

Breaking the Boundaries and Unfolding Language:

Learning to read through dance

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In admiration of an exquisite piece of art work, we often say the piece speaks to us. A simple expression of appreciation might include a general statement of beauty, but to say that art speaks to us, means something very different, something far more powerful. It is a recognition of the broken barrier which defines art from the rest of our surroundings. It speaks to us as we are drawn in, immersing our own existence into that of the work. By extraction, when saying that art speaks to us, we have given the piece of artwork its own language, one built within a deep connection and appreciation. When we exclaim that the art work has spoken to us, no one turns and looks with befuddled looks of peculiar wonder at the words we have just spoken. They understand, turning to listen to or read the language of the piece for themselves.

Martha Graham, one of the most influential leaders in the world of contemporary dance, once said “Dance is the hidden language of the soul.” Unlike any other sport, dance has a vocabulary of endless combinations that can be put together as words and sentences of movement, to create stories as diversely as our own written and spoken language. The question is, why does this extraordinary language remain hidden? If ballet is its own language of moment, can we then study it as a language? Just as our own written and spoken languages, ballet is a language with its own interpretations of phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, and comprehension. By examining how to teach the language of dance through literary processes including phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, and comprehension, we hopefully can gain similar results in improvement and progress from a physical representation of language.

Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness is an auditory processing ability to distinguish and manipulate the sequences of sounds and syllables (Module 2, 2017). The typical phonological awareness sequence in increasing level of difficulty includes: rhyming words, sentence segmentation; blending: syllable blending, blending onset-rimes, phoneme blending; and segmentation: syllable segmentation, phoneme segmentation, phoneme deletion and manipulation (Module 2, 2017). As soon as the identification of sounds becomes a question of the printed word, it is no longer phonological awareness, but phonetics. Phonological awareness is the first building block step to phonetics which directly affects students ability to read and write. Because of this, difficulty with phonological awareness becomes a root problem for students with learning and reading disabilities.

The “phonics analysis table, phonics skill hierarchy, applying phonics skills to sight words and reading miscues” is used to analyze student’s difficulty reading words phonetically (Module 4, 2017). By looking at the written word and the child’s response or attempt at reading the word, a teacher can identify where exactly on the phonics analysis table the child most struggles. This area is indicative of difficulties that may be addressed through phonological awareness. Children may struggle with individual phonemes such as basic initial and final consonant sound identifications or short vowel sounds. Consonant blends are sounds where two individual consonant sounds are connected to create one unit such as “bl,” “cr,” “-nd,” or “-st.” consonant digraphs are examples of a singular new sound that is formed by the combination of two consonants such as in “sh” or “ch.” Other examples of areas of difficulty could include CVCe Long V (final e) (“a_e”), the r controlled vowels such as “er,” vowel digraphs where teams of vowels create long vowel sounds such as “ai” or “ea,” and inflected endings such as “ing,” ed,” or “s.”

To begin understanding the language of ballet, it must first be understood that ballet steps build off each other in terms of strength, coordination, and difficulty. Young dancers are taught the foundation steps including: plié, relevé, tendu, and souté. Plié is the first step in ballet, meaning to bend the knees, building strength in the rotation of the legs and finding a connection in to the floor as well as flexibility and stretch of the Achilles tendon and calf muscles. Plié is performed in the 5 positions of ballet. Relevé means to rise and is the action of pushing down against the floor with stretched knees to rise up on the ball of the foot (demi-pointe). Tendu means to stretch and is the action of pointing the leg and foot out either front, side, or back (devant, à la second, or derrière). Souté means to jump and is the action of beginning in plié, pushing through relevé, to jump off the floor with stretched tendu legs. These steps in their essence, plié, relevé, tendu, and souté are the ballet equivalent of basic ballet phonemes. There are many positions in which these steps can be performed, and many alterations that can be added to create new steps. Once a ballet vocabulary is developed, steps are combined in more complex patterns referred to as combinations. These combinations become the sentences of ballet.

