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talking-dancing-howling-walking-whispering-spiraling…

Learning English while performing a dance score from the 1970s

Agnès Benoit

Abstract

"Moving Words in Space" is an artistic and teaching practice based on a dialogue between dance improvisation and language learning. I have been developing this teaching approach with adults for the last twenty-five years, but I have also used it with children to teach English under the name "Jump'n Turn". In this contribution, I retrace the developmental stages of "Moving Words in Space", before describing how I use performance scores to introduce children to the English language through "Jump'n Turn". To illustrate this process, I use "Scramble" (1970), an exercise and performance score originally created by the American dancer and choreographer Simone Forti. The tasks are extremely simple yet have a strong pedagogical potential. I explain how I guide young children through the activities so they can experience language fully through movement while performing a score that was created during the development of postmodern dance in the United States.

Résumé

"Moving words in space" est une pratique pédagogique et artistique à la croisée de l'improvisation en danse et de l'apprentissage des langues. Il s'agit d'une approche pédagogique que j'ai développée pendant plus de vingt-cinq ans avec des adultes mais que je propose également aux enfants, et que je nomme alors "Jump'n Turn" lorsqu'il s'agit de l'initiation à l'anglais. Pour la présente contribution, j'aborde le processus d'élaboration de "Moving words in space". Je décris ensuite la manière dont je pratique des partitions chorégraphiques avec des enfants tout en les initiant à la langue anglaise dans les ateliers "Jump'n Turn". Je prends l'exemple de Scramble (1970), qui est un exercice et une partition chorégraphique de la danseuse et chorégraphe américaine Simone Forti. Il s'agit d'une série de tâches simples détentrices d'un fort potentiel pédagogique. J'explique comment je transmets cette partition à de jeunes enfants, afin de leur faire vivre une réelle expérience de la langue, au travers de l'action et de leur corps en mouvement. Dans un même temps, ils interprètent une partition créée lors du développement de la danse post-moderne, aux Etats-Unis.

1 Little wolves

It is a school day, we're working in a multi-purpose room in a primary school, on the outskirts of Bordeaux, in France. About twelve children are moving around the room, carefully avoiding each other and taking up the whole space. The group constantly reconfigures itself. At times it gets very tight and a second later it expands, it breathes like an ongoing mass moving swiftly. One could imagine a flock of birds, a school of fish… There is always some giggling taking place, mischievous eyes, the eagerness to run into each other, collide and fall onto the floor. After all, they are just first graders, performing a dance score from the 1970s, with no music.

This is our last session, and the children know the instructions in the score very well. Much as a six-year-old would like to bump into a friend, they have embraced the possibility of moving through the group while remaining mindful of the whole room and the softness of their bodies.

I definitely can't see it, but I surely can hear it. I hear a pack of wolves! I hear a chorus of howls coming from two distinct groups. Another dozen children sitting on benches with their teacher and I, carefully watching the other half of the class moving through space, are actually communicating with the performers. It is a soft howl, almost a whisper, a murmur, but one can distinctly hear the sound wooooooo… It is missing the "a" as in a wolf's howl, but at this very precise moment I think to myself: "they're experiencing the talking-doing that Baptiste Morizot writes about."

> The grouping howl thus merges several functions of human speech: informative, incentive, performative. There is all of language, without language, in this howl. It is simultaneously a talking-of (I'm here), a talking-to (find me) and a talking-doing. It formulates, in a single unseparated song: 'I'm here, where are you? Let's be a pack'; but it also makes the pack by saying these things.

At this moment, I see the little ones embracing a *talking-doing* with such poetry, exactly what I am looking for when working with children. Even though we agreed to move in silence, I can still see their lips moving, as if I had asked them the impossible. For them this specific action is related to the word "through." And as they're saying it in the softest voice one doesn't hear it so well but one can just recognise the end of it as it lingers through their lips. I have seen this in many groups already, yet what intrigues me here is that the children witnessing the dance are also experiencing it.

They are imperceptibly shifting the weight of their sitz bones onto the bench, still linking this motion to the word "through." None of these children would be able to translate this word

into French, but they have experienced it in their bodies, it has a physical and possibly emotional meaning for them.

