LOCATING THE BODY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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FOR LOTTE

Transdisciplinary themes for contemporary research

Central to this chapter is my doctoral field research based on the applied practice of Jacques Lecoq’s neutral mask (NM). I look to this foundational acting tool at the heart of Lecoq’s School as a way to consider the relationship between the body and verbal speech in the English language learning (ELL) curricula of mainstream education. I demonstrate how the mask, outside its common usage, provides for an applied practice facilitating the reception of learning a new language. Paradoxical as this intersection may seem to those familiar with the origins of the mask’s ‘actor training’ purpose and intent, it is the mask’s elusive notion of neutrality that makes it a compelling subject-object problem of study in fields of critical pedagogy, phenomenology, neuroscience and embodied cognition. Drawing from Brent Davis’ and Dennis Sumara’s (2008) use of transdisciplinary practice, my research explores neutral mask in the context of these other fields. What does this mean? In the realm of my study, the definition of transdisciplinary is of a research strategy that intersects divergent disciplines to explore the development of new projects. I consider the inherent agency afforded the mask in its design as it negotiates the silence of the speaking body in relationship to the words of spoken language. At its core, the research addresses learning tensions shaped within Cartesian dualism – tensions which invariably inform the following pages.

‘Be the fire’

Deviens le masque neutre dans le feu ainsi que le feu lui-même. Tu incarnes le feu. Le feu n’est pas nécessairement fait des flammes rouges et des étincelles. Le feu est aussi unique que l’idée que tu te fais du feu, et donc de ton interprétation.

(Jacques Lecoq, November 1990, italics original)

I first encountered the neutral mask as a student of Jacques Lecoq more than twenty years ago. One of a few Canadians in attendance, that first year was comprised of fifty students from fifteen different countries on five different continents. The language of instruction at the
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School is French; however, the spoken word was practically non-existent in our class work. This, of course, did not include the teachers and their provocative commentaries, such as the italicized feedback above given to me barely a month into the program after my interpretive portrayal of feu (fire). The suggestion was to become the fire – a concept far removed from how I understood fire. This ‘reordering’ of symbolic representation that disconnects cognition-to-thinking-to-meaning-to-words is one of the greatest challenges faced in both Lecoq’s process of work and by students who engage in the work.

Prior to attending École Lecoq, my schooling experiences were limited to the formal education practices of provincially funded, Ministry-run, Anglo-Canadian institutions. I had never experienced another way of acquiring knowledge outside a system of schooling based, for the most part, on knowledge doctrines, formed and dominated by the English language. Throughout my fifteen years of primary, junior and secondary school learning, I had never considered whether the body possessed knowledge other than that of the mind’s consciousness, or the degree by which language evolves, prior to, and independent of, the speech of verbal communication. Before Lecoq, I never contemplated the interdependency of the mind and the body, the correlative assumptions underlying thought and movement, nor imagined voice and speech as the audible expressions performed through the theatre of the body (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Vygotsky, 1986; Damasio, 1994). The reason for this was, most likely, that the philosophy of education that informed my schooling is rooted in knowledge and ‘traditional theory of mind is epistemology’, or the theory of knowledge (Lang, 2011: 80). The two years chez Lecoq transformed all that. Quite simply, École Lecoq made me question how it is that I know what it is I know and how I arrived at knowing it.

Me, Moi, Io and the NM

English became the language of my exact expression, but it expressed thoughts that somehow have always remained Latin.

(Martel, 1996: 18)

Beyond the student experience at the Lecoq School and all the foreign language/culture adventure that goes with choosing to study there, the journey of the neutral mask unraveled what I would later understand as a confused space between the voice of my English proficiency in the body of my cultural language. A first-generation Canadian, daughter of (Abruzzian) Italian immigrant parents, the development of my primary, non-English, heritage language – a dialect really – occurred through the oral and the audible. The suspension of language inherent to the NM process of work chez Lecoq exposed a disruption between my spoken English in relation to the language of my cultural origin. The repercussions extended beyond the language. The absence of la parole both freed and confused the systems of ‘self’ I knew how to be – in my body – through my languages. It identified a hegemonic imbalance, i.e. how we embody oppressive social conditions through our verbal interactions, in relationship to the ‘me’ of my body and the ‘me’ communicated through language (Johnson, 2007). In hindsight, I identified this as a conflicted space between the spoken language of my maternal/home-life and the English of my educated/social-life.

