Performing English: The classroom as rehearsal space

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ABSTRACT
This article is concerned with the notion of language as performance. Learning to use the spoken language of another culture requires learning embodied language practices as well as verbal ones. Many students seem largely unaware of how their performances of English are tempered and regulated by physical traits of their usual native-language habitus. This article explores the paradigm of classroom as rehearsal space, and argues that embodied language rehearsal and teacher intervention in the classroom can raise students’ consciousness of contradictions and contrasts between their usual modes of embodiment and those appropriate to target English. This practical knowledge will lead to more culturally congruent performances of English.

Language as performance
In teaching English to non-native English speakers, I do not feel we attend adequately to its ‘physicalisation’, that is, to how we also use our bodies when we use language. The testing (and learning) of English is primarily as a verbal medium learned through words that are read in print, heard through speakers, and rarely embodied. Our students may become used to talking in the language, although not necessarily to performing in it. I believe that in language education, learners need to become aware that the body is integrally related to the culture and the language.

Much second and foreign language acquisition theory recognises paralinguistic communication skills as integral to linguistic competence. However, most theorists only attend to paralinguistic elements such as stress and intonation. Due to my dissatisfaction with the inattention to the body in dominant EFL teaching practices, in this article I apply insights from sociological theory to issues of second and foreign language acquisition.

Where a person enters an English language speaking culture or context, his or her paralinguistic performance must be appropriate to that language community in order for his/her communication to be easily understood. I refer to this as congruent performance of language, a performance that is executed in accordance and harmony with the culture one is communicating in. Where
one of the purposes of learning English is to interact congruently with native speakers in countries or contexts where the target English is spoken, then attention to the delivery and performance of that English should be integral to its study. The focus of this paper is on creating language classroom opportunities for students to learn and practise non-verbal as well as verbal language.

Performing in a foreign language can be compared to performing for the stage. In both, the key objective is effective communication. How do language learners and performance artists achieve fluid, credible performances?

Schirato and Yell argue that ‘… the pervasiveness of American cultural institutions and products … coming out of film and television …’ is such that Chinese families come to ‘… interact like families in American sitcoms.’ (1996: 153). This implies that the mannerisms of another culture can be acquired through exposure. I find it doubtful that a mental perception of the way a foreign culture operates can physically transfer into the bodies of those watching. Could a person who watches hours and hours of Chinese opera be able to perform the actions they have viewed? Surely to do so effectively and confidently would involve getting out of one’s seat and practising the actions. Understanding paralinguistic elements and non-verbal behaviour of another culture alone, is inadequate for effective communication to occur. Neustupny argues that ‘practise’ (as well as understanding) is essential for communicative competence to be achieved (1987: 195). Gee argues that the taking on of a secondary discourse not only involves knowledge gained through conscious reflection, explanation and analysis, but also learning that occurs through operating within meaningful functional settings (1990: 146). This leads not only to a critical understanding and metaknowledge of the discourse and how it works, but also to a practical mastery of the same. If we apply Gee’s theory to the taking on of a second or foreign language, then it is vital to supply students with settings in which to practise the language they are learning.

Rehearsal

Goffman (1965) equates individuals in everyday life to actors in performance. He speaks of a person’s ‘virtual social identity’ and ‘actual social identity’, where how one thinks one is performing and how one’s audience perceives the same performance do not always match. To bridge this gap, Goffman refers to spaces off stage where one can rehearse and possibly overcome these mismatches and align actual and virtual performances. In the theatre there are specific spaces for rehearsal, where one’s actions can be practised and improved with no audience other than one’s peers. Threadgold (1992) and Kamler (1997) suggest that similar settings, such as classrooms, can exist outside the theatre where performances of the self can be practised, improved, and even rewritten. For both
actors and language learners, ‘It is not enough just to say the right “lines”, one needs to get the whole “role” right.’ (Gee 1990: xv). Where this does not occur, where words and actions are mismatched or do not ‘fit’, misunderstandings are likely to occur (Gee 1990: 140).

