



Above: Soo Wright.

Moving words

Soo Wright, freelance community dance artist and part-time ESOL Lecturer at Wiltshire College, describes a creative dance project that supports people in learning English



Moving Words is a dance and language project for English as a second language learners. It aims to develop communication skills and build confidence in language learning through a creative dance experience. It has been delivered at Chisenhale Dance Space in London (April - July 2007), at Crisis/Skylight in London (August 2007) and in Frome, Somerset (February - May 2008).

As someone who comes from a language teaching background professionally and has trained to be a community dance artist, I'm very interested in making connections between language learning and movement. I've been exploring the idea of how to teach language more creatively, using a more 'holistic' approach, for some time now. I had an Iranian woman in my ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) class in London. She made very little progress in her English throughout the year; she often complained of headaches and would not be able to participate in the class. At the end of the year we had a party where students brought in music from their countries. The Iranian woman revealed herself to be a fantastic dancer; she radiated happiness and confidence as she danced and seemed a completely different person from the unhappy, suffering student sitting behind a desk! I danced with her and realised that this form of communication would have been a motivating starting point from which to develop language skills.

Why dance and language?

Research into the brain shows that if we sit still and concentrate on something for long, we begin to wind down physically and mentally. The concentration span threshold for adults is 15 to 25 minutes. In order to recharge our physical and mental batteries we need to activate our body to boost our circulation. This gets more blood flowing

around and carrying oxygen to refuel different parts of our body, including - most importantly in terms of learning - our brain. Creative dance can be a very effective tool for language learning because, not only does it activate the body, but it also engages the emotions. Emotion and memory are closely linked in the brain, which is why we remember things better when there is some emotional connection for us. There are many ways to engage students' emotions but what better way than to use movement and dance where emotions and feelings play such an integral part?

Accelerated learning, the combination of adult learning theory and whole brain learning theory used to achieve a faster learning rate, has been used successfully in the teaching of foreign languages. It encompasses many different techniques and methodologies such as Suggestopedia, Neuro Linguistic Programming, Multiple Intelligences theory and use of music and drama. One of the key elements for successful accelerated learning is the notion that without emotion, there is no learning. Our emotions powerfully influence the learning process and when they are positive, we are open to new possibilities and we have more mental capacity available for learning. A second key element is the role of the arts because the arts facilitate emotional involvement and self-understanding. Research shows that the arts enhance learning and speak to us at both the conscious and sub conscious level. Jensen (2001) presents the case for making arts a core part of the basic curriculum and integrating them into every subject. For example, he suggests using musical, visual and kinaesthetic arts to increase opportunities for more students to learn, enhance their thinking and make classrooms more positive and inclusive. In my experience, a dance studio or hall can offer a more relaxed and informal



Above: Moving Words project in Frome, Somerset 2008. Photo: Soo Wright.

learning environment for students, where desks don't inhibit freedom of movement and freedom of speech!

Learning through the arts is an established method in Canada, with the ultimate aim of promoting creative thinking and enhancing students' performance in schools. It is based on the idea that students learn more when learning is participatory and connected to the personal interests and learning style of each student. Creating dances is one of the ways in which students explore new ideas e.g. learning about geometry and fractions through dance. The UK education system is gradually providing more arts-based learning but still has a long way to go.

To many people's misconception, a dance class isn't a silent place where words aren't exchanged. As I discovered on my course at Laban, discussion and negotiation are important features of a creative dance class and a wealth of vocabulary is used in a contemporary dance class. Two of my fellow students, one from Portugal and one from Japan, both felt that their listening skills had particularly improved on the course. One said she had remembered unusual and repeated words such as 'pelvic floor', 'scapular' and 'spine' as well as instruction phrases e.g. 'face the mirror', 'close your eyes'. The other thought that the fact that teachers always described movement using descriptive language and images had given her a sense of immersion in the language. She also mentioned how she could understand the essence of a word in a practical way. For example, she could understand the meaning of 'be aware of' because the phrase was put into context and she was embodying it. This was far more effective than trying to find the meaning in a dictionary.

