



## The HeartSpeak Project: Stepping out of the CLIL Classroom and Learning Language through Dance...

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### Abstract

*I created The HeartSpeak Project in 2009 after many years of teaching two separate subjects; English and dance, in reply to what I saw ten years ago as something parents desperately wanted for their children in Italian state primary schools; the opportunity to experience English in a bilingual environment. In recent years the introduction of CLIL in classrooms in this country has seen a welcome explosion. This project goes a step further and specifically consists of dance classes conducted in L2. What began as a fun experiment has developed into a fully-blown mission. All HeartSpeak sessions are structured using sound principles of dance technique and within a solid framework of English language-learning, combined with a wide variety of music, illustrations and storytelling. Children are encouraged to find a voice, in any 'language' other than the spoken word and in the beginning the emphasis is on listening and comprehension. They are then guided by pictures, story, music and characters with feelings to express what they have absorbed through any means in as many creative ways, gaining confidence and boosting self-esteem in the process. Co-operative learning occurs by way of pairing, small group and whole class activities, as does memory enhancement, co-ordination, spatial awareness and stamina within choreographies that culminate in real performances. By starting with our most basic tool, our body, learners and teachers alike experience how we can always create something both powerful and poignant from nothing. In fact, the HeartSpeak Project prides itself on one simple, basic premise. All you need to take part is a body, some space, and (perhaps) some music. The fact the project needs very little resources in order to work is what makes it so viable. In a fast-moving and constantly changing world, increasingly dominated by high-speed technology, the development of an approach to teaching that encourages more connections and a deeper search within our inner world of the self through the creative arts, I believe, will prove vital. This article will outline very briefly the fascinating journey I have experienced in schools to see for myself the value of the arts as a channel for second-language learning, especially in the early years when language acquisition is blossoming at its fastest pace. But as children must absorb and learn slowly, so HeartSpeak aims for a more nurturing approach, allowing children in the beginning to 'learn a language' without uttering a single word.*

**Keywords:** CLIL, dance, creative arts, connections, language acquisition, bilingualism.

### Introduction

The HeartSpeak Project is, by its very name, an experiment. A word invented for a project that takes an approach to language learning based on the simple premise that our own bodies are our best tool and that to communicate in any way at all does not necessarily require the spoken element of language. Devised for primary schools in north-west Italy after many years of experience and in reply to a very pressing need, the project today appears to meld with a framework of CLIL methodology, now at the forefront of education at all levels. It continues to strive to create an atmosphere that is conducive to language learning for young children, up until the last year of primary school (11 years). With this paper I intend to demonstrate how, specifically dance, (combined with music and art) can be potentially more effective in helping to connect all subjects on the curriculum; the heart of CLIL.

### Stepping out in the gym

Right from the first session, the children step out of the classroom and into the gym and immediately become involved in physical movement. The emphasis is on *listening*, however complete comprehension is not expected. For visual clues the children are encouraged to also look, observe and mimic movements and gestures as well as stillness. The introduction of rhythms, first with body percussion and then the children's own names soon develops to music and the skill of listening is enhanced further. When the children are invited to sit for a story, read by the teacher with no first language translations, listening once again becomes the central focus, where the rhythms and tones of the language are simply to be enjoyed while the illustrations in front of them are essential tools with which to enter into a new L2 world. Coming around full circle, the children then return to the open



space to take part in physical activities that spring from the story and the characters, all led by the teacher in English. Precision not perfection are on display here. It is enough to get the gist of the communication from the teacher, enjoy the 'melody' of the new language as well as the real music and let it accompany the joy of dancing. Many feelings emerge from the first HeartSpeak sessions, with the impact of a mother-tongue English teacher leading a dance lesson, which is why I call these first impressions the E-MOTIONS. The project is full of them.

### **Learning as dancers do**

Curt Sachs, (1881-1959), German musicologist, called dance "the mother of all arts" [1]. I would tend to agree with him, for dancers receive the least acclaim for all their toil and dedication, much like most mothers I know. Donata Zocca, in her book *Laboratorio Danza*, also makes the connection of dance to a maternal and universal bond, suggesting "we all take our first dance steps in the womb" and that according to anthropologists, "there aren't any people anywhere in our world that don't dance"[2]. From my own experience I can confirm that it is very rare to find a child who refuses to dance just as it is very difficult to find someone who actively dislikes moving their body to music. In this project, total refusal to dance has never been an issue. If anything, more lessons could be longer in order to contain the immense energy that children have for dancing stories. Results are visible during performances, where all the practice and hard work becomes *invisible* to the audience, proof that this is learning, performing-arts-style, and not simply a sport or P.E.