Adjusting habitus

Bourdieu uses the term *habitus* to refer to non-consciously performed practices ‘… internalised as second nature and so forgotten’ (1990: 56). He claims that where we operate in different settings (referring to this as ‘entering different fields’, 1990: 67), we adjust our habitus accordingly. Similarly, Goffman (1965) claims that, as performers in everyday life, we come to adjust and change our performances according to what is appropriate to various settings. Second- and/or foreign-language learners, too, can learn to adjust something of their usual habitus (their usual non-consciously performed practices) in order to perform a new or foreign practice in a way appropriate to a second or foreign language cultural setting or context. The extent of these adjustments will vary according to differences between the embodied habitus of students’ home culture and those of the culture being ‘entered into’.

To illustrate how one’s habitus may adjust according to context, I refer to the process a dancer goes through when shifting from one dance style to another. This process and issues it raises can be paralleled to the learning of a second or foreign language. Consider a dancer who has trained primarily in classical technique (their first or native language) but who wants to work in contemporary dance style (a second or foreign language). There are notable differences between the movement and performance qualities of both dance styles, that is, deportment, carriage, turn-out, et cetera. Shifting from a classical dance movement habitus of many years experience to a contemporary dance movement style hinges on several elements. Explicit intervention of a choreographer can illuminate where and how the dancer must change and adjust his/her movement style. Models of how the contemporary style should look, as well as mirrors in rehearsal studios, will also help the dancer to identify and make the adjustments necessary. Thus, the dancer gains agency to control and change his/her style. Initially, adjustment to and performance of the contemporary mode (second/foreign language) will be a conscious process. Eventually, through practical experience, performing in either style will occur naturally and unconsciously according to setting and context.

*Mushfaking* (Gee 1990: 159) is a term coined to refer to the rehearsal of performance which can bridge conscious learning processes and assist their internalisation as habitus, that is, the period of rehearsal-practice that can facilitate the shift from consciously to unconsciously performed action. Just as through
rehearsal and repetition a dancer can relax into a new style, eventually (through repetition) embodied language patterns of a foreign culture can become automatic and unconscious. This is consistent with theories of ritualization, where a frequently repeated action becomes cast into a pattern that can be reproduced with an economy of effort (Wilcox 1999).

These processes of rehearsal and practice may help students develop and improve their English language performances in a realistic way which gives them a ‘feel’ for a language. Through repeated rehearsal, their second/foreign language habitus may emerge. How culturally congruent to the habitus of native speakers this will be, depends crucially on the guidance and intervention of the teacher. Intervention highlighting incongruities and differences in embodied forms between students’ usual habitus and embodied forms of the language they are learning can help in this process.

A further element central to the success of our classical dancer who wants to perform in a contemporary style is how he/she views contemporary dance. Bourdieu indicates that ‘taste’ is directly related to the development of embodied habitus (Shilling 1993: 130). Where performing an embodied practice is ‘tasteful’ to an individual’s social location, it may be taken on. When a practice is ‘distasteful’ it is more problematic. As students’ cultural patterns of communication are the framework by which they come to use English, this issue of taste may help explain why students may actively resist performing certain actions. Neustupny (1987) gives the example of some cultures, such as the Japanese, in which the use of gesture in communicating meaning is considered to be ‘vulgar’ and non-refined (1987: 137). Such taste-related barriers may exist for students in coming to terms with communication networks, such as those in English, that are highly embodied. It is a big step for learners of English to ‘physicalise’ English, that is, to use physical action in their use of English in ways which seem diametrically opposed to how their native language is embodied. If the body chooses what the body ingests both physiologically and psychologically (Shilling 1993: 11), then it is vital that as teachers we make the language of study as attractive to students as possible.