How the project came about

The idea for 'Moving Words' came about when I met up

with another Laban 'Dance in Community' student, Etta Ermini, with a similar background in language teaching as well as teaching experience in theatre and dance. Etta had been involved in a project in Belgium where French as a foreign language is taught through drama, dance, music and visual arts. After much discussion, we developed a project, submitted to Chisenhale Dance Space as part of the 'Reach out' programme and in December 2006 were successful in receiving funding. The project started in April 2007 and ran for ten weeks with a two-hour session every week at Chisenhale Dance Space. With the help of Chisenhale, we contacted community centres and organisations in Tower Hamlets where ESOL classes were being run. The Idea Store and Old Ford Housing Association were the first and strongest associates and the majority of the participants were recruited from there. It was decided to target women only as the majority of second language learners in Tower Hamlets are Bangladeshi and a mixed gender group would not have been appropriate. Also, immigrant women tend to be more isolated from British society as they often have children and rarely work, which makes learning English more difficult for them.

12 women were recruited, 11 from Bangladesh and one from Morocco. The level of English of the participants was varied with most having limited English but one fluent speaker who was able to translate some of the time for the others. I'd already devised a resource pack on using creative dance as a tool for language learning and this was adapted and developed for planning the weekly sessions.

One of the exercises that participants enjoyed was giving movement instructions, which they had to remember, around the circle. They were using the vocabulary of body parts and the language of instruction e.g. 'roll your right shoulder' as part of a warm-up. We had a particularly

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successful session on gestures where we had fun sharing typical British and Bengali gestures and discussing their meaning. We then taught the women a dance sequence based on gestures and they composed their own gesture dances. Body language is an important part of communication that is often not covered in a more traditional language class.

A constant challenge during the project was how to cater for the different needs of the participants, particularly in such a mixed level class. Some of them were very keen to get fit and to move while others needed more speaking practice. We tried to develop activities that integrated dance and language practice and made sure that there was an equal balance between the two during the course.

As the project progressed, we observed that the women became more confident in expressing themselves through movement and performing to each other. We were particularly surprised by one participant, a woman in her sixties, who'd been very reticent initially. She enjoyed re-discovering her love of movement despite suffering from arthritis and she inspired the others to be more exploratory.

The feedback on the project was very positive; many of them said they felt more self-confident and ready to study English further. They all wanted to continue to dance and had enjoyed the creative part of the sessions. It felt like a privilege for all of us to have been part of this cultural exchange and to have had the opportunity to work together in such a fun and creative way. We were all sad when it came to say goodbye.

When I moved to Frome in Somerset in July 2007 I was very keen to develop 'Moving Words' and adapt it to meet

the needs of second language speakers in the area. I was lucky to receive funding from NLDC (Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities) in partnership with Adult Learning & Leisure to run the project at a venue in Frome. I recruited some participants from Adult Learning and Leisure ESOL classes and others responded to posters or an article in the local paper. A taster session was held and a wide variety of nationalities came along, including two men, from France, Pakistan, Venezuela, Poland, Czech Republic, Ukraine, Taiwan and China - very surprising for a small market town in Somerset! This time, most of the learners had a higher level of English with the exception of one complete beginner.

A new activity that learners particularly enjoyed was practicing pronunciation, or more specifically word stress, using a jembe drum. We beat the rhythm of the word on the drum and learners found movements to emphasize the stressed syllables. This was followed with a worksheet at the end of the session to reinforce learning and provide a record of correct pronunciation. They also had fun understanding the differences between direct and indirect questions by moving in different pathways, straight for direct and curved for indirect, whilst asking some questions.

One of the things I did differently from the Chisenhale project was to use a flip chart more frequently to write down new language and to provide learners with occasional worksheets to consolidate learning. This was particularly beneficial for the beginner learner. I also included a session on idiomatic language where we explored, through movement, the literal and non-literal meanings of some common idioms.

Following a visit from the NLDC Curriculum Manager at Somerset County Council Skills & Learning, 'Moving Words' was one of the projects chosen to be represented on a NLDC DVD, as an example of good practice.

What next?

I'm currently developing 'Moving Words' to run it as an ESOL and dance course at Wiltshire College in Trowbridge. Chisenhale Dance Space has received partial funding to run 'Moving Words' for a year and is applying for funding to match this.

Etta and I would like to thank Chisenhale Dance Space for giving us the opportunity to pilot our ideas.

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Above: Moving Words project, Chisenhale Dance Space 2007.
Photo: Soo Wright.