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Embodied Spaces in Performative Language Learning

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Abstract

This article examines how embodied sensory-affective spaces support the emergence of communication in English as a foreign language within a performative, translanguaging approach. Drawing on an enactive perspective, language is understood as a shared, situated and embodied as well as a psychosocial and linguistic experience shaped by the dynamic interplay between bodies, material spaces, imagination, speech and the temporalities of classroom life. The study analyses data from the CELAVIE project, conducted in Grade 4 and 5 classrooms, combining qualitative materials (18 focus groups, 21 semi-structured interviews, and three explanatory teacher interviews) with quantitative measures of autonomous lexical production in pre- and post-tests. The findings show that transforming the classroom into a performative space—through physical openness, sensory comfort, creative exploration and embodied engagement—encourages students to speak more spontaneously, to draw on multiple languages, and to develop empathy, creativity, and confidence. Six interrelated dimensions of sensitive space emerged: sensitive space-time, intimate spaces, material spaces, performance spaces, physical engagement, and spaces for creativity and autonomy. Together, they reveal how performative practice supports the emergence of communicative behaviour by engaging students' bodies, emotions, perceptions and imaginative capacities. The results highlight the potential of performative pedagogy to create inclusive learning environments where language becomes a lived, relational and creative experience.

1 Introduction

> "[Language] flows through us, bathing us like amniotic fluid, ultimately dominating us and imposing its unpredictable laws. It is also carnivalesque because within it, anything is possible: subversion, excess, the abolition of taboos. Here again, it transports us, overwhelms us[3]." (Porcher, in Berchoud et al., 2008, p. 2)

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[2] Drama Ties Company
[3] Our translation

What does the theatrical performative experience bring to language teaching? This question runs through all our work and is formulated here around the role of embodied sensory-affective spaces in communication processes in primary school classrooms, in the context of teaching modern foreign languages (MFL). The term *theatrical* refers here to practices rooted in theatre traditions (working with the body, space, voice, presence and the "as if" mode of play) without implying a focus on scripted drama or a finished production. At the same time, the notion of *performative* situates our approach within performance studies, where theatricality is understood as a relational and experiential process through which meaning emerges from co-presence and interaction (Fischer-Lichte, 2004). We therefore use the expression theatrical performative experience to designate an approach that draws on theatre-based practices while foregrounding experience, process and emergence rather than theatre as an institutional art form or drama as a pedagogical technique. Conceived in this way, theatrical performative experience necessarily engages with space as a lived, perceived and relational dimension of learning. It is through this lens that we introduce the notion of sensitive spaces. Sensitive spaces mean, how the students and teachers perceive these spaces through their embodied character. Embodied spaces are those which embrace and connect the learning body-minds of the students. In the classroom, bodies are embedded in temporalities as well as in material and (inter)subjective spaces that are rarely questioned by language teaching, even though they are essential mediators of all linguistic relationships (Eschenauer et al., 2023; Eschenauer, in press a; Eschenauer & Schädlich, 2025) These dimensions come to the fore in "moments of co-presence in brave spaces" (Piazzoli & Dalziel, 2024, p. 26), characterised by shared bodily, emotional and relational engagement in meaning-making and group building.

Recent research on school spaces focuses mainly on the use of furniture or flexible organisational methods that promote student well-being (Herz et al., 2023; Larcher et al., 2019; Tellier & Eschenauer, 2024), in line with Freinet's pedagogical proposals (1964). Our approach offers an aesthetic and teaching perspective on the effects of spaces and temporalities in the construction of meaning and the development of communication skills in English as a foreign language. This reflection is part of the performative turn (Butler, 1988; Crutchfield & Schewe, 2017; Donovan & Hood, 2021) and enaction (Aden, 2017; Gallagher, 2023; Varela & Thompson, 2017), which we have previously written about (Aden & Eschenauer, 2020). In this cross-disciplinary framework, language is viewed as the emergence of shared meaning, which is situated, motoric, sensitive (emotional and sensory) yet also driving and reflexive. The student's body is therefore at the heart of this approach, where communication is not simply the transmission of information, but the dynamic creation of meaning between co-acting and perceiving bodies. Within this perspective, we adopt a

situated understanding of translanguaging, grounded in the notion of *translangageance* developed in our earlier work (Aden & Eschenauer, 2020; Eschenauer, 2014). Here, translanguaging refers to the flexible and optional mobilisation of students' linguistic repertoires (including family languages, English and other semiotic resources) when this supports expression, engagement and meaning-making. These resources are never imposed and may also remain absent, as some students choose to engage exclusively in English. Crucially, translanguaging as *translangageance* is understood as an embodied and multimodal process, integrating gesture, voice, posture, movement and emotions alongside verbal language.

Against this backdrop, this article examines how a translanguaging theatrical performative approach mobilises space, temporality and languages within a shared system of interactions, and how this transformation of classroom practices shapes students' experiences of communication in primary foreign language education. Drawing on the CELAVIE[4] study (Creativity, Empathy and Emotions in modern LAnguage learning for a Vivid Inclusive Education), conducted in Year 4 and Year 5 classrooms, the analysis addresses the following research questions:

1) How does a theatrical performative approach reshape students' experiences of space and communication in primary English as a foreign language classrooms?;

2) In what ways do embodied sensory-affective spaces contribute to the emergence of oral communication, empathy and inclusive participation?

