

Belonging through creativity, courage and care

Report on the Performative Approaches to Language and Intercultural Learning (PAInt) Summer School 2026

Sara Rozić

What does it mean to belong – to a place, a language, a story or a group? This question became a recurring thread throughout the fourth PAInt (Performative Approaches to Language and Intercultural Learning) Summer School, held at the Centro Linguistico di Ateneo of the University of Perugia from 28 to 30 July 2026 and jointly organised by the Universities of Padova and Perugia. Under the theme “Creativity, courage and care in performative language learning”, the Summer School brought together students, teachers, researchers and practitioners to explore drama-based approaches to second language and intercultural learning. Across workshops led by Fiona Dalziel, Filippo Fonio and Anna Taglietti, Vittoria Corallo and Erika Piazzoli, participants engaged with belonging, translingual women’s memories and identities, non-verbal communication, collective embodiment and process drama. This report reflects on these experiences from the perspective of a newcomer to performative language learning. Taking belonging as a connecting thread, it considers how individual stories, bodies and perspectives entered a shared space and how, over three days, creativity, courage and care contributed to the formation of an international community.

Keywords: *performative language learning; drama education; intercultural learning; Process Drama; belonging*

1 Introduction: where are you a local?

The fourth edition of the PAInt Summer School, *Creativity, courage and care in performative language learning*, took place from 28 to 30 July 2026 at the Centro Linguistico di Ateneo (CLA) of the University of Perugia. It was organised jointly by the Universities of Padova and Perugia, specifically by Fiona Dalziel, Filippo Fonio and Diana Peppoloni, and with my organisational support in the role of Summer School intern. Its focus was on drama-based approaches to second language teaching and learning and, in particular, on how imagination and creativity can coexist with courage, ethical responsibility and care. The 2026 Summer School followed earlier editions in Padua in 2017, Grenoble in 2019 and Padua in 2024.

My first sustained encounter with performative approaches to language and intercultural learning had only begun during the previous year in my master’s programme *Communication Strategies* at the University of Padua. I had learned about process drama, still images, teacher-

in-role and the possibilities of embodied learning in an academic setting, but at the PAInt Summer School I was entering a space in which these practices were not simply something to study. For three days, they would become the way we communicated, encountered one another and, at times, made ourselves vulnerable. Around me were language teachers, drama practitioners, researchers and participants who had been working in the field for years; some had already attended previous editions of the Summer School. I was new to this community – so, even before the first workshop began, I found myself wondering where exactly I fitted into it besides being an intern for this year's edition of the Summer School.

Perugia brought a fresh backdrop to these encounters. The CLA, housed in a former monastery, offered an almost theatrical setting of its own. Our first workshops took place in the library, once a chapel, where high ceilings and traces of the building's former life framed our movement through the space. Later workshops moved into a long, bright room lined with large windows. During breaks we gathered in the courtyard, where conversations that had begun in workshops continued over coffee. The physical spaces seemed to invite the alternation that would characterise the three days: concentration and openness, individual reflection and collective exchange, silence and voice.

Fiona Dalziel asked us the first question, one that would form the foundation of the following days: *Where are you a local?* Inspired by Taiye Selasi's (2014) suggestion that we move away from asking where somebody is *from* and instead consider where they are local, the question opened Dalziel's workshop *The Quilt: embodying local belonging(s)*. The distinction appeared small, but its effect was not. *Where are you from?* often expects one place and one answer. *Where are you a local?* leaves room for several. It invites memories, habits, relationships, languages, places, sounds, smells and everyday rituals into the answer.

What none of us could have known at that moment was that the question would escape the workshop. At our shared dinner, I heard participants who had not yet had the chance to speak to one another use it as a way of starting conversations: *So, where are you a local?* What had begun as a prompt was becoming a language for the community itself. Perhaps that is why belonging became, for me, the thread connecting the Summer School. Not every workshop was explicitly *about* belonging. Yet each asked, in a different way, what happens when individual experiences enter a collective space: how we carry places with us, how stories and identities travel across languages, how bodies find their place within a group and how creativity requires enough care for people to risk entering an imagined world together.

