Body/Language: Incorporating Movement and Dance into World Language Classes

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Abstract

Dance is an essential cultural product often overlooked in curriculum and lesson design in favor of sports, literature, visual arts, music, and other products from the target language culture. Given the similarities between the national standards for dance and for learning languages, movement and dance activities merit a greater role in world language classes. The author, a high school Spanish teacher and professional dancer, presents a continuum of approaches for incorporating movement-based activities into the classroom and describes specific activities that teachers can adapt for their classes, even without formal dance training or professional dance experience.

Keywords: classroom instruction, curriculum design, student experiences

Introduction

Dance is a cultural product that reflects practices and perspectives of the communities in which it takes place. In contrast to other cultural products such as music, visual art, and literature, however, there is little scholarship on how dance and movement aid language learning or enhance a world language curriculum. Recent scholarship presents ideas for teaching students dance steps from specific styles of dance from target language communities (Gardner, 2016; Ortiz, 2010), but offers little else in the way of helping language teachers conceptualize the role of movement in their classrooms or develop other activities.

Clarifying this role will help teachers put into practice what research has proven: movement ranging from gesturing to dancing increases student interest, engagement, academic achievement, and social development, especially in young children (Furmanek, 2014; Lindt & Miller, 2017; McLaren, Ruddick, Edwards, Edwards, Zabjek, & McKeever, 2012). As Ross (2004) notes, however, "the student body's presence in the classroom from

Kindergarten to 12th grade gets quieter and quieter until it is effectively mute" (p. 173). There is a need, therefore, to consider how secondary students in particular can experience the benefits of movement-based instruction. Gardner (2016) argues that teachers are well-positioned to do this work in world language classrooms, "where motivation is essential to success and understanding of patterns can help language learners connect their language learning to other patterns such as those in dance" (p. 83). Gurzynski-Weiss, Long, & Solon (2015) extend this line of thinking by connecting effective world language pedagogy–such as communicative, student-centered instruction and thoughtful technology integration–to innovative classroom setups, like café-style seating, which impact students "by engaging attention and facilitating quicker ease of movement" (p. 62) with activities.

The author will make his own case for incorporating more dance pedagogy into language learning by pointing out the similarities in the national standards for both subjects. He will then describe three different philosophies for making dance part of a world language classroom (Figure 1) and provide specific examples of activities that fit each of these approaches: inclusion, integration, and interdisciplinarity.
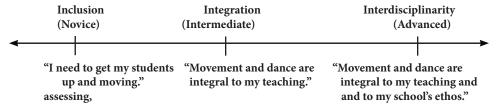

Figure 1. Continuum for Embodied Movement & Dance in the World Language Classroom. This figure shows a progression of three different approaches to incorporating movement and dance activities in a language class.

Dance and Language Learning

There are many parallels between the National Core Arts Standards (NCAS) in Dance, released in 2014 by the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards (NCCAS), and the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages (The National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015), published in 2015 by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). The former echo the five "C" goal areas of the latter: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. Together, NCCAS and ACTFL assure us that dance and language learning, respectively, can ensure a lifetime of learning and success. The former hopes that students will do with dance what the latter hopes they do with languages: discover, create, and leverage relationships with other fields of study.

First, the NCCAS incorporate the three modes of communication–Interpretive, Interpersonal, and Presentational–outlined in the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages (The National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015). According to the NCCAS, fifth graders answering the essential question, "How is dance interpreted?" should be able to "interpret meaning in a dance based on its movements" and "explain how the movements communicate the main idea of the dance using basic dance terminology" (2014, p. 9). Similarly, a high school student working toward Standard 9–"Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work"–should be able to define their own criteria for critiquing dance and "discuss perspectives with peers and justify views" (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2014, p. 9). It is clear from words such as *interpret*, *discuss*, and *explain*, that both NCCAS and the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages value students' abilities to thoughtfully

view a source, interact with classmates, and present information. For example, intermediate Spanish students studying narration and description in the past might watch a retelling of the classic fairy tale "Cinderella" by renowned flamenco dancer Sara Baras. Before even considering the language structures needed to retell the story, students could share their opinions on Baras' performance and discuss how it relates to the story or whether it was appropriate for this particular fairy tale.