As they're moving through space I can almost sense the air going through their lips. From our on-going practice of learning how to pronounce the word "through," the body remembers, the whole jaw, the tongue, the breathing… are still in action. One doesn't hear the whole word. It remains a ghostly memory. And these children, as packs of wolves do, are communicating with one another, they're experiencing a talking-doing.

2 Interlude

I have been working with this group of children for a period of ten classes. Each session is one-hour long, taking place about every two weeks, over a period of four months. The children are introduced to the English language and exploration of movement simultaneously, in a very playful way. Over the course of a few months, as we're developing a language and movement vocabulary, in total immersion, the pupils also learn some basic improvisation and choreographic skills.

Jump'n Turn was developed over many years. I look at it as a pedagogical approach, not a technique or method. It is part of a larger family that has many branches, but the core remains the same. It just requires a different focus and intention depending on the language I'm teaching and the group of people I'm working with. We might say, it calls for different teaching tools.

Before going further into the exercise described above, which I call *Through,* I will share the development of this pedagogical practice.

3 "Dancing in French"

In the Fall of 1997, while studying for my dance MFA at Bennington College, Vermont, two professors, Susan Sgorbati[1] and Isabelle Kaplan[2], approached me with the following question: "What would happen if dance improvisation and language acquisition were to come together?" The following semester a cross-disciplinary course appeared on the curriculum:

[1] In 1997, Susan Sgorbati was the co-leader of the dance program. She's now director of the Center for the Advancement of Public Action and interim director of the MFA in Public Action at Bennington College.

[2] Isabelle Kaplan was at the time the director of the Regional Center for Languages and Cultures at Bennington College. She's now retired.

Moving from words. Speaking through movements - and learning French. But the students simply called it dancing in French.

The cross-disciplinary component was crucial in the elaboration of this course. It was open to students from any disciplines and levels of studies, with the intention of creating an environment in which everyone would learn at their own pace. The combination of dance improvisation and language learning resulted in a horizontal teaching approach, with no hierarchy between language and dance, or between students, as all levels of proficiency were mixed. Very often, movement is used to support language learning. In this specific case, dance and language were meant to feed and support each other mutually. Getting familiar with an unfamiliar language, experimenting with linguistic forms, are as important as getting into a state of dance, developing movement skills, and learning how to work as a group. Curiosity and playfulness thus become key ingredients of the learning process.

When smiles and laughter appeared, the body would instantly relax, as would the tongue, enabling speech to flow. Repeating words and linking them together brought pure joy, even though the sentences formed didn't always make sense. These moments became beautiful, poetic dances. For example, two students crawled onto the floor and sang together. "J'aime les fleurs qui nagent avec les poissons[3]." It was important to remain in this playful exchange so as to avoid too static or frontal conversation mode, which would eventually bring the movement and the oral exchange to an end.

As I was exploring how to develop a pedagogical approach combining language, dance improvisation and playfulness, two dance practices which I was familiar with came to mind: Contact Improvisation (CI), a duet dance form, initiated by American dancer and choreographer Steve Paxton[4]. And Logomotion, a dance/narrative improvisation form, created by American dancer and choreographer Simone Forti[5]. Both of these practices became

[3] I love flowers swimming with fish.

[4] Steve Paxton (1939-2024) was part of the New York City avant-garde post-modern dance scene in the 1960s. He was a member of the Judson Dance Theater and of the collective Grand Union. Paxton was the founder of Contact Improvisation (1972), a duet dance form in which participants give and take each other's weight. He pursued his career presenting many solos internationally and in 1986 he began developing "material for the spine," A system for exploring the interior and exterior muscles of the back.

[5] Simone Forti (born in 1935), grew up in Los Angeles and studied dance on the west coast with Anna Halprin. She moved to New York City in 1959. Forti was very active in the New York City post-modern dance and performance scene of that time. She's known for her *Dance Constructions,* presented at Yoko Ono's studio in 1961. She developed *Logomotion* in the mid-1980s.

a real source of inspiration as I developed “Dancing in French”. After completing my MFA, I went on to teach at the University of Rochester, NY, where “Dancing in French” was among the courses I taught.

Interlude

Here are a few observations from my own experience as a language learner: Learning a language in a fully immersive environment is a matter of survival.