In my preparatory class of 7-8 year olds, one of the first blended phonemes that we learn a new step called degasé. This step is similar to tendu, only instead of leaving the toes on the floor as the leg and foot slide to pointe out, the toes extend long off the floor approximately 2 inches. In teaching degasé, we first break the step down into its phoneme (tendu) and phoneme manipulation (lifting off the floor). We take a 4-count exercise from first position (the basic position in which the dancer stands on rotated legs with her heels together and toes opened apart). Exercise: [tendu, lift, tendu, close first]. Once students master this exercise, they are challenged to blend their ballet phonemes together to create the full degasé step, brushing the

foot against the floor immediately off the floor and back in to first. Building a strong foundation within the ballet phoneme is essential to training the body to accurately perform the fully blended *degasé*. Especially in more advanced examples of steps, this becomes increasingly important, not only to the initial learning of the step, but also to the continued growth and improvement of the ballet technique within the step. In a full ballet class, the dancers begin at the ballet barre, working on simple *pliés* and *relevés* in each of the five positions, advancing through several *tendu*, *degasé*, and *piqué* exercises, moving into an increasingly more demanding step each time. Building a strong and knowledgeable foundation of technique at the barre will hopefully then translate into stronger more technical center work.

The following strategies as explained in Module 2 (2017) for teaching phonological awareness to struggling children includes unison responding in which all children repeat back the broken-down parts of the words. This method is utilized in teaching general new steps. As in the broken-down combination for *degasé*, students who repeat back out loud the 4 counts of the exercise before performing it, showed greater success and faster blending ability than those who do not repeat back the steps within the combination.

Visual representations can aid in this process of teaching phonological awareness, as can manipulatives such as tiles, fingers, sound boxes, or cubes, and physical cues and actions (Module 2, 2017). In these situations, each phoneme can be given its own tile or other manipulative and children can use hands-on integration to build their own words. Model-lead-test formats are structured such that the teacher says the sound, teacher and students say the sound, and then just students repeat back the sound. Exercises may also include the rhythmic patterns of clapping out the specified fragments of a set of sounds, either words in a sentence, syllables in a word, or phoneme sounds in a word. In learning *degasé*, some of my students

struggled to clarify each phoneme. We clapped 4 claps while saying the 4 ballet phonemes out loud. This hands-on focus on rhythmic patterns for specific building blocks helped those who were struggling with incorrect blending maintain clarity in their executions. As we maintained a strong foundation of the basic parts to degasé, students were able to build a more technically sound beginning to their degasé step.

Phonics

While ballet and our English language both have similar phonological awareness necessities, phonics involves the written language. It is a recognition of the written word as its meaning. Ballet is a language spoken in musical movement, written in class. As students advance and combinations become more difficult to memorize, a form of literacy develops in their ability to read the quicker combinations as demonstrated by the teacher, and recreate them on their own maintaining their own syntactic structure.

Strategies for teaching phonetics includes three approaches: synthetic or explicit phonics, analytic implicit phonics and analogy based phonics as discussed in Module 3 (2017). In synthetic or explicit phonics, students convert letters and different combinations of letters to form a word. A student may be given the knowledge of the letters d, o, and g, and be asked to blend them to create the word “dog” (Module 3, 2017). In analytic implicit phonics, students analyze the letters and sounds within words they have already learned without breaking up the letters’ sounds, starting to identify larger phonemes as a single unit. During a phonics lesson, a teacher may break up activities to introduce the new word or sound by modeling the decoding of this sound, working through a guided group practice, or using a mixed practice to combine and identify the new sound in combination with other sounds (Module 3, 2017).

Synthetic phonics is a tool that is not often explained while utilized in teaching ballet. Often students are asked to break a part a full step, but when they are given the parts to the step and asked to blend them to create the step on their own, this process is rarely explained to them. Even in the prior example teaching degasé, students are typically asked to work backwards from the full step without guidance towards making the connection for themselves.

In one specific class, I had two students deeply struggling with a step we were working on called fondué to passé. I gave the combination as a breakdown of ballet phonemes to be layered and blended to create the step. Exercise: [coupé, fondu, stretch, hold, fondu, stretch, passé, lift]. This combination was to occur devant (coupé in front) and derrière (coupé in the back) 4 times. Each movement had a count. We spent 10 minutes of class time working with 2 students on learning this combination before execution. I said the combination many times, demonstrated the combination, and talked through the combination while demonstrating at a slower pace. We clapped out the individual steps. We participated in a guided group practice. But each time when I stepped back and asked the two students to recall the combination individually, they could not. They forgot parts or added additional ballet phonemes that were not a part of the movement. We revisited the combination the following class, this time I brought my small whiteboard. I wrote out the counts and under each count, the phoneme. We read the count and phoneme together individually. This visual representation of synthetic phonics showed great success and for what we were unable to accomplish the class prior, both students understood and were able to recall and execute the combination.