Of greater interest (and consequently the groundwork from which I scaffold this research) was recognition that these applied linguistic tensions were all contained within the biology of my body. Variations of my given birth name (Nicolina, Nicole, Nikki) influenced the
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body expressions performed according to the language context required. That is, the applied English-speaking 'me' of school superimposed on the 'me' I knew myself to be – of a 'self' – in the home of my skin. I became aware of how, as a young person, my alternating between the rural dialect language of my parents’ ancestral region and the required dominant social/school language contributed to an invisible friction demarcating an incompetency in my body-of-origin compared to the more competent ‘educated body’ costumed by the English language (Carozzi, 2005: 32). Movements, gestures and overall physical behaviour – complex somatic information, critical to the makeup of a ‘sense of self’, were manifested according to the degrees of linguistic acceptance and/or tolerance of each participant (Gallagher, 2005: 46; Kemp, 2012: 136). This gap between language and body would become the catalyst for a much deeper engagement with the embodied performances of alterity, which came at the expense of potentially disengaging performances of identity.

Languaging the neutral mask experience

My body is wherever there is something to be done.

(Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 291)

An invitation to work with marginalized, at-risk, newcomer-to-Canada youth completely galvanized a whole other dimension to the mask’s capacity. I sense I was hired for the ‘pantomimic’ training Lecoq’s School is reputed for. Perhaps it was believed the mimetic gesture work would serve as an effective bridge to help foster acculturative struggles in view of the youths’ lack of English proficiency. It did. On a personal note, it also (cathartically) brought full circle my heritage/socialized language struggles experienced as a child with my professional (corporeal) training chez Lecoq.

Engaging NM in this completely different context, I recognized familiar mind/body disruptions as those elicited in actor-training. However, here, its resonance as a foundational modality of expression was amplified tenfold. This was due, in large part, to the ‘neutral’ space it provided between the youths’ different mother tongues and the English language. Noticeably, the non-verbal ‘neutral’ movements, like a divide, brought attention to how the students ‘lived’ in their cultural bodies versus corporeal adjustments that occurred once we moved to the larger objective of the program in the development of English acquisition. This wasn’t merely an audible silence-to-speech rupture either. It resembled more of an embodied ‘hiccup’ that extended beyond vocal, tongue, palate and larynx/glottal shifts (Wagner, 2002: 3). It takes great courage to open your mouth and speak a language that is not your own. Those who’ve tried manoeuvering the present, past and future tense rudiments of a foreign language have probably experienced its humbling effect. The limitations of a foreign vocabulary can make you feel childlike, inferior, less intelligent, or elicit feelings of awkward self-consciousness. These experiences have a way of heightening an awareness of self to self, much like hearing one’s voice recorded. Observing newcomer students in and out of the neutral mask unmasked the ever so slight micro-adjustments of body movements as they criss-crossed between heritage and English languages.

It occurred to me that, reminiscent of my mask experience as a student of Lecoq, the youths could be subconsciously experiencing a similar sense of internalized oppression between their cultural bodies in relation to the new (dominant) language acquisition. This got me thinking about two things: 1) what happens to the body of cultural origin as it becomes further
distanced from its country-of-origin mother tongue? and 2) to what degree do linguistic practices influence cultural parameters that potentially misinform and/or serve to dis-embody (as in distance the body away or apart) from teaching and learning practices for the new language?6

‘Our bodies do our living’

In Pedagogy and Politics of the Body (1999), Sherry Shapiro shares a poignant moment when, as a former dancer attending graduate school, she was asked by a professor how she thought of the body in the act of dance. Without missing a beat, Shapiro replied, ‘We don’t think about our bodies in dance!’ (1999: ix). Upon reading this passage, the proverbial ‘light bulb’ went off in my head. However, in my case, the reverse occurred. It was not until I engaged Lecoq’s work with newcomer youths – outside a performance focus – that I began to think about how we thought about the body. Not unlike Shapiro, I was asked in graduate school to think about the body, but I was also required to find vocabulary to express the thinking of moving in an effort to explain the experience of Lecoq’s applied practice. This has been the greater challenge.