The study adopts a mixed methodology combining quantitative and qualitative measures, presented here in part. For this article, we will discuss part of the quantitative data, namely independent lexical production scores from the students in pre vs post-tests, and the qualitative component derived from 18 focus groups and 21 semi-structured interviews with students, as well as three explanatory interviews with teachers. The analysis focuses primarily on students' lived experiences of theatrical performative practice and on how they perceive and engage with embodied sensory-affective spaces in the emergence of communication in English as a foreign language. Teachers' explanatory interviews are mobilised as complementary perspectives to contextualise and support the interpretation of students' accounts.

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2 Learning to communicate in a foreign language: spaces, bodies and orality in translanguaging theatrical performance

In language teaching in France, communication in primary schools is often still viewed as a transfer of information between a sender and a receiver, in line with the Jakobsonian model. This situation is particularly salient in primary education, where teachers are generalists and are not necessarily trained enough in foreign language didactics, which can contribute to the persistence of transmission-oriented models of communication. However, since the introduction of the action-oriented approach in the early 2000s (CEFR, 2001), it has been accepted that learners are above all social actors whose interactions depend on the environment. The introduction of the concept of tasks into the curriculum was intended to put action back at the heart of learning. In practice, nevertheless, tasks may in some contexts come to be experienced as obligations, and may be perceived by students as work to be handed in rather than as situations to be lived and explored (Eschenauer, 2021). Its Latin etymology (*tasca, tascha: 'fee', 'thing owed'*) is reminiscent of this relationship of constraint. This tension between productivity and expressiveness is reflected in classroom interactions, where institutional and curricular constraints may lead activities intended as shared experiences to be reframed as processes of production with a deliverable outcome... Furthermore, recent French curricula encourage the inclusion of multilingual and intercultural practices, but in reality, language teaching in primary school often remains focused on the vocabulary and grammar of English as a foreign language (introducing oneself, family, weather, greeting rituals, etc.), which are repeated year after year (Eschenauer, 2021). This segmented approach, derived from a logic based on the accumulation of knowledge, maintains a distance between the student and the lived experience of language.

One possible consequence is a decline in student's engagement, as they feel little connection to a discourse that they reproduce without truly understanding it. In such cases, the foreign language can come to be experienced as an external object rather than a space for lived experience. Interactions may then cease to be lived as encounters and can be reduced to the application of linguistic forms, a tendency discussed in research on meaning-oriented engagement and embodied language learning (e.g. Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Larsen-Freeman, 2011).

Within this perspective, language learning can be understood as a complex and dynamic process in which learners draw flexibly on a range of linguistic and semiotic resources. What is referred to here as translanguaging (Canagarajah, 2013; Moore et al., 2020) designates this situated mobilisation of resources (across languages, modalities and embodied forms of expression) that unfolds prior to and alongside verbal language. In line with our notion of

translangageance, translanguaging is approached as an embodied, relational and emotional process rather than as the simple alternation or codemeshing of named languages.

However, even before it is spoken, language is co-created, shaped in encounters, in glances, in the rhythm of bodies and voices, in bodily and facial expressions that convey emotions and thoughts. Rethinking communication therefore involves questioning the ecological conditions of its emergence, particularly the spaces, temporalities, and physical, sensory, motor, and emotional presence that allow shared meaning to emerge (Aden, 2017; Larsen-Freeman, 2011). This approach is consistent with performative perspectives, as well as with the theories of embodied cognition and enaction (Aden, 2017; Varela, 1989). These theories view language learning as a coupling of perception and action. In other words, it is an emergent activity in which meaning is formed through the adjustment of expressive bodies in spaces and intentions for action, and sometimes speech. This conception profoundly transforms teaching objectives. Although linguistic knowledge remains essential, it is rooted in an experience of shared otherness, understood here as the co-experienced encounter with others' perspectives through creating together in embodied classroom interaction, including emotions and ways of acting, that is brought forth in spaces (situated cognition).

2.1 Physical spaces and language

The material and symbolic classroom layout profoundly influences the forms of language that are deployed there. Teaching spaces remain largely inherited from the 19th century, when school architecture was designed for transmission and surveillance rather than interaction (Jeannin, 2017; Le Cœur, 2011). The relatively fixed layout of desks and the visual and auditory hierarchy between teachers and students shape a relationship with knowledge that tends to freeze listening and speaking positions. Rethinking these frameworks and their effects on sensory and emotional perceptions means redefining the very conditions of communication. The (re)discovery of active teaching methods have also reintroduced the issue of the student's body in the classroom. However, few studies have yet examined the effects of the sensitive body (which perceives, feels and acts) on language learning. Yet languages are always embedded in physical, cultural and imaginary spaces.

The physical spaces of the classroom – their size, texture, colours and acoustics – influence behaviour and attention span. An empty room encourages mobility, a hard or soft floor changes posture, and the resonance of the walls affects the voice. These sensory parameters contribute to the body's availability. Teaching outdoors or in an open space can change the relationship to language: the environment becomes a co-actor in language (van Lier, 2004).

In addition to these physical spaces, there are imaginary spaces, which Bachelard (1992) defines as dynamic.