Fluency

According to Rasinski, there are three main aspects of fluency: recognition accuracy, word recognition automaticity, and oral reading with appropriate prosodic features, ie. stress,

pitch, phrasing, and expression (Rasinski, 2009, 3). Successful fluency requires the child to both decode and understand simultaneously. In order to develop automaticity of word recognition, exposure to a range of text and repeated practice is important (Rasinski, 2009, 4). Opportunities to practice reading at their own level individually and practicing with a scaffolding teacher at a challenge level are great tools to continue to push for fluency growth (Rasinski, 2009, 4).

Typically, fluency skills develop in the second and third grade (Kuhn et al., 2011, 3), similar in age to when fluency within dance is becoming more necessary and demanded. Three strategies for teaching fluency are outlined by Kuhn et al. (2011). The first is partner reading (Kuhn et al., 2011, 7). As partners take turns alternating reading parts of the story together, they engage in both active reading and guiding. By listening and following their partner, the listener can help if the partner struggles with a specific word. This error recognition teaches the listener how to self-check his own reading, while drawing attention to help him remember specific areas of difficulty.

One exercise for developing fluency skills that my ballet classes enjoy is based upon this partner reading strategy. We divide the class in a few small groups. This activity is best completed with *petite allegro*, one of the most fluency challenging parts of ballet class. *Petite allegro* is “small jumps,” to which there are a series of different small and fast jumps. The first round we focus on the identification of steps and terminology. I demonstrate a combination without saying the terms only once through. Students work together to re-construct the combination on their own. When I feel that most groups have completed, each group presents the combination to the class. Groups must first say out loud the combination terminology without movement, and then show us the steps of the combination. The group that shows the most accurate replication of my original combination wins that round. The second round, I say a

combination of steps once through, and the groups repeat the exercise, this time only with the auditory aspect of learning. The last round, we focus on the development of appropriate prosodic features within their movement. I will say a combination using appropriate stress and phrasing to create the correct detailed flow of the combination as it fits to the music. A large portion of dance is working with prosodic features within our movement; this use of musicality is what creates the language of ballet. This activity helps students develop better fluency of the ballet language, teaching them how to learn, think, and speak this language. Either in a class combination, or an important choreographer's rehearsal, fluency is one of the most important skills for a ballet dancer to learn.

Echo reading is another option providing reader scaffolding in which the students follow along reading with the class as the teacher reads aloud (Kuhn et al., 2011, 8). After the teacher reads the text, the students echo and read the same passage back. This strategy allows for students to become exposed to a slightly more challenging text, and catch up to where they need to be for fluency and reading ability. Choral reading is another option involving slightly less teacher scaffolding. In this strategy teachers and students all read a passage out loud together, providing the opportunity to increase fluency through word recognition and prosodic features of reading (Kuhn et al., 2011, 9). Both echo and choral "readings" of our combinations have shown positive results in teaching appropriate use of fluency in ballet. My younger students benefit most from a integration of both echo and choral repetitions of combinations (both executions of the movement and verbally repeating back the terminology combination), as opposed to the older students who benefit the most from the group activity above.

An additional strategy test involving two similar interventions, FOOR and Wide FOOR is explained by Khan et al. (2011). Fluency-Oriented Oral Reading is a reading technique and

instructional method in which students take place in either echo or choral readings during three sessions. In FOOR, the three sessions used a repeated passage, and in Wide FOOR, a new passage was used each time. While both groups showed advancements in word recognition, fluency, and prosody, Wide FOOR also made advancements in comprehension. This demonstrates the possibility that either new readings without repetition in story or a prompt to focus on meaning during the reading increased comprehension. This is particularly applicable to ballet training. Especially in the beginning levels of ballet, students are working on the same combinations for an extended period of time. These combinations are designed to build the foundation needed to create more complex combinations with correct technique. However, if students are not challenged with new material of the same level in their practicing, they cannot develop this aspect of comprehension. For this reason, I have developed what is referred to as a tag to the ends of certain repetitious combinations for my classes. This tag is relevant in some way to the step we were working on. For example, one tag that can be added to a foundational tondu exercise is a temps lié which is a step created using both the tendu and the plié steps. In younger levels the repetition is needed to build strength, so this can be a small addition within repetition to add little challenges of application, building comprehension. Additionally, as in the petite allegro fluency activity, challenging students with new combinations of steps requires them to fully utilize their comprehension skills.