Learning English in a UK international school, where more than fifteen other languages are spoken, is a blessing. English becomes the common language while so many other languages are floating, bouncing and dancing around.

Learning Spanish came from a deep desire to reconnect with my grandfather, who distanced himself from his mother tongue in order to fit into French culture.

Moving to the US after learning British English was like learning another language. It wasn't about the accent or the differences in vocabulary or spelling; it was more about entering a new culture.

At some point, I came to realise that I had a French dancing body and an English dancing body, as words resonate differently inside and outside, as they pass through my spine, limbs, and heart. And it made total sense.

4 “Moving words in space”

I moved back to France in 2013 and started teaching English through movement, first to adults and then to children. In 2021, I received a research grant from the *Centre National de la Danse* (CND). I had been teaching for many years and I felt I needed to take time to reflect on my own practice. I chose to call it “Moving words in space”, with the idea that it could be geared towards any language. I defined “Moving words in space” as an artistic and teaching practice focusing on a dialogue between dance improvisation and language acquisition. I asked the following questions: In what way can an unknown or unfamiliar language start making sense while we’re moving? How can it resonate within the body and initiate a dance? This practice offers an ongoing dialogue between movement and words as they’re starting to find their shape within the body and throughout space.

When teaching a “Moving words in space” workshop, I encourage everyone to repeat the vocabulary I introduce. We play with sounds, we let words resonate inside the body and through space. Playfulness is key. We always start with the concrete, with what we have, with our bodies and the space we are in. I often introduce body parts: rotating the joints, folding and unfolding the arm at the elbow, feeling the length of the spine with its many curves,

visualising it as a river flowing upwards or downwards… placing a cushion of air between each of the vertebrae.

One exercise I like combines Contact Improvisation and Logomotion. I ask participants to find a partner and sit with their backs to each other on the floor. While sensing their partner's back, I suggest they start a simple conversation and slowly begin to move, following the point of physical contact and moving from the back to different parts of the body. The pair continues to support each other's weight without interrupting the conversation. Their joint focus is both on the area of physical contact and the ongoing verbal exchange. Fluidity varies across individuals: some are more at ease with movement, others are more fluent with speech. But all must pay attention to motion *and* speech as they dance, and this has the effect of reducing the inhibition felt by everyone.

I encourage participants to keep their vocabulary simple. If they only know a couple of English words, that's just fine: they can repeat them over and again. Playfulness is key. There is no sense of doing it right or wrong; the idea is to enter into a dance while playing with words. As the two dancers engage in moving and speaking together, they build a shared vocabulary, which differs from one duet to the next. They get involved in an improvisation and enter a simple dialogue. Words and movements merge, then go their own way, without much concern for the meaning of the spoken sentences or the "beauty" of the dance. The participants welcome a kind of poetry into their dance and conversation, while broadening their vocabulary in both dance and language. A moment later, they are rolling on the floor, bodies spreading loosely across the room, rolling from side to side, stopping, resting, rolling again, while articulating the letter "r". *And so, we do roll, and we do rest*.

I develop a wide range of such exercises, in which movement and language come together, meet, mingle… But what about entering a dance state without necessarily speaking, in which language shows the way, carves the experience, finds its way deep into our joints, bones, tissues? How can it become an embodied experience? And also, how can it be linked to part of history, culture?

With this in mind, I would like to discuss a specific exercise that I often begin a "Moving words in space workshop" with. *Scramble* is a dance score Forti created in the Seventies and which I have since learned from her. It is extremely simple and yet so profound. When teaching adults, I share *Scramble* with some variations that I will describe below. But when teaching this exercise to children, a whole new world opens up. After exploring this in school settings for a number of years, I came to realise that *Scramble* had fed and influenced my teaching practice more than I had thought it would. It had helped me find ways of guiding simple, multi-layered tasks in a language children did not own.

5 Scramble

Scramble is often referred to as a warm-up exercise that can lead to a performance score. It can also be seen as a movement game or task-based structure. In an article in *Contact Quarterly* from 1984, Forti describes this dance score.