2.2 Intimate spaces, imagination and the emergence of orality

Imagination is not reproduction but creative distortion. In language teaching, it allows a mental image to be transformed into experience: instead of describing what they see, pupils express what they feel (Potapushkina-Delfosse, 2019). This transition from the expression of the imagination in motion to speech creates an organic link between perception, emotion and speech. The imagination engaged in the embodiment of a character allows for the transposition of oneself onto others, by projecting oneself into another place, another time, another skin. The game of 'as if' (Husserl, 1986) forms the basis of empathy capacity, understood here as the ability to feel the world 'in place of' the other while remaining self-aware (Thirioux et al., 2014). Empathy then becomes a cognitive mechanism used by students to understand others (other characters, who express themselves in another language) and co-construct the meaning of interactions.

From a phenomenological perspective, the language experience is inseparable from the Leib/Körper, i.e. the lived body (the body that one is) and the organic body (the body that one has) (Husserl, 1907; Merleau-Ponty, 1945; Fischer-Lichte, 2004). Meaning emerges from movement; it is woven into the action itself. As Varela (1989) points out, cognition is embodied and each person needs the other to make sense. Language thus becomes a driving and sensitive phenomenon, permeated with emotions and perceptions. Glances, gestures and prosodic variations become micro-events that structure communication. Communication is therefore not limited to lexicon or syntax. Speech is a fabric of reciprocal influences that emerges from a network of intra- and inter-individual relationships.

Getting students ‘moving’ is not simply a matter of making them stand up or move around. It is a movement of consciousness: the encounter between what they perceive, imagine, experience and understand. In line with Laban (2003) and Lecoq (1997), performative pedagogy invites each learner to become an actor by creating a character, an intention, a story. This intimate body engaged in the construction of learning (the Leib), maps emotions with embodied experiences, in dialogue with the visible body (the Körper) through a constant interplay of gestural, postural and expressive adjustments associated with the new words/syntactic structures that students need to tell their stories. By playing a story in a theatrical way, that is, by engaging bodily with characters, space, movement, voice and emotion rather than just reading and maybe reproducing a scripted text, “there has to be a two-way process, and the stirring from within has to be by the stimulus from outside.” (Brook,

1968/2008, p. 123). The feelings that naturally resonate with the performative space are central to theatre and the classroom.

Neuroscience confirms that cognitive and emotional processes share the same sensorimotor circuits (Damasio, 2023). Emotion does not precede reason: it is its raw material. Learning a language is therefore learning to perceive act; understanding the world through the body that we are and the body that we have. In a teaching context, this concept invites teachers to create spaces of trust, where intimacy can be expressed without being psychologised because it is distanced and aestheticised through acting (Eschenauer, 2019).

2.3 Performing spaces: communication and the "as if" play

Theatre offers a privileged setting for experimenting with this transition from experience to speech. As Brook writes:

> "In everyday life, 'if' is a fiction, in the theatre 'if' is an experiment. In everyday life, 'if' is an evasion, in the theatre 'if' is the truth. When persuaded to believe to believe in this truth, then the theatre and like are one" (1968/2008, p.157).

In performative-enactive practice (Aden & Eschenauer, 2020), students start from their lived experience and progressively transform it into fiction through embodied and collective action. This approach differs from traditional approaches, in which students are asked to describe or comment their experience (Eschenauer, 2020) or from forms of school theatre that focus on the reproduction of a written text. Here, experience precedes language and text: students act first, invent situations together, and only later engage with written narratives. The teacher and the performer-educator jointly propose a broad thematic and fictional framework, which serves as a shared horizon for exploration rather than as a script to be reproduced. Fiction is thus not imposed from the outset, but emerges progressively from students' bodily engagement, emotions and interactions. The written text is introduced at a later stage, allowing it to function as a trace and a reconfiguration of a shared lived experience. In the context of the present study, translanguaging theatrical performance sessions are organised as a progressive and situated process that articulates embodied exploration, collective creation and reflection. Figure 1 illustrates the successive phases of a two-hour session and the transformation of space, activity and roles over time.