In addition, the NCCAS echo the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages' expectation that students, "interact with cultural competence and understanding" (The National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015, p. 1). Apart from valuing dance as a cultural product, of course, the NCCAS explicitly asks learners to connect it to practices and perspectives. In response to the essential question, "How is a dance understood?" an high school student who meets the NCCAS' "advanced" performance descriptor ought to be able to, "explain how dance communicates aesthetic and cultural values in a variety of genres, styles, or cultural movement practices. (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2014, p. 8)" Likewise, eighth grade students focusing on dance literacy should meet the following criterion: "Analyze and discuss how dances from a variety of cultures, societies, historical periods, or communities reveal the ideas and perspectives of the people" (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2014, p. 8). These objectives, among others, demonstrate a commitment to students knowing not just dance technique and terminology, but also the relationship of dance styles to the cultures from which they are derived. Continuing with the example of the Sara Baras video described above, students could follow up with interpretive reading and viewing activities to learn more about flamenco dancing and Ms. Baras herself. They could learn the names of the props Baras uses in the video and also think critically about why she was chosen to protagonize it.

Furthermore, NCCAS calls for students to engage in cultural comparisons, another pillar of the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages. As an example, learners as young as third grade should be able to, "select dance movements from specific genres, styles, or cultures" and "identify characteristic movements from these dances and describe in basic dance terminology ways in which they are alike and different" (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2014, p. 9). Again, the repeated references to culture reinforce the importance of using dance to both learn about and reflect upon other societies and worldviews. After watching Sara Baras, students could compare the video with examples from their own communities that showcase dance as a promotional tool. They could also compare Ms. Baras and her art form with a famous dancer from their own culture.

Both sets of standards also support students in applying their content-specific knowledge to other disciplines. The World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015) titles this goal area Connections, writing that students should, "connect with other disciplines and acquire information and diverse perspectives" (p. 1). The essential question for Standard 10 of the NCCAS is, "How does dance deepen our understanding of ourselves, other knowledge, and events around us?" (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2014, p. 10). In response, sixth grade students might complete the following assignment: "Conduct research using a variety of resources to find information about a social issue of great interest. Use the information to create a dance study that expresses a specific point of view on the topic. Discuss whether the experience of creating and sharing the dance reinforces personal views or offers new knowledge and perspectives" (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2014, p. 10). Once students are familiar with Sara Baras, they could adopt a historical lens and research the origins of flamenco or take a more contemporary perspective and explore how

the genre was affected by the closure of *tablaos*, or flamenco performance venues, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The teacher could also explore a connection with a local dance studio or arts council to sponsor a flamenco master class or performance. Students might be inspired to research other traditional Spanish dances, such as the *paso doble* or the *bolero*.

Finally, NCCAS and the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages both state that studying dance and languages, respectively, ensures that students can both function in and enrich the national and global communities of which they are citizens. When we incorporate the arts into education, says the former, "we are fulfilling the college and career readiness needs of our students, laying the foundations for the success of our schools and, ultimately, the success of our nation" (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2016, p. 2). Dance students will develop into culturally competent community members and skilled artists who are poised to be movers and shakers in both the literal and idiomatic sense. The World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages share this sentiment when they declare that the goal of learning a language is to "prepare learners … to bring a global competence to their future careers and experiences" (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015, p. 2). Both practical and lofty, this goal suggests not only that being multilingual can enrich one's work opportunities, but also that it can enhance one's life overall. By taking their first steps along the continuum, teachers can help their students develop essential multidisciplinary skills and experience the beauty of how language and movement interact.

Novice: Movement-inclusive classrooms

In the first step on the continuum–inclusion–movement is sometimes part of the lesson, though it is not the norm. A movement-inclusive teacher typically includes a movement activity because the teacher recognizes that students need opportunities to move around during class. The teacher may be particularly aware of the benefits of movement in the classroom, but does not necessarily see movement as anything beyond another pedagogical strategy. Students may see it more as a break from learning rather than an inherent part of how they learn in that course. If students only experience movement during brain breaks, for example, they may infer that moving should occur separately from learning.