Much to my surprise, what I encountered at University was not as blasphemous or incongruous to Lecoq’s pedagogy as I was anticipating. Under his tutelage, we understood (rather quickly, I might add) the dangers of intellectualizing his process of work. For that matter, the process of work is the School, i.e. you have to go there and physically ‘do’ it. However, aside from its completely practical aspect – understood only through practice – the larger, underlying dichotomous mind-body framework of the Lecoq School has been debated since the time of Aristotle. Initially I bifurcated my approach, leaning on the works of many notable theorists who, over the centuries, have been discussing the mind (Descartes, Kant, Freud) in relation to the body, versus those who focused on the body (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger) in order to discover the mind. This led to nonverbal studies that recognize gesture and movement from the preverbal to verbal communication and symbolic play/imitation in children, as critical mediators in enhancing expression and facilitating social comprehension (Kozulin, 1986; John-Steiner & Mahn 1996; Mc Cafferty, 2000). Additionally, contemporary research discoveries have begun to substantiate the relationship between kinaesthetic resonance and emotion (‘somatic marker hypothesis’ – or the feeling of knowing), neural mirroring and imitation, and the aesthetics of human meaning where expression is more than a reliance on words and sentences (Damasio, 1994; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Johnson, 2007; Rizzolatti, 2008). Encountering these and other corresponding theories outside a performance and performer’s focus further empowered my Lecoq training; it even validated it. They demonstrated the degree to which Lecoq’s work is deeply ingrained in my body. It confirmed the primacy of the body, as ‘incarnate subjects’, in relationship with our living situation as the source that gathers, stores, creates and supplies knowledge in/for our making of meaning (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Lecoq was not opposed to the mind or its cognition. In fact, on closer inspection, his movement work follows an epistemic structure. Movement epistemology is the work of a ‘symbol-making’ body, of animating physical gestures to complement or imitate thought and language (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999: 490). In this instance, the same laws of movement apply to those found in language. Random and/or abstract movement remain just that: unintelligible. I would go so far as to say that the pragmatic aspects of verbal language competence share a corporeal equivalent in Lecoq’s methodology (Felner, 1985: 150).
the critical semiotic mechanisms of meaning-making context, content and sense (syntax), as inextricable features of kinaesthetic consciousness (‘thinking movement’), replicate themselves in Lecoq’s training, except the discourse is visible (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999).

**Lecoq *Hors Contexte*: NM in ELL**

I wanted the neutral mask, as both an object of research and a research object, to trouble how art-related objects are located in education and the art-appropriated spaces in which they are generally placed – by relocating both their engagements and evocative narrations in *out-of-context* learning contexts. Thus, a field study opportunity to integrate the mask as a supplement to ELL curricula for new-to-Canada learners created what is often referred to in theatre as a beautiful problem. The NM’s non-verbal movement-based methods not only turned language learning on its head, but it also confused the space of the classroom and the designated student/teacher roles organized within it. From a transdisciplinary viewpoint, the intersection completely disoriented each of their parameters. This was largely due to the mask’s full-faced design. When placed over the entirety of the face, the NM not only limits verbal speech, but regular eye, ear and head functions shift to the body, thus amplifying even the most nuanced movement. This asked that the ELL students connect with the impulse for movement in order to look at what they were trying to ‘communicate’ without the facility of (either) verbal language at their disposal. What became immediately clear was the lack of context, as in prior learning, for (pre-mask) bodywork to occur. The lessons had no frame of reference. So the challenge for me became how to begin NM and masking technique without adequate participant preparation for the requisite physical vocabulary. This led to another significant dilemma – speaking about, and agreeing upon, what it means to be a body – with high-school-age students.