2 Belonging: From place to people

Dalziel's *The Quilt: embodying local belonging(s)* gave this thread its first physical form. The workshop drew on bell hooks' (2009) writing on place and homecoming and Taiye Selasi's idea of locality. At its centre was the quilt: an object associated simultaneously with warmth, craft, family histories and artistic creation. It offered a way of bringing care and creativity together while opening questions about the meanings attached to place and to the objects through which people remember and narrate belonging.

Before the quilt became a collective image, however, we began with ourselves. Walking through the room to music, we were invited to imagine a place, a sound and a smell. We then shared these sensations with others. The activity made locality sensory before it made it intellectual. A place was no longer merely a point on a map; it could be remembered through a smell, a ritual, a language or the feeling of being recognised. This approach resonates with Dalziel's previous work on *Belonging(s)*, in which imagined belongings and cultural objects become metaphors for cultural identities and are shared through embodiment and collective creation.

Still images offered one way of making these abstract ideas visible. In groups, we created bodily representations of belonging. Some images suggested roots or intertwined threads; another presented belonging as something tangled and complicated; another imagined a relationship between the individual and the earth itself. Rather than producing a definition, the bodies in the room produced possibilities. When the separate pieces finally came together in the image of a quilt, individual contributions remained visible while acquiring meaning through their relationship to the whole. Participant feedback repeatedly returned to this collective quilt as one of the strongest moments of the workshop and described the metaphor as a way of understanding identity through multiple places, memories, languages and connections. The workshop also moved into the beginnings of a process drama. Through activities such as the gossip mill, a shared narrative grew out of speculation, listening and response rather than a predetermined script. What struck me was how quickly strangers were willing to construct something together. Belonging was being discussed, certainly, but it was simultaneously being practised. By the end of the first workshop, the original question – *Where are you a local?* – no longer seemed to demand a geographical answer. Locality could be layered – so could belonging.

3 Embodying stories, identities and relationships

Before moving into Filippo Fonio and Anna Taglietti's workshop, Erika Piazzoli led the group through a series of vocal warm-up exercises. After the previous day's work, the exercises quite literally woke us up, but they also invited us to search for and inhabit our own voices. What initially felt like a playful preparation for the day soon acquired another meaning. As we moved into a workshop centred on translingual women's memories, identity, disempowerment and re-empowerment, the idea of finding one's voice seemed to follow us into the material. The transition was not planned as an explicit thematic bridge, yet for me it became one: from becoming aware of my own voice to encountering stories of women negotiating whether and how their voices could be heard.

3.1 Carrying stories: translingual women's memories

In Filippo Fonio and Anna Taglietti's workshop, *Approcci didattico-performativi alla memoria femminile translingue. Identità, disempowerment, re-empowerment*, the idea that people carry several places and identities with them took on a more politically charged dimension. Their workshop was grounded in autobiographical and literary texts connected to translingual women's experiences and invited us to approach questions of language, migration, identity and power not only analytically, but through the body. Its focus on identity, disempowerment and re-empowerment was already explicit in the workshop materials. The texts revealed migration and female identity as complex, layered experiences that could not be reduced to a single narrative. Some dealt with motherhood and its rejection; others with linguistic displacement, labour, family, home or the pressure to adapt. But we did not remain seated only around these texts. Bags and suitcases entered the space, as did still images and improvisation. Small groups transformed fragments into short performances, making choices about bodies, objects, relationships and voice. The written material became something we had to negotiate together.

One of the final presentations has stayed with me in particular. It challenged the tendency to reduce migrant women to stories of endurance alone. The woman at its centre did not simply want to survive; she wanted beauty, dignity and the freedom to care about how she existed in the world. The thought condensed into a phrase that has remained in my notes: *it is a right to seek beauty*. That moment mattered because it refused an easy narrative. To speak of empowerment is not necessarily to replace vulnerability with heroic strength. It can also mean allowing complexity back into a person's story. Participant feedback similarly highlighted how the workshop connected translingual women's memory with identity and how performance allowed experiences of disempowerment and re-empowerment to be approached without reducing them to a simple progression. The use of real bags as stimuli and the freedom to

transform texts through improvisation and even communicate without words were particularly helpful to immerse oneself into the complex worlds of the women in question. Once again, belonging was not presented as uncomplicated. Migration can multiply belonging, but it can also expose who has the power to grant it, question it or deny it.

