

The physical theatre at the core of language learning

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The aim of this contribution is to provide an insightful didactic reflection on a long-running pedagogical experiment (2014-2024) conducted at the University of Paris 8 as a result of the collaboration between the Language Centre and the Theatre Department. Learning foreign languages through the arts, and more specifically through theatre, is an innovative approach that seeks to overcome cognitive barriers while providing learners with interactive, creative and engaging experiences. The course “*L’Italien à travers le théâtre*” is intended for students’ specialists of other disciplines, of all levels and who have never studied Italian before (A1.1 and A1.2 levels). It is designed with the conviction that, from a pedagogical point of view, the use of techniques specific to the field of theatre such as acting, improvisation, diction and memorisation, are particularly effective cognitive drivers for language learning. In addition, the various uses of rhythm, space and mask make learners’ performance more enactive and the learning experience more poly-sensory. First, we will describe the course’s general set-up, drawing attention to its strengths and weaknesses; then, based on the comparative study of the results obtained in terms of learning the written and spoken language, we will discuss the specific nature of the use of physical theatre, how it works and what its objectives are.

Keywords: language learning, physical theatre, learning by doing, creation

1. INTRODUCTION

Research in the field of language didactics is increasingly incorporating the use of artistic practices into the learning of modern languages, particularly the visual arts. In this sense, the arts provide a unique bridge between the first language and the second one. By appealing to the sensory and emotional dimensions, they provide learners with a more personal and profound grasp of the language. The thread that guides our study is that of learning Italian for beginners, based on an innovative experiential device that puts didactic and epistemological reflection at the heart of its implementation. By pedagogical innovation, we mean the innovation that is advocated by Puozzo (2022) and which aims to challenge existing teaching practices and consubstantially adopt three levels of co-construction of knowledge: interdisciplinarity, the project approach and collaboration. The suggested educational innovation involves an approach that : ‘It is not about producing a new object, but about an ethic of personal development and inclusion in a future project’ (Puozzo, 109).

The challenge is twofold: to respond to an institutional demand for the design of innovative projects and to imagine, based on heterogeneous field realities, pedagogical devices that could enable learners to acquire knowledge, following a personalized progression and a learner-centered approach. Our study therefore relied on an innovative device, a long-term pedagogical experiment (2014-2024) conducted at the University of Paris 8 thanks to the collaboration between the Language Center and the Theater Department. Learning foreign languages through the arts, and more specifically through theater, is an innovative approach that seeks to overcome cognitive barriers while offering learners interactive, creative, and engaging experiences. Indeed, theater, for example, offers a safe space to experiment and express oneself both individually and collectively, while poetry fosters an intimate connection between the learner and language. Theater increases learners’ motivation through its playful aspect, which promotes an intrinsic motivation essential to language learning, according to Malone and Lepper (1985).

2. METHODOLOGY

First, a state-of-the-art review will be conducted regarding the use of innovative methodologies in foreign language teaching, with a specific focus on the integration of the arts. This analysis will aim to highlight the uniqueness and innovative nature of our pedagogical approach through the use of theatrical practice. Secondly, the focus will be on the experiences and insights that, around ten years ago, led to the conception and implementation of the course *Italien à travers le théâtre*. During this phase, special attention will be given to the role of the body, as one of the underlying hypotheses of

our study is that learning passes through the body; it takes place with and thanks to the body. This is particularly relevant since, as Paolo Torresan and Maria Simona Morosin have demonstrated, meaningful memory tends to remain active and accessible longer than memories created using a single sensory channel. Finally, the specific structure of the course and its objectives will be presented and analyzed, highlighting its tripartite framework. This configuration enables students, through theatrical practice, not only to acquire a solid foundation in grammar and communication, but also to develop targeted and transversal skills, such as: Communication (exchanging ideas, listening, informing, explaining oneself); Cooperation (collaborating, working in a team, participating); Creativity (imagining, adapting, proposing improvements); Curiosity; Decision-making; Initiative; Rigor. The production of a play is a collective endeavor that demands unwavering commitment from the entire group on multiple levels. Throughout the process, the development and acquisition of the aforementioned skills are continuously required.

3. RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is important to emphasize that the cognitive and affective dimensions solicited in theatrical play, both for oneself and for others, encourage learners to form rich and lasting mental representations of the target language. As Patrick Anderson (2003) reminds us, learning a foreign language is above all a sensory experience. Indeed, it is the sounds, rhythms, and intonations that promote immersion in a new culture. As we have seen, this sensory dimension proves essential for successful language acquisition, particularly for beginner learners. This is why a large part of the students' interest in this course seems to lie in the fact that theatrical practice is not limited to a simple pedagogical tool. It also becomes a learning field in its own right, offering an aesthetic dimension that defends the idea of a theater accessible to all. The use of physical expression and gesture thus makes it possible to overcome not only cultural but also linguistic barriers and to find oneself in the great theater of the World.

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