Comprehension

Comprehension is the ability to create meaning and subsequent learning from a text through the application of strategies. Effectively teaching comprehension requires teaching strategies that are used to create meaning from text by utilizing specific and effective methods of instruction (Teaching Comprehension CEP 804a PPT, 2015). Duke & Pearson suggest areas of

effective individual strategies for comprehension including prediction or prior knowledge, think-aloud, text structure, visual representations of text, summarization, questions or questioning, and vocabulary (Duke & Pearson, 224). Three “comprehension routines” (224) include reciprocal teaching, transactional strategies instruction, and questioning the author (Duke & Pearson, 225). Predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing are included within the routine, reciprocal teaching (Duke & Pearson, 225). In this routine, the student acts as the teacher, asking questions about the text, summarizing, asking for clarification if necessary, and predicting what might come next. Transactional strategies instruction, such as the SAIL (Students Achieving Independent Learning) utilizes prediction, visualization, questioning, clarifying, making associations, and summarizing (Duke & Pearson). Students learn to construct a visual structure of information from the text, from which they can obtain meaning, looking for common themes and relating texts. Questioning the author guides the students to take the responsibility of monitoring their own text discussion, initiating more interactions (Duke & Pearson).

Comprehension in ballet literacy is essential for two reasons. It first allows the further growth and development of technique and fluency as students become older and more advanced. Ballet class is structured such that we always work through the basic foundational steps before advancing to the complex steps and combinations. If a dancer is given a correction in their foundational technique at the barre, the comprehension of application allows this correction (i.e. in tendu) to be applied to every step involving and building from tendu. By extension one correction in tendu at the barre should in turn improve the dancer’s degasé, piqué, fondu, rond des jambs, frappé, développé, line and extensions, battment, jumps, and a world of other examples.

One activity that is resembling of the SAIL transactional strategy instruction is switching roles. Whenever we participate in combinations done in groups, the watching group is performing what we refer to as the 3 L's of ballet: Listening, Looking, Learning. This process is not only to maintain class order, respect, and discipline, but also to help guide students to learn by watching and listening throughout class. When one group performs a combination, the other is practicing their three L's, thinking like a teacher. After group one finishes dancing, each member of group 2 must say one positive comment and one correction for the first group. Students are challenged to visualize the combination's accuracy and technical execution, question, clarify, make associations, and summarize their peer's performance to advance both their peer's learning experience and their own. This activity has increased the productivity of class. By guiding students to stay engaged throughout class by thinking like a teacher, their own work improves. When they watch others participate, they can see corrections they are working on themselves either being accomplished or not. This activity has been very successful in increasing comprehension of the language of ballet for young dancers.

Conclusions and Further Applications

Through an examination and equivocation of ballet as a language, we can approach its teachings to establish a literacy within ballet. Through a literary process of establishing phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, and comprehension in ballet, we can utilize strategies designed for language and literacy acquisition to produce similar results in the improvement and progress of the physical and movement language of ballet. Several applications of literacy strategies have already shown applicable to ballet. While this discovery of language instruction was successful, it is only the first step in bridging the gap between academics and ballet instruction. Applying these fundamental language and literacy techniques and concepts to ballet

instruction, could provide many avenues for research and experimentation. If we can adapt interventions for literacy to the language of ballet, could teaching ballet to children with reading disabilities serve as a form of literary dance therapy in the future? Could we develop a specific teaching guide for adapting ballet instruction towards an inclusive option in a comprehensive approach to helping children in literacy? There are several forms of difficulties that students with learning disabilities may experience from two aspects of reading comprehension: reading based factors and text based factors. Reader based factors include phonemic awareness, phonics and decoding, fluency, vocabulary knowledge, prior knowledge, comprehension strategies, and engagement and interest (Module 6, 2017). Text based factors include text structure knowledge, consideration and recognition of genre, text quality, syntactic complexity, and difficulty of concepts (Module 6, 2017). These are areas that can be shown to have a direct correlation to specific aspects in teaching dance. Investigating how utilizing the same executive functions in learning dance as in learning literacy can integrate together could be the next step of this beginning research. Dance therapy through ballet for children with reading and learning disorders could offer a new level of applications. This is the next broad step I intend to take with this research in the extended future. Within this exploration, a fundamental translation of language between the structure of ballet and the spoken/written language must take place. Upon the further development of this new area of discovery, we can connect the benefits of physical movement and learning to design a new approach to teaching literacy.

Why keep this beautiful language hidden, when we can unlock the hidden language of our soul to extend beyond the stage. We can break the boundary between the language in which this art form speaks to us, flooding out into the lives of those around. We hold the capability to create art which can speak to us beyond the boundary. Find the art, beauty, and language in the

world around us, because it can be found beyond the spoken word, beyond the pages we turn bound by torn covers.

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