3.2 Becoming a choral body

If Fonio and Taglietti asked what stories bodies carry, Vittoria Corallo's *Within the choral body: the inner communication between bodies and space, at the roots of relational intelligence* asked what happens when those bodies stop insisting on being separate protagonists. Corallo, a director, actress and theatre educator, was facilitating a PAInt Summer School workshop for the first time. Her premise was deceptively simple: before words, communication is already happening. Her workshop therefore focused on listening to the self within the group and to the group *as an organism*, exploring forms of communication rooted in relationships with ourselves, space, time and others. This was perhaps the workshop in which I was most aware of the tension between surrender and control. We breathed; we closed our eyes; we moved.

In one exercise, we walked through the room without sight and gradually found other people through touch, resting hands or arms against one another. Calming music played in the background, but without vision the room felt uncertain. The task was challenging precisely because it removed one of our most reliable ways of managing distance. Yet the vulnerability of not seeing also accelerated trust. Perceiving the room solely through touch and movement was an intuitive experience of group connection and although the exercise was initially intimidating, it ultimately increased my confidence in non-verbal communication.

A quieter exercise remains equally vivid. Standing in a circle, we passed a breath from person to person. One participant breathed in as the previous person breathed out, until the breath had travelled around the group. Nearly fifty people stood silently enough to hear one another breathe. Nothing spectacular happened – and perhaps that was exactly why it was so affecting. There was no individual performance to applaud, no need to distinguish oneself from the group. Attention itself became the activity. Feedback later singled out both the shared breath and the act of passing it around the circle as particularly moving.

Corallo repeatedly returned us to the pressure to emerge as individuals. Many familiar narratives revolve around a hero, a protagonist to whom everyone else becomes secondary. Her work invited another possibility: the group as protagonist. The flocking exercise made this physical. Without a permanently designated leader, movement travelled through the group; the task was not to stand out but to remain attentive enough for many bodies to act as one.

The same principle appeared playfully in an exercise based on the four seasons. Without verbally announcing our birthdays, we imagined and embodied the season in which we were born and tried to find others who were doing the same. Slowly, four groups emerged. Surprisingly many of us had found our way towards people who did, in fact, share our birthday season. Whether through posture, pace or imagination, we had communicated something without naming it.

Corallo's teaching was poised, calm and at the same time firm. One idea in my notes captures what I took from the afternoon: *we give information all the time without speaking. When words are removed, we do not necessarily communicate less. We may simply have to listen more carefully.* Here belonging shifted again. It was no longer primarily about *where* I belonged or which stories I carried. It was about the temporary decision to place myself within a collective: to become, in Corallo's terms, one thread rather than struggling continuously to be seen as the whole fabric.

4 From imagination to reflection

By the final day, the three words in the Summer School's title – creativity, courage and care – no longer felt like separate concepts. Each of the preceding workshops had required all three in different proportions: creativity to imagine beyond what was given, courage to enter uncertainty and care to make that uncertainty bearable for others.

4.1 Building a safe and brave space

Erika Piazzoli's concluding workshop, *Negotiating Creativity, Courage and Care in Process Drama: The Legend of the Brave Snails*, addressed this balance directly. Piazzoli's workshop focused on the question of how teachers can encourage creative risk-taking while maintaining responsibility and psychological safety. Using process drama inspired by Julia Donaldson's children's book *Superworm*, the familiar story was revisited from the perspective of three snails. Distancing as an aesthetic principle — the awareness of the boundary between fiction and reality — provided a framework through which difficult feelings could be explored without abandoning care (Eriksson, 2011). This connects with Piazzoli's earlier conceptualisation of process drama as an experiential form in which facilitator and participants co-construct an imagined world rather than work towards a predetermined script or external performance (Piazzoli, 2012). Her research also emphasises the potential of teacher-in-role, play and distributed responsibility to increase confidence and willingness to communicate while reducing language anxiety.