When a foreign practice is performed frequently it can eventually become non-consciously performed. The emergence of this new or modified habitus or disposition comes about in four stages:

1. Becoming aware of embodied practices which are performed
2. Willingness to take on/perform these practices
3. Conscious self-regulation, such as muselfaking, appropriate to the culture in which one is operating
4. Performance of the action automatically and appropriately according to context.
Both usual and new habitus operate according to the cultural contexts in which one finds oneself. Performances adjust according to setting or context (Goffman 1965), and the language one is speaking is an aspect of context. Shifting between the two need not be problematic. It can become natural, for some native Japanese speakers at least, to perform a casual greeting in English with a nod or wave of a hand instead of a bow as normally practised in their native Japanese. This could be termed *bicultural habitus*.

**Teacher intervention**

This section is concerned with how teachers can attend to and facilitate improvement in their students’ embodied performances of English, and draws on EFL classroom activities I conducted in a Japanese high school in which students were required to create and perform scenarios in English. Hall (1959) stresses that where learning is not formal or technical, a principal means of learning is through imitation of a model. The models I supplied in the Japanese school were two video recordings of the same dialogue performed by Australian native English speakers, one delivered with little physical action and in flat monotone, the other (the model I wanted students to emulate) vital and expressive. A comparison of the two recordings allowed me to draw students’ attention to the role of embodied action, pitch, pause, pace and intonation in communicative English.

Let us examine the example of a student-created scenario based around a retail situation. In this situation, the sales clerk, who was seated and remained so, bows to two customers as he asks, *Can I help you?* In bowing, the student embodies his spoken English in a posture that is specifically Japanese. Although he speaks in English, his body signals the status between customer and sales clerk from his own cultural perspective. This combination of forms seems incongruous and awkward from both cultural points of view. To see a clerk bow to customers is odd to most native English speaking viewers. To see a clerk bow to customers whilst seated would also appear odd to native Japanese viewers. The performance is shaped by the way the student conceives an English-speaking shopkeeper to be (seated, asking *Can I help you?*), and by the students’ native cultural habitus (bowing in respect to someone).

If the student playing the role of the sales clerk were to draw upon his exposure to native English speakers, for example, American and other native English language movies and television programs, he would be conscious of the fact that people do not generally bow when speaking English. However, without this insight, he is likely to perform the English phrase in the way his native Japanese habitus dictates. Intervention of the teacher as director or rehearsal master can help the student to recognise the incongruity of his performance.
far sooner than he would come to realise it independently, and to rehearse and adjust it accordingly. Although bowing is part of the student’s Japanese language habitus, repeated embodied practice of the scene without bowing may contribute to the development of his English-language habitus, a non-bowing habitus that will come to be automatically and naturally adopted when operating in English language contexts.

In another student-created retail scenario one of the customers places both hands very deliberately on the table before the store clerk. He leans forward and asks, *Please give me a delicious snack*, slapping the table with both hands whilst speaking the word *delicious*. Whereas the bowing clerk’s action (outlined previously) struck me as being unconsciously performed, this student seems to perform his action with great deliberation. The performance seems to emulate embodied forms he may have seen in American situation comedies on television, that is, humorously aggressive behaviour displayed by some of the male characters in ‘Full House’ (ABC situation-comedy), where characters such as Joey and Jessie often thump the kitchen counter to emphasise a remark. However, in the context of the scenario, there is an odd mismatch between how the student negotiates the aggressive action performed using a polite expression. Although the student may be embodying English in line with the movement style of Joey and Jessie in ‘Full House’, the action he has chosen to execute is not congruent to the context of making a request in a shop, especially one that he qualifies politely with *please*. Again, through discussion (with a teacher/rehearsal director), this cultural point can be clarified for the student, and the action or spoken words altered.

From a Japanese context, goods of quality or merit are exchanged with both hands, regardless of size or weight. If an object of importance such as a name card is taken only with one hand it can be construed as a direct insult to the person from whom it is being taken. In their performances of English, I found that Japanese students regularly used both hands to hold, offer, give and take objects. From a Japanese cultural point of view, exchanging goods in this way is in accordance with their native cultural habitus. To the Western viewer uninitiated to this Japanese custom, the two-handed exchange of goods seems curious when the size and weight of the objects being exchanged do not warrant the use of both limbs. Once students become aware that the two-handed exchange is not customary in English-speaking cultures, they are capable of adjusting their performances. Without this awareness, however, they may continue to perform the exchange of goods as their habitus dictates, resulting in performances of English that may be confusing and misconstrued by native English speakers unfamiliar with Japanese culture. Differences in practices of eye contact and proximity are other elements of language performance that
often need to be explained, and more importantly practised, in order to become comfortable and performed unselfconsciously.