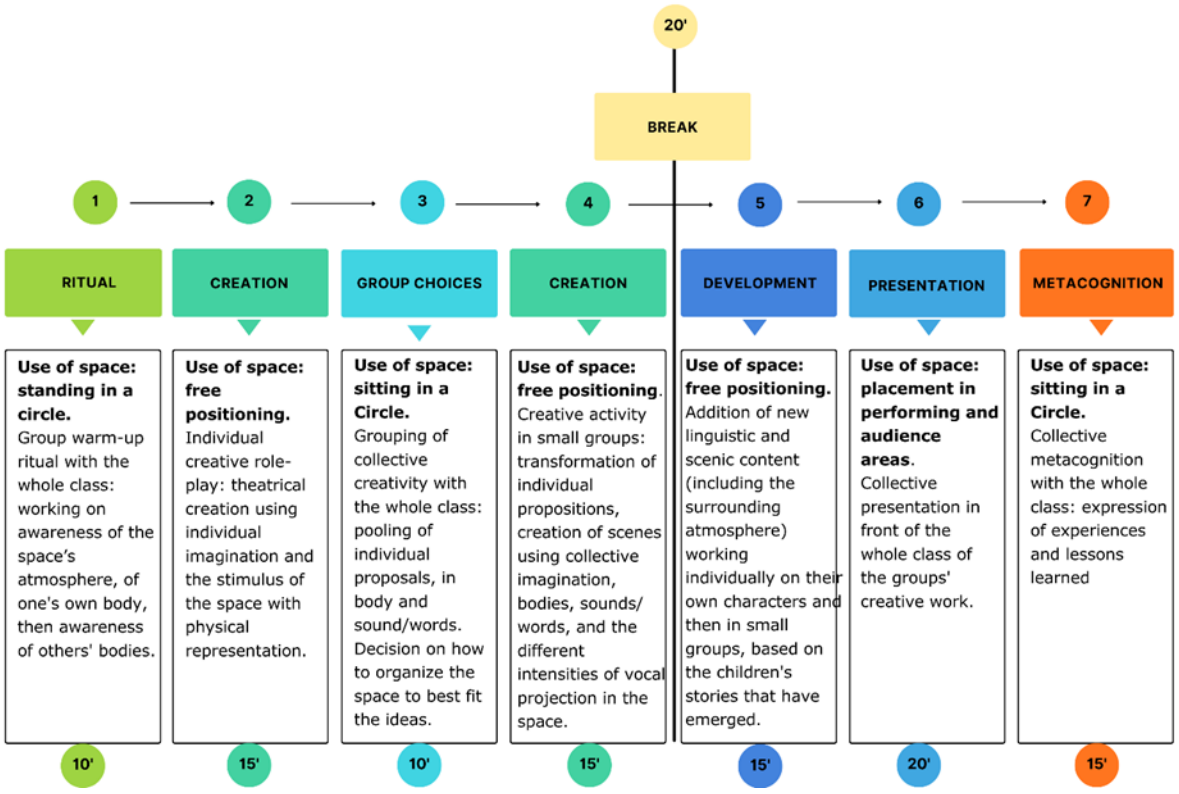

Figure 1: Two-hour schedule for performative theatre workshops, over half a day. CELAVIE study.

Figure 1 illustrates the overall organisation of a two-hour performative session, structured into successive phases that articulate embodied exploration, collective creation, development, presentation and metacognitive reflection in performance spaces. The progression of the session is designed to accompany a gradual transformation of spatial arrangements, from open and free positioning to more structured configurations, such as circles or performing and audience areas. Each phase corresponds to a specific pedagogical intention. Initial ritual and creation phases focus on attuning students to space, their own bodies and the presence of others. Collective choices and group creation phases support shared decision-making, imagination and the emergence of collective meaning. After a break, development and presentation phases allow students to enrich scenic and linguistic elements and to engage with an audience (other students of the class). The final metacognitive phase provides a space for collective reflection and verbalisation of experiences. The figure also makes visible the complementary roles of the performer-educator and the classroom teacher across the different phases. While the performer-educator primarily guides embodied, creative and performative exploration, the teacher ensures pedagogical continuity, supports inclusive participation and accompanies moments of reflection and institutionalisation of learning. These performance spaces require particular attention to physical conditions, including open space, soft lighting, comfortable and clean flooring, and the ability to move freely. In the context of French primary schools, such conditions are not always readily

available, which requires adaptation and negotiation within existing architectural and institutional constraints.

By way of example, and to illustrate the type of performative-enactive and translanguaging practice implemented in the study presented in Section 3, the following outlines how such a project was conducted in a primary classroom (Grade 5). In this case, the work was inspired by the picturebook *Grumpy Monkey* (from Susan and Max Lang) chosen for its philosophical depth and its focus on emotions, perspective-taking and social interaction. Students did not begin by reading the book. Instead, the performer-educator guided them to explore their own emotional states of the day through movement, rhythm, gaze and interaction in space.

From this experiential starting point, students were invited to choose animals they felt an affinity with, allowing personal emotions and dispositions to find symbolic expression. Only progressively did a shared fictional environment (such as a jungle) emerge, extending rather than replacing students' lived experience. At this stage, guidance from the performer-educator remained important, as students were discovering an unfamiliar creative universe. Some explicitly expressed difficulties, stating that they "had no imagination". Imagination was therefore approached as a process rather than a prerequisite, understood as a gradual transformation of experience through embodied exploration. Following Bachelard, imagination unfolds as a dynamic process through which habitual representations are transformed, enabling the subject to project themselves towards other possible worlds and modes of experience.

> "Imagination is too often considered as the faculty of forming images. It is, rather, the faculty of deforming the images supplied by perception; above all, it is the faculty that liberates us from primary images and allows us to transform them. Without a transformation of images, without their unexpected combination, there is no imagination. There is no imaginative activity"[5]. (Bachelard, 1992, p. 5)

Within this framework, translanguaging functions as a situated and optional resource. During phases of exploration and creation (particularly when students negotiate meaning, express emotions or construct fictional elements) they may draw on their full linguistic repertoires if they wish. Home languages, code-switching or mixed utterances can thus appear during moments of negotiation or emotional expression, before progressively giving way to English as the shared language of performance. Linguistic choices are not prescribed but emerge in relation to the activity and the group. This type of work aims to support the development of psychosocial competences together with linguistic competences, particularly empathy and

[5] Our translation

emotional literacy. Empathy means here both the capacity to better understand one's own emotional states and ideas, intentions, and the ability to project oneself into others' perspectives through shared action. This progressive movement from lived experience to fiction constitutes a necessary condition for what we refer to as *virtuous empathy*, namely the capacity to enter another's universe without judgement and to adapt one's ways of acting in order to establish constructive communication.