Communicative activities that ask students to move around the classroom in some way fit the definition of a movement-inclusive language classroom. In a "Four Corners" activity, for example, students might move to the corner of the room bearing a sign with the frequency word (always, frequently, sometimes, never) that matches their answer to the teacher's questions in the target language. Similarly, students might move to one side of the room or the other to indicate whether a statement about an interpretive reading assignment is true or false, or to indicate which of two options they would select in a game of "Would You Rather," designed to practice language structures for expressing opinions and making hypotheses. The popular "Human Bingo" is another movement-inclusive activity. Often used as a community-building exercise at the start of a school year, "Human Bingo" typically has students practicing a frequent language structure while moving around the room and talking with classmates in order to identify peers who had certain experiences over the summer or who possess particular characteristics, for instance. Another way to get students walking around and talking to each other is by using "*Puedos*" ["Can-dos"], developed by North Carolina Spanish teacher Laura Sexton. Students move around and ask classmates to show something they can do from the list of skills (e.g., exchange information about their favorite academic classes, express an opinion about climate change) provided by the teacher.

A more fast-paced movement activity is a running dictation. Before class, the teacher writes a series of sentences and posts them in the back of the room or in the hall-

way. In class, students are divided into groups, and one student must run to the sentences, memorize as much as they can, run back to their group and repeat it to their peers. Those classmates must, in turn, write down what was said (and, perhaps, begin to illustrate it). The activity continues until a team has transcribed the sentences exactly.

Learners might also get out of their seats, and even out of the classroom, in order to do a gallery walk as a way of learning new material at the beginning of a unit or presenting work at the end of a unit. Station activities or escape/breakout rooms could also involve physical tasks or at least require students to move around the learning space. Additionally, students could work in groups to craft a tableau, or a still scene, representing an event from the text they're currently reading or a cultural practice they recently studied. Other groups could observe the scene and engage in an interpersonal speaking or presentational writing task in which they comment on the tableau using familiar words and structures. Finally, learning dance steps from a target language culture can be fun, but without meaningful connections to the curriculum, teachers should be wary of considering this kind of activity an end goal for movement-based instruction. As Gardner (2016) writes, educators "should consider what topics or themes are already being studied and how to integrate dance with that unit, theme, topic, or chapter of study to make a cohesive lesson" (p. 88). For example, if students are going to learn steps from a dance that is traditionally performed as part of a particular festival, it would be a more culturally rich experience for students to also study the social and historical underpinnings of the festival itself within the context of a thematic unit rather than just learn the dance.

The term *inclusion* is deliberate: First, because it represents the fact that the teacher *includes* dance in their classroom, which is to say that they make it a part of their teaching (and could just as easily remove it) without changing any of their existing practices or pedagogy. Secondly, a classroom that is inclusive–of viewpoints, identities, or learning styles, for instance–is an admirable goal of any educator. A movement-inclusive classroom is an important first step for educators without formal dance training. However, whereas inclusion might be considered the ultimate goal for many teachers, there are phases beyond inclusion on the author's continuum.

Intermediate: Movement-integrated classrooms

Integration implies more than just including dance in the curriculum, but rather embedding it inextricably into one's values and pedagogy. If dance activities were removed from a movement-integrated classroom, the class itself would change; students and teacher(s) alike might feel they were in a different course altogether.

For example, in a movement-inclusive classroom, the teacher might occasionally initiate a game of charades so that students practice new vocabulary. In a movement-integrated classroom, the teacher would regularly introduce new vocabulary by associating each word with a gesture or movement, for example, or would teach a movement pattern to accompany certain phrases repeated within a text. Students would regularly act out new words or structures in context by playing charades and/or role-playing a TPRS (Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling) story: As the teacher improvised or narrated a story, students would act out what was happening, with the teacher's repeated use of certain phrases or vocabulary words solidifying the connections between movement and meaning. In this kind of classroom setting, due to the frequency of movement activities and the consistency with which they would be embedded in teaching and learning, students (as well as evaluators) would recognize the importance of movement.