Participant responses offer glimpses of how this worked in practice. They describe activities such as creating a flower and the snails through collective role, rebuilding a story by isolating and transforming one of its elements, working with fabric and embodying characters together. Particularly striking was the way several participants jointly embodied a single character, contributing to its motives and emotions from within the collective role. The process also emerged as a carefully scaffolded form of collective creativity that fostered a strong sense of support and immersion. These impressions make the relationship between the three concepts clear. Creativity did not mean unlimited freedom without consequences; courage did not mean forcing participants beyond their limits; care did not mean avoiding uncertainty. Rather, care created conditions in which courage could become possible and courage allowed creativity to move beyond the familiar.

4.2 Connecting and reflecting

The last activity consisted the continuation of the zine-making activity which had been launched at the start of the Summer School. Zines are small handmade booklets that combine words, drawings, images and other materials in a personal and creative way, serving the purpose, in this case of reflection on practice and experience. It was an appropriate form with which to conclude a Summer School built around embodiment: rather than being handed a summary of what the three days were supposed to mean, we made one ourselves and created a unique souvenir from Perugia.

Yet some of the strongest evidence that the Summer School's theme had moved beyond its workshop titles appeared outside the formal programme. During breaks, the courtyard became a place for conversations between people of different ages, countries, disciplines and levels of experience. Some participants had returned after previous PAInt editions; others were encountering this community for the first time. At dinner, we sat together at one long table in the centre of Perugia, continuing conversations that no longer felt constrained by workshop groups. The participants repeatedly identified this opportunity to meet, exchange practices and build relationships as a highlight. Others spoke of the atmosphere of openness, the international community or the sense that scholarly depth, artistic experimentation and human connection had been allowed to support one another.

It would be too neat to suggest that every participant experienced every session in the same way. Yet that, too, points towards a productive question for performative pedagogy: how embodied experience, artistic practice and explicit pedagogical transfer can remain in dialogue. Other participants, particularly following Piazzoli's workshop, noted the concrete links made to second-language classrooms. The Summer School therefore did not produce

one uniform understanding of performative language learning. It created a space in which such understandings could be tested against experience.

5 Conclusion: Becoming a local in Perugia

In Dalziel's workshop, locality became layered through places, memories and cultural belongings. With Fonio and Taglietti, belonging became entangled with migration, language, female identity and the power to define one's own story. Corallo moved the question into the body, asking what it means to stop competing for the position of protagonist and instead listen closely enough to become part of a collective organism. And in the final process drama, Piazzoli brought creativity and bravery into conversation with the care required for people to enter such collective spaces safely.

None of these workshops offered belonging as a comfortable or permanent state. That is perhaps what makes the idea useful. Belonging can be complicated, negotiated and temporary. It can be carried in an object, enacted in a still image, heard in somebody else's breath, challenged by a new language or built through a story that did not exist until a group began imagining it together.

The quilt now seems an almost unavoidable image for the Summer School itself. A quilt does not create unity by making every piece identical. Its pieces retain their colours, histories, textures and edges. What gives them another kind of meaning is the act of placing them in relation. The same was true of us. We arrived in Perugia from different places, languages, generations, professions and experiences. Some already knew the field intimately; others, like me, were still finding our way into it. We brought our homes with us – sometimes literally in the stories we told, sometimes in our accents, languages, gestures, memories and ways of moving through a room. What made the three days special was the generosity with which people were willing to share those pieces with one another.

I had initially understood becoming *local* as knowing a place well enough for it to become familiar. After the PAInt Summer School in Perugia, I would describe it differently. Perhaps becoming local can also mean paying enough attention to a place and to the people inside it that, for a moment, you begin to participate in its life rather than simply passing through it. I no longer found myself asking whether somebody belonged there. Everyone was there for a reason, everyone had brought something of home with them and everyone had been invited to share those homes with one another. So, for three hot days in a former monastery in Perugia, we made a place to belong and, in doing so, became local together.

Disclosure statement

Generative AI (OpenAI ChatGPT) was used to check grammar, spelling, and clarity in this manuscript. No new content was generated; all edits were reviewed by the author.

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