The performative sessions do not function as isolated events. Between sessions, the classroom teacher continues the work within regular classroom time, ensuring pedagogical continuity. The classroom space is organised flexibly, allowing for movement, regrouping and collective rituals that echo those introduced during the performative sessions. These rituals support attention, emotional awareness and group cohesion.

The project is also articulated with other areas of the curriculum. In particular, links are established with Moral and Civic Education (EMC), where issues related to emotions, relationships and living together are discussed, as well as with visual arts, through the representation of characters, spaces or scenes explored performatively. Elements of the embodied and performative approach are further reinvested in other learning contexts, including storytelling activities, mathematics or history, supporting an embodied approach to teaching and learning across disciplines.

The methodological design and data collection related to this project are described in detail in Section 3.

2.4 Performance and intimate, familiar and foreign modern languages

Performances in a foreign language inevitably draw on the students' first languages. Whether family or social languages, they form the foundation from which new speech emerges. From a multilingual perspective, these languages are not obstacles but resources. As Auger points out (2014), the aim is to help students build on what they already know in order to move towards other languages. Students are then encouraged to forge links between their intimate, familiar and foreign languages. This movement across languages aligns with translanguaging as conceptualised in the literature (Canagarajah, 2013; Wei, 2018), and is further extended here to include the body as an integral mediator of meaning-making (Aden & Eschenauer, 2020; Eschenauer, 2020). As detailed in Section 2.3, these translanguaging dynamics are situated within specific phases of the performative process, particularly during exploration and preparation, while English progressively becomes the shared language of performance. The linguistic repertoires of the learners were heterogeneous and included various family and

social languages (friends' languages for example). Some learners spontaneously engaged in code-switching or mixed utterances, while others chose to remain in English. The use of other languages was neither required nor prohibited, but functioned as an optional mediation supporting participation, inclusion and engagement. In some instances, students also chose to include their home or familiar languages in the final creations. These languages were clearly distinguished from English and were mobilised deliberately, as a way of expressing meanings or emotions they considered particularly important to share in their own language. In this way, performance creates a space where languages coexist, intermingle and respond to each other. Students develop a multilingual awareness embodied in as many ways of perceiving the world.

These theoretical perspectives show that translanguaging theatre performance acts as a device for activating spaces: it connects the intimate, the material, and the scenic; it transforms perception into action and action into speech. The following section will present the empirical implementation of this framework through the CELAVIE study, highlighting how these sensitive spaces concretely influence students' communication practices.

3 The CELAVIE study: artistic performance and translanguaging orality

3.1 Context and objectives

French students continue to struggle with English as modern foreign language (Ministry of National Education & France Éducation International, 2022). Following a feasibility phase (Eschenauer et al., 2023), part 2 of the CELAVIE study aims to examine, in an ecological classroom context (that is, within the ordinary conditions of a regular primary classroom rather than in a laboratory or theatrical setting, , in order to examine performative practices in everyday educational settings), the impact of a translanguaging theatrical performative approach on communication skills in foreign languages, taking into account its physical, psychosocial and linguistic components. The study also aims to understand how the spaces involved (intimate, material and scenic) transform students' communication behaviours.

3.2 Methodology

The experiment was conducted over two years with grades 4 and 5 students in two geographically close schools with comparable profiles. One of the classes constituted the test group (n=24), engaged in a theatrical performance approach; the other class constituted an active control group (n=23) and followed a board game training in English. The board game training consisted of language activities based on table-top board games played in a seated position. This format was deliberately chosen to control for the motor effects associated with theatrical movement, while maintaining learners’ motivation and a playful, engaging learning

atmosphere. The selected games involved small-group and team-based play, ensuring collaborative interaction and joint decision-making. This design made it possible to preserve comparable conditions of collaboration and co-creation across groups, while isolating the role of motor engagement and sensitive space specific to performative practice. The two teachers, who were trainee teacher trainers, were trained in language teaching.

Each cohort participated in two-hour workshops (16 hours per year), led by English-speaking facilitators: a performer-educator for the test group and a games educator for the control group. All students received the same amount of English language instruction and were exposed to the same curricular content throughout the study. The only difference between groups concerned the intervention format, with one group engaging in board game–based activities and the other in theatrical performative activities. The study followed a mixed, semi-ecological test-retest protocol, with repeated measurements administered at the beginning and at the end of the study. The term “semi-ecological” refers to the fact that, while the intervention took place under the ordinary conditions of a regular primary classroom, a research apparatus (including audio-video recordings) was present. The same instruments and procedures were used at both measurement points, allowing changes to be examined over time. Given the longitudinal design of the study, students progressively habituated to the research apparatus, which became integrated into the classroom environment.

The qualitative data is based on two types of interviews, complementary in terms of their timing and purpose. On the one hand, focus groups were conducted at the end of each theatre workshop to gather the students' immediate collective perceptions and feelings about the experience. On the other hand, semi-structured individual interviews conducted in the post-test phase, focusing on the perceived evolution of confidence, relationship to language and communication processes. These two components were subject to methodological triangulation, cross-referencing verbatim accounts (first-person data) with observation notes from the researchers in the research notebook (third-person data) to ensure the internal validity of the thematic categories identified. The recordings were transcribed and then coded using NVivo software according to an inductive approach (Bardin, 2013). Recurring themes were ranked in order of salience, validated by double coding and inter-rater agreement greater than 80%.