> In my workshops, I've evolved a movement game I call the scramble. I've done it with anywhere from five to twenty-five people. I can imagine it with hundreds. Essentially, the directions are for each person to go darting through the spaces between the other people. The whole group starts to scramble and the experience is exhilarating. How is it exhilarating? There's the sense of moving through a new medium. Not just air, not water, but a dynamic shifting field of spaces and solids in constant articulation, and one experiences oneself lunging and darting, twisting and falling through this constantly shifting environment. The environment is of individuals. The experience is of group. One sees all the faces passing, lit up with energy and fun eyes alert and focusing broadly to take in all the quickly changing spatial information. Poetically speaking, there's a sharing of body and feeling with a group field of energy, as if all the individual electrical fields were being scrambled together; there's a participating in the ancient dance of schooling together.

Scramble is an exercise Forti often introduced at the beginning of her workshops. At times it was performed in front of a small or large audience at the end of a workshop. It has also been shown in museums during openings of some of her exhibits throughout the world. It is a movement game that has been experienced by many international professional and non-professional dancers, and still very little has been written about it, probably because of the extremely simple nature of the task. But recently, in her 2024 book, *Simone Forti – Improvising a Life,* dancer and scholar Ann Cooper Albright wrote the following description.

> The instructions are deceptively simple: move quickly through the studio, finding the spaces between two people and sliding through them without touching either person. As the score progresses and the participants become more comfortable with the speed, they begin to relax and allow their kinetic reflexes to take over any decision making needed to avoid collisions. Then, something truly magical happens.

The experience as an individual or as a group is always indeed magical and poetic. A shift takes place and ripples throughout the space. In 2021, as part of the *Moving words in space* research, I visited Forti in Los Angeles and we had several conversations together. During one of them, she described such a moment.

> One time I did it with a group of performers, in Salzburg at a museum, and there was a large outdoor space. And somehow that day Scramble really took everybody and they were like birds when you see how birds fly together. They were getting close together and far apart and going in waves together, in curves together. It was really joyful and beautiful. I often tell them to go easy on initiating anything, but to read the mood of what's happening in the group and to keep with that. Of course, then if you want to contrast and start another thing, you can do that, but to have that sensitivity to what's moving, what quality is coming into play or really pulling the whole group.

When taught to dance students or professional dancers, *Scramble* really expands in multi directions, offering endless exploration possibilities and experiences of *fields of energy.* David Zambrano[6], a Venezuelan dancer based in Brussels, studied and performed with Forti in the 1980s. He developed his own movement practice, *Passing Through,* grounded in his experience of dancing *Scramble* with Forti.

Throughout the Nineties, as a young dancer taking many workshops, I studied with both of them in different contexts and formats. Years later I realised that when teaching *Scramble,* I was actually transmitting a mix between *Scramble* and *Passing Through.* When visiting Forti in 2021, in Los Angeles, I invited Zambrano via a video call from Brussels to join us. My intention was for them to talk about the development of *Scramble* and *Passing Through.* During this conversation Zambrano recalls.

> I remember the first time Simone asked us to just walk, always between two people. As you go through the room you practice walking between two people. And in that time, it was walking with the front of the body, and I loved that. I immediately included it in my warm-ups when working with groups.

He further explained that with his different dance background and interests, he started developing *Passing Through* by offering other options, such as walking backwards, moving in curves and adding spiraling through the body, as well as moving through different pathways by extending arms and legs, while going between two people.

Forti and Zambrano's teaching approach is immersive. They give instructions and describe the process while dancing with the participants, adding layers as they're tuning in to the group dynamic. When teaching a "Moving words in space" workshop, I introduce *Scramble/Passing Through* in a similar way, but I do need to introduce the English vocabulary carefully, so that

[6] David Zambrano has been developing improvisation practices Flying low and Passing through for many years. In 2018 he initiated Tictac Art Centre as an artistic home base, in Brussels.

it can grow. As the participants are walking, they're simultaneously experiencing the action and the positioning of their vocal chords, jaw, lips and tongue, as they're pronouncing "I'm walking," "we're walking." Further along, we also practice the word "through," the positioning of the tongue, the silent "th" sound.

This is what triggered my interest in transmitting this exercise to children. The "th" sound is a complex one for French learners and it is important to practice it at a young age.

