lecoq explains, at his School “we enter a text through the body. We never sit around and discuss ...we explore the different texts: working through movement.” See Lecoq (2000), p. 137.

light on the intricacies that youth with limited prior learning confront not only in the acquisition of new language and adoption of new culture, but those they simultaneously face vis-à-vis the realities of instruction and curriculum content. I examined the word culture through two fields of reference. The first speaks “to the arts and higher learning...the second...is much more holistic and inclusive. It adopts a more anthropological approach: life-ways, patterned events, and belief systems all understood as part of culture” (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p. 10). I considered the double meaning of ‘school culture’ in relation to the socially dynamic foreign-language classroom situated within the hegemonic culture of schooling (McLaren, 1998).

In my doctoral dissertation I further the research by focusing specifically on ELL curricula of mainstream education. Integrating the non-verbal movement based methods of the NM as a supplemental in the language learning classroom seeks to assist with integration and adaptation strategies. The work troubles dominant learning structures reliant on linguistic meaning, or, meaning derived and based on words and sentences (Johnson 2007, p. 8). This examines a paradoxical space of silence before speech in an effort to expose the notion of alterity in linguistic practices. Regarding the primacy of movement as the foundation for language meaning, NM serves as the motivation for language in the pre-reflective bodily experience. In the context of schools and schooling, the multilingual, diverse, and multiple faiths that populate our classrooms, can also be sources of conflict. I argue, given the climate of global migration, language education needs a theory of embodiment that reflects the unique diversities of those settling in the country. Drawing from students’ experiential knowledge, this taps into a core fundamental pedagogical principal that learning builds on what learners already know. A pedagogy that incorporates the bodily-kinaesthetic creates awareness of the visual-spatial, the intra/interpersonal, i.e. the living, breathing, exchanges of experience, negotiated by the body, *for* language learning—all of which are a part of literacy.

4 Gesture for Speech

I integrate aspects of Lecoq’s pedagogy to demonstrate how the sensorimotor system and verbal speech share a critical relationship expressed through the “theatre of the body” (Damasio, 1999).⁵ Lecoq’s work concerns itself with the physical motivation of the body’s role in the production of the speaking narrative—before the assemblage of coded signs, signals and symbolizations of represented movement, ‘short-cuts’, if you will, often used in social communication (Foster, 1996, p. xv; Langer, 1957, p. 41). Some people would argue that this ‘suspension’ is impossible. However, similar to Lecoq, I am seeking to create a potential space in language learning curricula, for the possibility. Through analysis of movement, the neutral mask is a ‘bottom up’ rather than a ‘top down’ process of learning language. This considers how socially recognizable movements reproduce themselves in language. By this I mean, the neutral mask transposes speech through physical mannerisms such as when a wagging

⁵ I borrow the Damasio’s metaphor ‘theatre of the body’ for its connotative meaning in relationship with my Lecoquian context. Damasio’s employs it more in the sense of emotions that are played out through the body, whereas feelings play out in the theatre of the mind. Damasio is distinguishing between the biological distinctions that separate emotion, feeling of emotion from the sense of oneself feeling emotion. See Damasio (1999), p. 8.

finger conveys ‘no’ or a reprimand, a forcefully outstretched hand suggests ‘stop’, a ‘thumbs up’ can mean ‘okay, cool, right on’. More engaged body speech includes insinuating ‘states of being’, for instance, the way arms folded across the chest signifies disapproval or authoritative defiance. The head cocked to one side can imply inquisitiveness. The neck bent back, which forces the gaze upwards while stretching both arms upwards towards the heavens may imply mercy, help, or perhaps even desperation. These are some examples of represented movements examined as corporeal syntax consisting of gestures and postures *vis-à-vis* personalized movement and the idiosyncratic ways in which we move (the swinging of arms, the weight bearing shift of our hips, the heel-toe stride of our gait) (Buckley, 2009, p. 263). Each belongs to personally-coded movements that I correlate to an awareness of the body-self in language or rather feel language already existing in their bodies. This allows the newcomer student to identify the body-of-cultural-origin in the new language and not feel the need to modify movement and the physical “sense of who they are” under the influence of the dominant language structure (Lacroix, 2004, p. 156). The design of my research is to help diminish a “starting over and rebuilding” of their subjectivity in preserving cultural *re*-presented positions they may feel, or be compelled, to occupy in order to “fit in” (Lacroix, 2004, p. 156). I use NM as a learning source from which to comparatively conceptualize social body narratives in English *for* language learning.