The quantitative data is based on a language test developed for the study, consisting of comic strips without speech bubbles featuring two child characters that the students had to embody in order to engage in dialogue. The oral production task consisted of two stages: a warm-up phase involved the production of a short dialogue based on a comic strip expressing a single emotion. Second, a pre-/post-test phase used a different comic strip designed to elicit dialogic oral production incorporating the four emotional categories assessed in the emotional

prosody perception test. Emotional prosody perception was assessed using the open-source ADEPT dataset and evaluation methodology, which was developed to enable fine-grained evaluation of suprasegmental variation in speech samples, including emotional prosody, that listeners can reliably distinguish (Torresquintero et al., 2021). The test presented short English sentences with prosodic cues for four emotional categories (joy, anger, fear and neutral), organised into six blocks of ten sentences per category, resulting in 240 trials per student. The ADEPT task is mentioned here only to justify the choice of emotional categories; further analyses are reported in (Eschenauer et al., in press b). The second comic strip was not modified in the post-test. Nevertheless, the 15-month interval between the two tests is well beyond the period during which the effects of practice or memorisation of the test could influence the results. The work of Hausknecht et al. (2007) and Calamia, Markon and Tranel (2012) shows that these effects decrease significantly after a few weeks or months. The meta-analysis by Calamia et al. (*ibid*.) even indicates an almost complete reduction in practice effects after 6 months, which validates the hypothesis that the memory effect is negligible at 15 months. During the pre-test, the children systematically asked for a translation and reproduced a model; in the post-test, they produced their statements independently, so an equal score actually reflects an increase in independent production.

3.3 Overall results

Both groups showed progress in oral language skills; however, gains in autonomous lexical production reached statistical significance only in the experimental group, while remaining non-significant in the control group, as detailed below. The analyses presented here therefore focus on this quantitative result and on qualitative discourse analyses of student and teacher interviews, in order to examine how linguistic development is articulated with embodied engagement in space.

Concerning the measure of training effect on lexical memorisation, as the distribution of our data deviated from normality, we relied on non-parametric statistical tests in R. These tests do not assume a specific underlying distribution and are therefore well suited for analysing heterogeneous educational and behavioural data. They allowed us to compare groups and examine changes over time in a robust and distribution-free way.

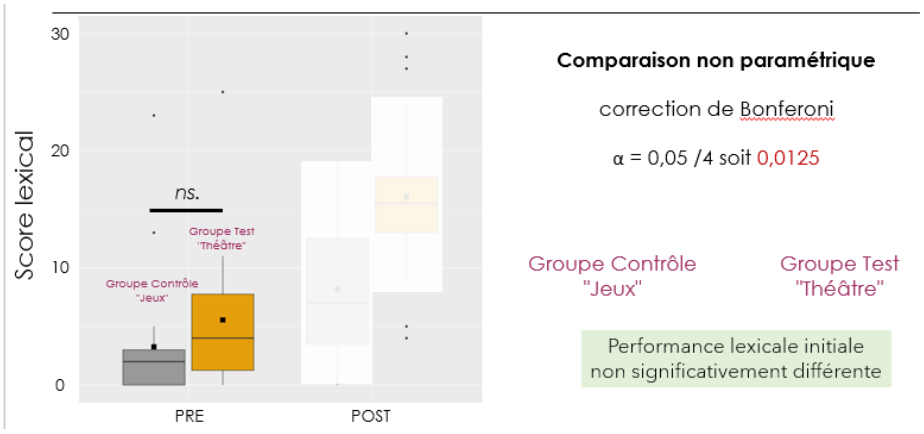

Figure 2: Pre-test autonomous lexical production score, control group "games" vs "theatre test group"

The diagram above (Figure 2) indicates that the two groups did not differ on the pre-test ($p > 0.05$). In contrast, the post-test results indicate a statistically significant difference between the groups ($p < 0.001$), as illustrated in Figure 3:

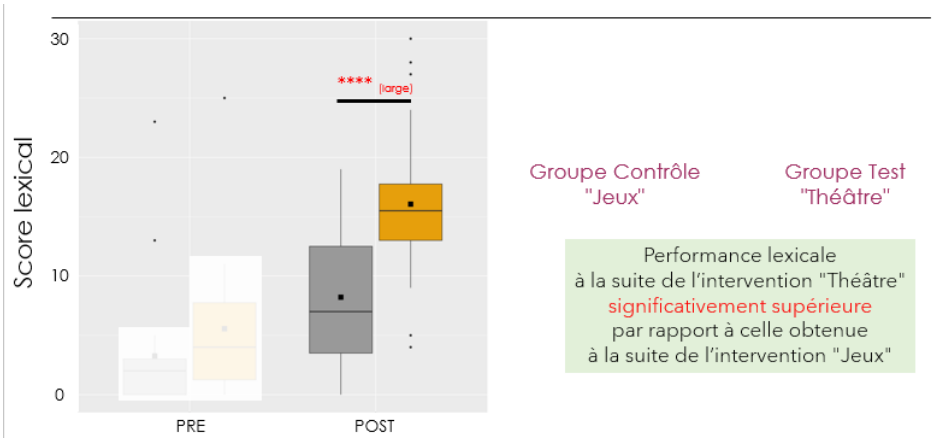

Figure 3: Post-test autonomous lexical production score, control group "games" vs "theatre test group"

The increase observed in the performative group is larger, with the mean post-test score corresponding to approximately twice the mean pre-test score (mean PO-L ≈ 2 × mean PR-L). In the control group, which engaged in board games activities, the increase is smaller (mean PO-L ≈ 1.7 × mean PR-L). These patterns are supported by the statistical analyses presented in Figures 4 and 5.