Hanna Poikonen, of the Cognitive Brain Research Unit at the University of Helsinki, in her recent paper of 2018 claims that "dancers brains develop in a unique way"[3]. Her results show that dancers' brains react more quickly to changes in music at a subconscious level and that they are more synchronized with frequencies associated with emotions and memory. Her findings claim they could influence future developments of therapies for the treatment of various pathologies such as autism and mood disorders. For HeartSpeak, this is evidence that the inclusion of dance lessons in educational curricula can be of value for a number of reasons and beneficial to children with all kinds of issues; attention deficit disorders, autism and learning difficulties. The lesson here is simple. The tools we have need not be 'perfect' in a conventional sense but when those tools meet music, they can communicate.

### **Learning language like a bilingual baby**

The HeartSpeak Project believes language learning should be as close to first-language learning as possible, thereby giving every child the opportunity to experience what it means to be fully immersed in a bilingual environment where language acquisition is not the single only objective of the lesson but is part of a wider spectrum of development. In other words, a truly holistic interpretation of dual-subject CLIL.

In the same way Caleb Gattegno's Silent Way [4] of teaching English was radical in the 1970s, taking away all reliance by the students on the teacher and his/her voice, this project instead relies completely on the teacher as guide, much like a parent and asks of the children to be mostly silent, at least while dancing. The emphasis on listening is paramount, as is observing in order to gather visual clues for comprehension and it is through illustrated books and animations that the language input is introduced. For primary school children, this project uses the story of "The Snowman" by Raymond Briggs, to demonstrate the value of 'silent' storytelling in L2. The book is wordless, yet young language learners have shown high levels of motivation in a number of activities involving mime, movement and play that require imagination, spatial awareness and co-ordination through musicality, all the while consolidating language skills. The journey the children embark on during the HeartSpeak Project mirrors somewhat the discoveries the character of the snowman encounters. A new world, a new language with which to decode meaning, and like James the young boy in the story, a new way of seeing and dreaming. It is very much a metalinguistic experience, finding language in a story where there is none, and within such a magical story, it is a metaphysical as well as a physical one.

Children nowadays are already used to teaching methods that employ whole participation and 'acting out' of words, phrases and songs in their textbooks. TPR, or Total Physical Response plays a very large part in this project and gives shape to many of the activities proposed in response to story and lexicon. Originally developed by Professor of psychology James Asher in the late 1970s, Asher's observations have very much inspired the aims of this project; that language learning occurs first through listening and internalizing through movement in the body; that effective language learning must engage the right hemisphere of the brain, again where physical movement stems from; and finally that language learning should avoid any negative emotions that would inhibit the natural



process and should be stress-free. Asher describes language acquisition like this; “In a sense, language is orchestrated to a choreography of the human body” [5].

His suggestion that young children spend a long time listening to language before ever attempting to speak, and that they understand utterances much more complex than those they can reproduce themselves, mirrors what I feel many educators may be afraid to try, but which the HeartSpeak Project challenges. The core aspect of our education systems that push children, *all* children, to speak, denies them the time to absorb, consolidate and relish the new language and concepts they are discovering for the first time. This requires new ways of thinking.

Fritjof Capra, in his “*Tao of Physics*” (1975), puts into question old ways of thinking and encourages us to embrace new viewpoints, that will “[transcend] the realms of thought and language [and] which will not be communicated in words.” As an experiential educator, I appreciate the courage needed to envisage education that goes beyond words, even the ‘unthinkable’. Capra quotes the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu more than two thousand years ago who said simply about knowledge, “He who knows does not speak, he who speaks does not know” [6].

### **How the HeartSpeak Project fits into a CLIL programme in schools**

The focus in any discussion involving CLIL revolves around the integration of content with language communication and at its core is multidisciplinary. This added freedom for learning has been seized by the HeartSpeak Project, which can be incorporated into English and Physical Education lessons, as well as music, art, science, geography and history lessons using endless links across the school curriculum with well-chosen stories and poems that illustrate multitudes of topics. But there are other connections to be made too.