The rehearsal studio mirror assists the dancer in self-correcting and refining his/her dance technique. In much the same way, where practical activity such as role-plays, simulations, performed scenes, skits, et cetera are incorporated into English classes, video-recording students’ work can enable students to view for themselves and consider their own embodied performances of English. Discussion and analysis of these recorded performances of English can lead students to grasp the concept of culturally congruous and incongruous performance. Further rehearsal, practice, and recording and reviewing students’ work can refine or reshape practices to be more culturally congruent.

Implications

For the most part, students instinctively perform English in the same way they embody their native language: in their usual habitus. Many of them naively juxtapose what they take to be Western style communication forms on top of and in conjunction with their own native forms of communication. Where meanings of paralinguistic action are common to both cultures, problems of cross-cultural understanding do not arise (Shilling 1993: 82). Where meanings of paralinguistic action differ, however, students need to become conscious of some of the contradictions and contrasts between cultural forms. While it needs to be remembered that students’ negotiations in the field of English are still in transition, it is important for teachers to illuminate incongruities between the culture-specific actions students do or do not perform. Explicit coaching can serve to help students locate and consider cultural incongruities between their usual modes of embodiment and those appropriate to English. However, making differences in practices sit comfortably on students’ bodies will not happen through information alone, but through practice.

Classroom activities which entail students preparing and acting scenarios will encourage students to negotiate their regular embodied practices with those they perceive appropriate to English in a thoughtful and practical way. Such activities also help them synchronise the way they move and speak in English interdependently. From instigating activities that encouraged embodied performances of English, I found consistently that there was a correlation between embodied action and vocal delivery. Where motion and gesture were performed, tonal variation and pitch-change also occurred. The act of emphatically stressing a word in vocal delivery is likely to impact through the body, just as a physical emphatic gesture while talking will impact on the sound that is produced. Which aspect is conditional on the other is debatable.

In much the same way that a director in the theatre assists actors to shape their performances, so the teacher in the EFL classroom/rehearsal room can
intervene and assist students to improve their performances. Pivotal here is the teacher’s own practical embodied command and knowledge of the target English culture, as well as techniques of illuminating these for students. Teachers must consider when, how, and how much intervention should be given to students in order not to overwhelm them with too many things to be taken into consideration at once. It is important to build students’ confidence in their embodied performances of English, rather than make them too self-conscious about all the incongruities between their practices. Through coaching, practice, watching, questioning, adjusting, repeating, discussing, remodelling, and rehearsing, the teacher may help students to become more comfortable in their embodiment of English and gain a practical understanding of differences between linguistic and embodied forms. Students will gain an awareness of what the target English language cultural norms are, and how their usual embodied practices may violate these (Neustupny 1987: 146).

Rehearsal settings

Rehearsal of the self is a vital step toward achieving fluid performance of a practice (Threadgold 1992). The EFL teacher who wants students to experience and become comfortable in the performance of embodied English must therefore establish pedagogic settings to foster this process. The English classroom can be established as a rehearsal setting, a place to find and negotiate ways of performing embodied English, where body and action as well as the spoken word are regarded as carriers of meaning (Migdalek 1996). Through greater exposure to and practice of the target English as an embodied practice, a smoother, appropriate form of communicative English will develop. With guidance from a director in a rehearsal room over a period of time, an actor is able to relax into a role and perform the same on stage before an audience and appear natural and comfortable in the role. Similarly, with guidance from a teacher/director in the classroom, the performance of English will gradually become more comfortable. As a result, the performance of English beyond the classroom/rehearsal room will become a more familiar and easier experience.

REFERENCES