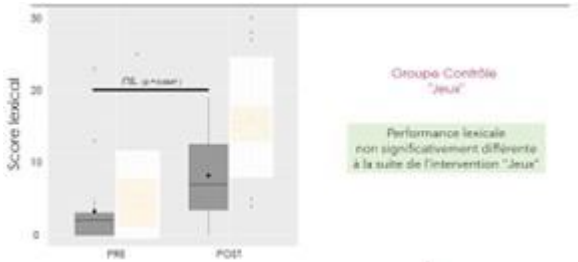

Figure 4: Mean autonomous lexical production scores at pre-test and post-test for the control group

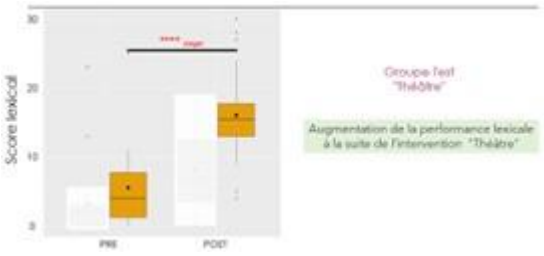

Figure 5: Mean autonomous lexical production scores at pre-test and post-test for the experimental group

While these quantitative results indicate differential gains in autonomous lexical production between the two groups, they do not, in themselves, account for how these differences were experienced, interpreted or enacted by participants. The following section therefore turns to qualitative discourse analyses of student and teacher interviews, in order to elucidate the relationship between these quantitative outcomes and the embodied, spatial and relational dimensions of the learning experience. Using NVivo software, qualitative discourse analysis enabled both the identification and the quantification of recurring discursive themes in student focus groups, which were subsequently triangulated with teachers' interview data to strengthen interpretative validity.

In the control group, exchanges remained focused on reproducing the vocabulary learned and memorisation. Students assessed their progress in terms of the number of words retained or sentences recited (see Fig. 6).

Conversely, in the test group, students mention the pleasure of creating, the freedom to improvise, and the joy of playing in English, even without knowing all the words. For them, it is the importance of creativity/creation situations that constitutes the highest number of coded occurrences, followed by empathy and the importance of movement and gestures associated with speech (see Fig. 7).

Figure 6: Distribution of coded themes resulting from the qualitative discourse analysis of student focus groups in the control group, in response to the question "What helped you learn English?"

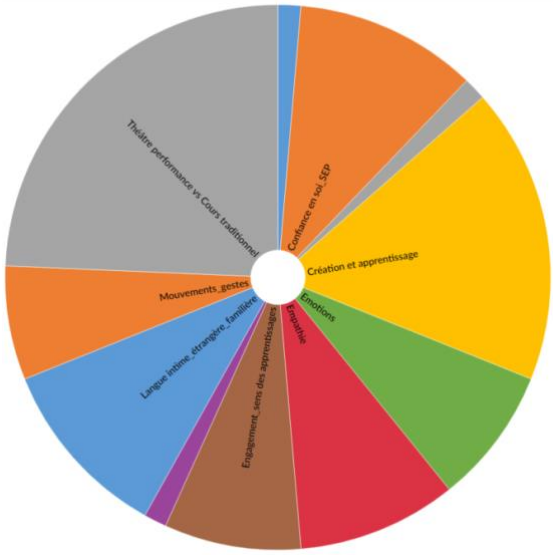

Figure 7: Distribution of coded themes resulting from the qualitative discourse analysis of student focus groups in the experimental group, in response to the question "What helped you learn English?"

In the control group, discourse analysis shows that students primarily attribute their learning of English to traditional classroom activities. While gestures and songs are mentioned as helpful, they are described as auxiliary supports rather than as central learning resources. References to intimate or familiar languages remain limited, and students explicitly mention

a lack of engagement in their learning experience. Overall, learning is described in terms of task completion and school-based practices rather than embodied or creative involvement.

In the experimental group, students' discourse highlights theatrical performance as a central resource for learning English, frequently contrasted with traditional classroom instruction. References to creation and learning are particularly salient, with students associating their progress with inventing, improvising and acting in English. Empathy also emerges as a key dimension, most often linked to acting, but also to relationships with peers and spectators during collective creation. Movements, gestures and emotions are described as integral to this experience, while engagement is framed in terms of meaning-making and pleasure in using English. Overall, learning is described as an embodied, creative and relational process.