5 Settlement integration and newcomer youth



Figure 3 Making meaning through movement with non-drama students using modified Lecoquian techniques. (Pascetta, 2015)

Within the diversity of our classrooms, the three dimensional, visible, manifest embodied reality of physical flesh can also be the primary, boundary crossing of difference. Marked by traces, the oppressed body, the colonized body, the gender-compromised body, and equally, upholding the body of affluence, and /or of social acceptance, these continue to be the paradigms that subordinate, *other*, and estrange the bodies in our classrooms. An idealized, if not ephemeral space, NM exposes how our differences are fundamentally similar through the biologic connection of our bodies.

Drawing upon newcomer students' body of culture as the storehouse of their *experiential knowledge*, differentiates the application of spoken English language from the performance of its cultural ethos.

Exploring the experience of language, my research seeks to expose a critical learning space between current English instruction frameworks and issues of acculturation. I argue there is disproportionate focus on acquisition of, and proficiency in, the speaking of English as the measurable determinant to establish newcomer students' successful integration. As the *newcomer body* becomes further distanced from its country-of-origin mother tongue, my research asks: is the body contextualized by the appropriate social parameters of language? Or rather, is the body provocatively appropriated in order to fit into language of the new social? Faced with the challenges of integration, does ELL curricula inadvertently contribute to a bodily *othering* of self to self—and consequently a *disembodied*⁶ voice for the new language? I believe inclusion of an embodied component to language learning offers newcomer students agency in meaning-making processes of the new, dominant, language cultural capital.

In the theatre training context of Lecoq's School, NM is primarily used as a teaching tool to awaken students to the physical relationship they already have with the world. However the evocative object not only allows the body in the mask to become the eyes, ears, face and voice *for* language *in* advance *of* the learning, neutral space brings awareness to the social noise and politics that complicate the body and identity. Consequently, the impossibility of 'neutral' is the very first discovery students make—followed by the accompanying improbability of sustaining anything resembling neutrality for any length of time (Frost and Yarrow, 1990/2007, p. 156). In its simplest form NM is a method that demonstrates how in the 'in-between' negotiation of languages there is visceral connection to the semiotic.

At a glance, my research could be summarized as a qualitative study that seeks to transpose an arts-based pedagogy into mainstream education. I am certainly not the first to re-contextualize theatre strategies or advocate for the performing arts as a framework from which to draw social parallels. However, as both a physical theatre artist and a doctoral student, I wear two hats in this, my dissertation 'journey'. The academic side of the study attempts to disrupt the traditional approach to language learning of mainstream education and how it conceives of newcomers' settlement. I am aware of the disruption that NM poses to mainstream pedagogy, as well as the risks of transferring a completely experiential-based work beyond its theatre-performance origins. Thus, I propose to examine both the disruptions and the risk-taking in an effort to address how a non-traditional teaching and learning practice originating outside an institutionalized system of schooling can be tolerated and indeed, welcomed, by the institution.

We are living in an era of unprecedented change. The crisscross of national boundaries, fusion of global socio-cultural exchange and technological advancements are proceeding at a rate of no parallel in human history. With the increase of global

⁶ To be clear, as human beings we are always bodied, i.e. we can never be *disembodied*. When I write dis-embodied here, I am using the prefix 'dis' to express the ways in which education moves away from, as in creating of distance, in relation to the body in teaching and learning practices. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson identify disembodiment as conceptual aspects that remain "contents of mind" yet "not crucially shaped or given any significant inferential content by the body." See Lakoff and Johnson (1999) p. 37.

migration this research re-evaluates the spaces between cultures, language, and identity in the 21st century. It is significantly relevant to ELL education and applied linguistics for what it offers in the way of new curriculum directions evolving the relationship between literacy, culture and learning. In a broader context it could be equally applicable to areas of sociology, anthropology (im/migration studies), or critical performance pedagogy, performance ethnography, and gender performance studies in the humanities.

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