6 "Jump'n Turn"

My interest in teaching language to children also started while studying at Bennington College. During my first year, I took a course on Second language acquisition. One of the requirements involved first-hand experience in local primary schools. During this time, I started teaching French to homeschooled children as well, which I kept doing throughout my years of living in Rochester. When I moved back to France, I started teaching in primary school settings again and developed "Jump'n Turn", the kids' version of "Moving words in space". In "Jump'n Turn", the dialogue between dance improvisation and learning English remains, but the approach is quite different. Or I should say the environment and the context play an important role.

For the present contribution, I have chosen to focus on a group of first graders (6-7 years old) as each age group requires some adjustments. When teaching in a school, I work with a whole class, usually a group of about 20 to 25 children who are roughly the same age. (In the French priority education network known as REP+, groups tend to be smaller, comprising only 10 to 12 pupils). It is important to note that the children have not expressed their wish to participate. Neither have they expressed any desire to dance or learn English. It is the teacher who has shown interest. At this young age, the children are still in the process of acquiring strict classroom routines and attitudes, such as sitting at a desk, listening and participating. As they enter a room that has no desks or chairs, it feels like playtime, and the excitement is very palpable.

Playfulness can be very helpful when trying to go beyond inhibition, especially for adults, but with youngsters, there is rarely a fear of "not understanding," "going along," "repeating words without knowing what they mean." They learn fast. It is a real treat. It is thrilling, but it is also a challenge, a fine line between playfulness and total chaos. Captivating my audience is crucial, taking them on board with me is essential. They also need to understand that even though we're playing, we are at work, we're focusing on specific tasks. When practising *Scramble* and *Passing Through,* the change of rhythm is very important and going into running can be exhilarating. But with young children, running is already a given and so we need to work from

a different perspective, asking: what is the full spectrum of possibilities between stillness and walking “fast”?

Interlude

As we gather for our very first “Jump’n Turn” class, I ask the children if they speak other languages than French at home. There are always a few children who are bilingual or trilingual in various languages. We speak about learning a language within the family or environment context, but also through play. I explain that we're about to embark on a special journey where English will be the only language we speak. We get up, gather in a circle, connect our index fingers with the person standing next to us, and together we say: “one, two, three, connection.” From this moment on, the children know that English, and English alone, will be spoken, while French awaits in our shoes. And as we embark on this imaginary journey together, the children are given permission to act as parrots. They are actually encouraged to repeat everything I say. And so, off we go, travelling together to a faraway land where people just speak English and dance together.

7 Warming-up

This circle and finger ritual is extremely important. After a couple of sessions, the children understand the routine and are looking forward to it. It helps them feel more present, and to get ready to speak a language they don’t know yet. At first, the parrot game encourages a kind of mimicry; the children repeat everything I say and imitate my movements. They immerse themselves in the English language and different ways of dancing, before owning it. Together, we build a vocabulary based on body parts (self-massage as we’re naming shoulder, elbow…), qualities of movement (slow, fast, soft, hard, fluid…), directions in space (up, down, front, back…).

We explore some Contact Improvisation (CI) exercises. I introduce different qualities of touch through self-massages. We begin to work with light contact with a partner. For example: facing each other, connecting finger to finger, eyes closed and listening to one’s partner through the physical point of contact. We also practice an exercise we call “Push and Pull” to feel the exchange of weight through the partner’s hands, all the way down to the feet, keeping a softness in the body. I introduce the word “soft” as opposed to “hard,” so that when collision might occur, bodies bounce back without interrupting the flow of movement. We work on getting used to going in and out of the floor, introducing spiraling pathways.

The vocabulary I choose is very specific. It has to be simple and efficient, yet at the same time must be filled with images. As we’re practicing our “pliés,” as in any dance class, the seventeenth century French vocabulary transforms into “softening the back of the knees” for

adults, but for young children I shorten it to “soft knees.” So, when later on I might say: “soft bodies,” as we’re walking between people (*Scramble*), the children have a kinesthetic memory and immediately soften their joints throughout the body, with a grin on their faces. We might also be drinking “a cup of tea” as we’re sitting on the floor, crossing and uncrossing our legs without using our hands (they’re busy holding the imaginary cup while trying not to spill any “tea” onto the floor). We rally butterflies, spiders, monkeys, bears along the way, but also flowers, rocks, rivers, scissors, tables… We might find ourselves saying: “let’s have a cup of tea,” “oops sorry,” “kiss,” “hug,” “how are you?”