I embraced these beautiful problems like the hard ‘art’ lessons of my days *chez* Lecoq. Far exceeding the parameters of my preparedness, these problems lay in the realm of the unforeseeable, in the messiness of *lived* experience (Van Manen, 1990). They also revealed a fertile space of exploration where the assemblage of each (NM/ELL) learning objective, in contention with one another, provoked an *enquête* into the nature of learning language. A *rappelle* (recall) into the reordering (cognition-to-thinking-to-meaning-to-words) of my physical theatre training exposed the degree to which language acquisition is predominantly approached as a cognitive function in mainstream education. Yes, the language learning classrooms and educators with whom I have worked create inter-active spaces and engage applied practices; however, the acquisition of verbal language (an evolutionary marker of intelligence) is typically associated with (conceptual-propositional) meaning, thought and reason (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999: 7; Fitch, 2010: 15). Gestural, embodied, non-verbal language is considered to be a limited (subordinate) form of expression. Added to this is the exponential rise of English language learning and its coveted conversational proficient ‘product’ – a highly sought-after global commodity. In the context of the rapid-paced technological advancements of our time, education is practically compelled to place great emphasis on cognitive processes for immediate, recognizable, substantive results. In order to develop ELL pedagogy beyond a linguistic modality aid to a modality of coming into being in language, I needed to reorder how ELL is approached – a practice largely reliant on linguistic meaning (interpretation of words) – towards an explicit inclusion of a corporeal dimension, and go from working with students to working with their teachers (Johnson, 2007: 8; Manning & Masumi, 2014: 8).9
Reculer pour mieux sauter (A step back for a big leap forward)

I introduced the NM as a pedagogical tool for ELL at the University of British Columbia’s Okanagan Workshop on Innovation in Language Teaching (OWILT) in Western Canada. Those in attendance were, for the most part, scholars of applied linguistics representing universities across the country. Regarding the primacy of movement as the foundation for language meaning, I shaped the workshop according to two objectives:

- Further my research by launching a condensed application of a pre-language supplemental derived from Lecoq’s NM in order to assess the potential of an embodied relationship to language through ELL curricula with the conference participants.
- Lead a mini-workshop in which participants could experience a sense of heightened body-self awareness in order to feel how personal movement, i.e. the idiosyncratic ways in which they each move, uniquely reflects coded corporeal syntax – or how a modality of language already exists in our physical being.

My presentation was strategically placed at the end of the day. I asked the group to leave their ipads, laptops, ibooks and all other tech gadgets to join me as we temporarily left the tiered smart lecture room. I led them down the hall to the front foyer where, over the lunch hour, I had recreated a mini-theatre complete with audience rows and a playing space. Given the time constraint of my presentation, this was an intentional disruption in keeping with, and reflective of, my ELL field study. At its essence, NM is used to create awareness for the actor (here, conference participants), which includes the surrounding physical space and, more importantly, their place in the space. Thus, for the first objective, I began with a series of basic exercises (sans mask) as a way to experience the body outside of their socially represented identifications, i.e. how they identify – or are identified – through race, gender and identity (professor, husband/wife, father/mother and so forth). I invited the participants to help create a standing circle. The circle is a significant spatial configuration in that it brings immediate awareness to the other bodies, (vulnerably) in full-body view, occupying the shared space. Standing in the centre, I began to speak about my desire to use this conference opportunity to try out the intersections of my divergent themes. This preamble was mostly to offer a moment for the nervousness and chatter to dissipate – as mentioned, my time-slot was the end of the day, after eight conference paper presentations, two breaks, and a formal luncheon. As I spoke, I simultaneously imitated some of the ‘language’ the participants standing around the circle were ‘speaking’ through the body as they stood intently listening. These included arms akimbo; arms crossed at the chest; hands clasped, tucked into pants pockets, or swaying by their sides; fidgety fingers; and so forth. I felt this would effectively demonstrate my intention without having to verbally explain it – this, too, was strategic. It took a moment, but soon they became aware of what I was doing, and conversely what they were doing in relation to them and their bodies – all in the simple act of standing. I asked that they bring awareness to the composition of their body as they stood. Were their feet together or apart? Were they leaning on their haunches, feet pigeon-toed, or shoulder width? I demonstrated how to redress the body of this unique language and replace it with a ‘neutral’ stance – in an attempt to void symbolic speech of any kind. I asked that their arms, a soft drop from the shoulders, rest at their sides; their legs be parallel, hip-width apart, with their weight equally distributed on each leg; their head centred; and their face relaxed of all expression. I asked them to try to become aware of when ‘habits’ in their postural stance and facial expression fell back into a place of comfort, or patterned familiarity.
With little time remaining, I invited two volunteers to join me in the centre of the circle while the rest took a seat in the chairs provided. Our backs turned to the ‘audience’, I presented each with a NM and worked privately with them, providing basic instruction to demonstrate a simple NM exercise. My instructions were along the lines of slowing down movement, making certain the mask was properly placed on the face, tucking in the neck, making slight adjustments to centre the head – and reminding them to breathe! I, too, then joined the others, who sat across from the playing space. Providing verbal direction, I had the volunteers slowly turn to face the group. A hush fell over the room as the masks commanded attention. I asked the volunteers to just stand – in neutral – and be the body in the mask. They would later share their degree of difficulty in merely standing, largely because they could feel their faces overworking, as if to compensate for the stillness of the body. Carefully, I asked one volunteer to turn the head (at the neck and not at the waist) and face the other, while the other continued to face the audience. This very small movement elicited small gasps of intrigue from those observing. It spoke volumes in the sense of what it triggered vis-à-vis intentionality and conceptual-propositional structures of meaning-making – albeit, in this instance, a physiological applied practice (Johnson, 2007; Kemp, 2012).