In his book ‘*The Systems View of Life*’, Fritjof Capra devotes some time appealing to educators and artists of the need to connect and collaborate and realise the potential of art in education. Encouraging us to perceive differently, he calls for eco-literate future generations who prioritise multidisciplinary connections, processes and relationships over linear knowledge, end products and ‘growth’. This new shift in perception involves visualizing and he sees this moment in time as an opportunity for educators to “open the door for integrating the arts into the school curriculum”[7]. He goes on to stress, “there is hardly anything more effective than the arts – be they the visual arts or music and the other performing arts – for developing and refining a child’s natural ability to recognize and express patterns[...] In addition, the arts enhance the emotional dimension that is increasingly being recognized as an essential component of the learning process.” The HeartSpeak Project answers his call and embraces the idea of pattern in multiple ways; across a vibrant and stimulating network of subjects by means of a ‘foreign’ or second language; through the recreation of illustrations from a linear storyline; through varied and changing patterns in space within choreographies comprising of small group or whole classes that explore 2- and 3-dimensions both on the floor and within the air ; and of course through the students’ very own bodies and feelings. When the learning potential within this framework is so far-reaching, and in a way, unknown and impossible to predict, we could say that words of *any* language are rather superfluous and probably inadequate to describe the process and product which tend to be very much in the moment, fleeting and continuously changing ‘works in progress’.

The growth of CLIL within schools reflects the increasing diversity of our societies and embraces wholeheartedly an inclusive message. As teachers traverse multiple subjects in one lesson it makes sense that they allow students to enter into the content in a similarly varied way. Howard Gardner, Professor in cognition and education wrote about seven (and later eight) intelligences that offered a framework for describing the different learning styles that exist; linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily/kinaesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic. He suggests that “any concept worth teaching can be approached in at least seven different ways”[8]. Specifically, within a project involving dance and the arts, his findings make interesting reading and beg for further development and research concerning innovations in language learning. That “the ability to use one’s body to express an emotion (as in dance) [...] is evidence of the cognitive features of body usage”, is at the core of HeartSpeak’s objectives.

With tightening budgets and resources, schools are often faced with curricular decisions based on finances. The HeartSpeak Project literally lifts words off the pages of books, transforming stories into visual and moving images. There is no limit to the artistic creativity that can spring from a room of bodies in a space with some music and therefore, due to its minimal material requirements, the project is extremely viable in monetary terms, priding itself on the belief that in every sphere ‘less is more’.



In a world increasingly sedentary, The HeartSpeak Project is all about exercise and can tackle a very real problem of child obesity or at the very least enables a child to experience activities that can be practiced later after school.

With growing insecurity for their future, young people and children need a school environment that is able to help improve self-esteem and offer tools with which to cope with stress. With no emphasis on tests, the end of course performance is a 'moment' of achievement in many languages aside from L1 and L2 – the universal languages of dance, music and art combine to communicate a voice and tell a story. Moments of calm and stillness, self-reflection and empathy mean that The HeartSpeak project offers small doses of psychotherapy through movement, music and art while consolidating authentic language communication against a CLIL backdrop.

Gender issues will undoubtedly surface during the first dance lessons but HeartSpeak challenges full on the stereotype that dance is a 'feminine pastime'. HeartSpeak specifically targets boys throughout, with carefully chosen choreography and music that allows them to touch a more sensitive side of themselves. More importantly, they are permitted to show to others without ridicule, and importantly as artists. The HeartSpeak Project is inspired by initiatives such as Project B, a three-year project run by the Royal Academy of Dance that aims, as one of its ambassador teachers Jason Thomas says, "to make boys proud to dance"[9].

## Conclusion

Children are not robots, nor should education be reduced to a mechanism to be programmed. Despite the recent rush to technologize everything and everyone, I beg to suggest that we take a moment to slow down and re-evaluate the power of our own bodies that physically makes us people. We must give children the time to savour for themselves activities requiring feelings that go beyond numbers in test results and gaps to be filled on pages. Their ideas, imaginations and curiosity must be sparked in multiple and exciting ways in order to help them learn about a world they have yet to enter fully but which will ask of them many attributes in the future. To embark on a task with the energy of a young child influences how we grow and become who we are. I suggest education must start from much deeper. If we can connect with our inner selves, touch a part of us rarely exposed when we listen, feel, move and express all of this richness through the languages of the arts, then we can begin to connect to others, the big wide world around us and ultimately, learn. The HeartSpeak Project is E-MOTION in its purest sense. It is the invisible thread of a myriad of languages that whisper to us in new, diverse and mysterious ways. When we dance, long before we can speak with words, those whispers of 'language' can simply be heard in the heart.

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