Their word collection is constantly expanding, as is their ability to move freely in the room while we get involved in some improvisation scores. The children won’t be actively producing language, but they will start to understand more and more and to choose the right English vocabulary according to specific movements. The focus here is on a dialogue between the exploration of movement and an introduction to the English language. I further ask: how can children experience a state of dance, even for a brief moment, as they are guided in a language they do not fully understand? How can they embody an experience through a foreign language?

8 “Through” (Scramble)

We take it step by step. My intention is for the whole group to experience *Scramble,* even if it’s just for a few minutes. I invite them to fully engage in this dance score. The warm-up and several exercises have opened the way. Some notions are well established: I walk, I stop, I run, I don’t run, I walk forwards, I walk backwards, I walk in a curve… The challenging part is for the children to understand that they need to walk between two people and not just randomly. So, we all stand up, gather in a group and I demonstrate: “I look,” “one” (pointing to one child), “two” (pointing to a second child close to the first one), “I walk through” (walking between those two children), “I stop.” I repeat the action. Then we slowly practice together: “I look, one, two, I walk through, I stop.” We get a rhythm going. Stopping is important; it allows the whole group to focus again. Once they fully understand this string of actions, we skip it and start by just saying “through.” Then, we pause again and spend some time practicing how to pronounce “through.” Little kids have a lot of fun when slightly sticking their tongue out, not too much, not too little, while trying to avoid a spitting contest.

As the children get involved in ever-changing movement pathways, it is very tempting for them to bounce against one another or push each other. We clarify: “I push,” “I don’t push.” And we work on pushing and not pushing as we’re saying it. Collisions do happen, we acknowledge them. We invite our soft bodies to join in and keep gathering and scattering while exclaiming: “oops,” “sorry,” “excuse-me.” At this point, children’s faces light up. They

finally have the permission to softly bump into one another, while acknowledging it and speaking it out.

We keep building by giving the possibility of extending our limbs, especially fingers and the whole length of the arm, not forgetting to move in all directions. We spend time watching half of the class performing "*through"* and we talk about how the group organises itself. We bring our attention to watching a score we're already familiar with, and we learn from it. We always keep a friendly gaze.

We assemble the score step by step, introducing new ingredients each week, always speaking out our movements. We keep on practicing, and at some point the music comes in. It allows for more fluidity, it helps with the softening, the rhythm, the joy of moving through space. But we also talk about keeping our intentions clear, finding ways to keep our interests alive.

Around the sixth or seventh class, we have three different versions of *Through:*

- talking-dancing,
- with music (they may keep talking if they want to),
- in silence (no music and no talking).

The silent version has different layers. Each time we do it, we decide how long we can maintain it. No talking, with no music is demanding for children, and they have to be up for it. So our *Through* performance in silence can vary anywhere between thirty seconds and three minutes!

8. Driving on the Los Angeles freeway

We end our work sessions with our circle and finger ritual. Together we say: "one, two, three, disconnection." Then, we sit in a circle, French has returned. We take the time to point out details, ask questions, explain some complex concepts, but we never go into any translations. After we've practiced *Through* for some time, I tell them about Simone Forti: where she lives, how old she is, what her work is… I tell them that *Through* is actually called *Scramble,* that it has been performed by adults in many places around the world and in some international museums. They like hearing the story; it makes the experience more real, more concrete. Depending on the age group, I go into more detail about the history of post-modern dance. I send a link to their teacher so that they can view a performance of *Scramble* together. And I tell them the story of *Scramble.* I describe LA highways and how Forti told the story in our 2021 conversation, with Zambrano:

> [Scramble] came quite a bit later for me, when I went to LA and was at CalArts. I was learning how to drive and I couldn't imagine how people knew it was safe to change lanes. How did they know that two cars weren't going

> to suddenly decide to go into the same empty spot. So, I thought I'd make something to get the feel of how people can safely go through spaces at the same time and feel what's going to happen and how to go through…

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