Through rudimentary exercises such as this, I wanted to impart to the OWILT participants the underuse, lack of use, and even misuse of the body in ELL curricula. I hoped to convey how the mask serves as somewhat of a tabula rasa upon which the wearer is invited to journey back to the ‘point of departure’ to ‘unknow,’ or rather know anew, through gesture and movement (Rolfe, 1977: 19). This ‘return to zero’ (neutre), facilitated by the NM, reorders language learning that begins with physical action for thought (meaning-making) to language (text) (Chamberlain & Yarrow, 2002: 27). However, the process of reordering inevitably gives rise to the socialized noise and politics that complicate the body and identity, well before spoken language even begins.

As scholars informing practice, and educators standing before students, I wanted to convey to the participants how embodied situatedness is very much a part of language learning, and that voicing language, even non-native language, is an active expression of self (Hastings & Manning, 2004). I wanted to express how critically the body contributes to language and the need to explore the notion of alterity in linguistic practice (Hastings & Manning, 2004: 292). I hoped using NM as an interpretive interlocutor helped them experience the speaking body in the performance of spoken language to get them to recognize the non-conscious ways the body contributes to meaning-making by demonstrating how the body, as a thinking entity, and its language (of movement) are more than merely adjuncts to speech. I wanted to emphasize this largely overlooked, invisible aspect of language learning, and to instead demonstrate how drawing from 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.

Notes

1 Traditionally, transdisciplinary research unites the expertise of different investigative teams, where each team contributes their specific field ‘know-how’ to a study. Working in collaboration, the disciplines collectively troubleshoot complexities that arise as a 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. See Davis and Sumara (2008).

2 ‘Become the neutral mask in the fire as well as being the fire. You embody fire. Fire is not necessarily red flames and sparks. Fire is unique to your understanding of fire, your interpretation’ (my translation, in-class statement). See Pascetta (2009).
An educated body, having the competence to produce discourses about discourses, is not constructed as just another body, but as a qualified body. Such a body is valued in the labor market, is perceived as prestigious and is judged as morally superior’. See Maria Julia Carozzi (2005: 32).

In Embodied Acting: What Neuroscience Tells Us About Performance, author Rick Kemp elucidates the complexities of the proprioceptive system as a continuous balance and negotiation of sensory input from the internal and external. See Kemp (2012).


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: 37).

“Our bodies sense themselves in living in our situations. Our bodies do our living. Our bodies are interactions in the environment; they interact as bodies, not just through the five senses. We do not lurk behind a partition with five peepholes’. See Gendlin (2003).

Basic definitions on the five pragmatic aspects of language: phonetic (knowledge of the sound-symbol relationships in a language), semantic (knowledge of the word labels that specify concepts and semantic networks), syntactic (knowledge of the rule system or grammar for using a language), morphemic (knowledge of word structure), and pragmatic (knowledge or awareness of language is used differently in different situations or settings). See Langer (1957).

References

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