This ease is accompanied by a noticeable shift: the language is no longer foreign; it becomes intimate and expressive. Students talk about "daring", "feeling" and "sharing" rather than "reciting". The teacher and the support worker for students with disabilities notes that the class, which was initially reluctant, has become "much more inventive" and "fearless", and points out how important it is "to be able to express one's emotions", which helps to improve "pronunciation, intonation and the intention that [the student] wants to convey " (Explanatory interview with helper Exp. Group, 05:01 – 06:01; Explanatory interview 1 – Teacher Exp. Group, 09:10 – 10:10). And the students are now asking for theatre to become a weekly ritual.

Both qualitative and quantitative data point toward a positive contribution of the performative approach to the development of language skills, as well as to psychosocial dimensions such as empathy and creativity. The sensory-motor and emotional engagement mobilised throughout the performative activities appears to support this evolution, as illustrated in the following excerpts from student interviews:

> - We had to understand English, so we had to understand everything we said, we had to speak in English, **we had to do the movements in English**, **and I think that's much better.** Personally, I've progressed faster here in a few months than in nine years at the other school. Well, not nine years, but almost. (Semi-structured interview, student 075 Exp. Group, 05:37 – 06:08)

> - And I thought it was really fun to do theatre because, suddenly, (...) we're doing theatre and, on top of that, we're doing English. So **it sticks in your head more easily than having something to read over and over and over again.** (...) because we don't have a text in French, we have a text in English, so **it's up to us to find the emotions, it's up to us to put ourselves in the character's shoes.** But then, because it's all in English, **we speak a lot in**

> **English, even among ourselves.** (Semi-structured interview, student 026, Exp. Group, 11:40 – 12:54)[6]

The analyses converge on one finding: theatrical performance acts as a communication amplifier.

3.4 Effects of attending to sensory-responsive learning spaces

The thematic analyses[7] also revealed six interconnected dimensions, corresponding to transformations in the sensitive spaces experienced by the students:

1. Sensitive space-time: extended workshops (four consecutive hours) promote physical and attentional immersion. Students discover the time of the experience, which is different from fragmented school time. This temporal continuity allows for sustained concentration and more spontaneous speech.
2. Intimate spaces: students talk about expressing their emotions, the possibility of embodying characters "who resemble them," and the freedom to invent from within themselves. These moments foster trust and a sense of belonging. Intimacy becomes a source of language: words emerge from shared emotion.
3. Material spaces: the transformation of the space – moved tables, cushions, soft lighting – changes the perception of the body and the voice. Students associate these changes with a “pleasure of being” and a feeling of comfort conducive to creativity. Teachers observe that interactions are more respectful and exchanges more sustained.
4. Performance spaces: performance transforms the classroom into a stage. The space becomes circular and open, and roles are redistributed: the teacher, the students as co-creators and spect-actors (Boal, 1978). The audience (the other students in the class) is an active participant; speech is woven into reciprocity.
5. Physical engagement: the motor dynamics of the workshops promote verbal fluidity. Students produce more gestures and modulate their voices. Speech takes shape.
6. Spaces for creativity and autonomy: students experiment with co-constructing shared worlds. They set their own rules, invent dialogues and spontaneously extend the practice outside the workshops (in the playground, among peers). This demonstrates a shift from the duty to learn to the desire to learn.

These six categories, which recurred in interviews and observations, show that performative practice affects the very structure of educational spaces: it sets bodies, objects and

[6] Our translation

[7] A more detailed exploration of these sensitive spaces is developed in a forthcoming article (Eschenauer, in press a).

representations in motion. Communication unfolds as a lived, sensory and creative experience.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

Cross-analysis of the corpus reveals a circular relationship between space, movement, emotions and speech in LVE. When students perceive the classroom as a welcoming and free space, they engage their bodies, their imaginations and their languages. Space becomes a mediator of expression. Teachers report a change in attitude: performance leads them to share the experience rather than direct it. They describe a new form of presence, consisting of listening and joint attention.

These observations are in line with Fischer-Lichte's (2004) conception of theatre as based on the emergence of an 'autopoietic space', i.e. a living system generated by interactions between actors and spectators. In a school context, this autopoiesis is embodied in the shared moment: the classroom as a relational stage where meaning arises from co-presence.

The role of physicality is central here. Students become aware of their voices, their breathing, their gestures and their movements; they learn to inhabit language for themselves and as a group. Performance leads them to sharpen their own awareness and that of others in a virtuous way so that they can create stories together.

Beyond linguistic progress, performance therefore promotes prosocial behaviours: cooperation, mutual aid, mutual recognition. Students with disabilities, particularly those receiving AESH support, find in these open spaces an opportunity for adjusted expression, since the body can act as a relay when speech is more difficult to produce or when communication abilities are usually impaired (Eschenauer et al., 2023). These findings are in line with the aims of inclusive education: to enable everyone to participate in the construction of common meaning. Performance acts here as a means of accessibility.

Finally, the effects observed extend to the teaching community. In the test group's school, an *in situ* training programme involving two theatre companies was set up at the start of the 2024 school year to extend the approach to other disciplines. This extension, supported by the NEFLE (*Notre École, Faisons-la Ensemble*) programme of the Ministry of Education, demonstrates the transformative power of the performative experience on teaching practices.

The CELAVIE study therefore shows that translanguaging theatrical performance transform classrooms into sensitive spaces for communication. Students experience physicality as a tool for thinking and relating. These transformations, which can be observed empirically, are consistent with the theoretical foundations of enaction and the aesthetics of performance.

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