Another way in which an educator could integrate dance pedagogy into language teaching is by consistently arranging student desks or chairs in a circle. This formation is known in hip hop and tap dancing as a *cypher* (alternatively spelled *cipher*), a space where dancers can freestyle, cheer each other on, and make music together. Typically, dancers stand in a circle

and take turns going into the middle–sometimes individually, sometimes with one or more partners–to improvise while others watch, groove to whatever music is playing, and call out words of encouragement. Rapper and writer Toni Blackman, the first Hip Hop Cultural Envoy for the U.S. Department of State, described the cypher as an experience of "giving and exchanging information, energy, and ideas" with a focus on "community building … [and] connection" (TEDxTalks, 2013). That "giving and exchanging" echoes how world language students might "interact and negotiate meaning" via interpersonal communication in the classroom, and community and connection are two of the five "C" goal areas that make up World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages (The National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015).

Northwestern University professor Billy Siegenfeld (2009), the creator of Jump Rhythm® jazz and tap technique, frequently begins his classes in a circle because it "helps students work in less hierarchical relationships," and can "dissolve the military-like, single-direction facing and coax students to *connect with each other conversationally* [emphasis added]" (p. 114). Indeed, classroom setup can be key in encouraging both movement activities and oral interpersonal activities. In a study that explored the effects of traditional classroom seating versus collaborative, coffee shop-style seating on student interaction in university Spanish classes (Gurzynski-Weiss, et al., 2015), the teacher in the collaborative space not only noted that the setup "allowed for ample movement throughout the classroom," but also "reported increased interaction among students throughout the semester, and, rather than attempting to modify the space to accommodate his instruction needs, he found himself modifying his lessons to benefit best from use of the space" (p. 74). Accordingly, a more movement-friendly classroom design, such as a circle, can inspire instructors to incorporate more movement and dance activities into their classes.

Numerous world language teachers, especially those who endorse TPRS and/or CI [comprehensible input] methods, have addressed this topic by going "deskless." Though there has been minimal scholarship on this topic, "Going Deskless in the World Language Classroom" and "#deskless" were sessions at the Southern Conference on Language Teaching (SCOLT) in 2019 and 2022, respectively, and several popular bloggers in the world language community, such as [Allison Weinhold](#) and [Mike Peto](#), have written about it (Peto, 2015). This [setup](#) is particularly useful for leading TPRS activities, facilitating interpersonal speaking opportunities, and engaging in text-based class discussions, among other common tasks in the language classroom. As the removal of desks creates more space for movement–including the creation of a "dance floor"-type space in the center of the room–teachers interested in moving along the continuum may want to pursue a deskless environment.

An additional strategy for incorporating the cypher into the language classroom would be a text cypher, an activity I experienced in a class led by hip hop artist, educator, and consultant Aysha Upchurch, a Lecturer on Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. In this activity, which is appropriate for one class period, students would read, view, or listen to an authentic resource (at home or in class) and receive discussion topics or questions. Students would stand in a circle and the teacher would play music from the target culture. All participants would be encouraged to groove to the music, or at least keep the beat in some way (e.g., tapping their foot or snapping their fingers), and anyone who wished to speak in response to one of the prompts would move into the center of the circle and groove as they spoke, addressing everyone in the circle as best as possible. When they finished talking, they would move back to the perimeter of the circle, or they would trade places with someone who volunteered to speak next. The instructor would announce when the class was moving on to the next question. A text cypher could be used at the beginning of a unit, when students might read a particular text to serve as an introductory hook; in the middle of a unit, as a

class activity once students are familiar with thematic vocabulary and target structures; or at the end of a unit, perhaps as the presentational component of an Integrated Performance Assessment (IPA). It is just one idea for how movement can blend with interpretive reading and presentational speaking.

Whereas movement activities in a movement-inclusive classroom may have students moving merely to get them out of their seats, a movement-integrated classroom intentionally weaves movement into course content and objectives. For example, students could embark on a scavenger hunt around the school: They could be practicing school-related vocabulary; carrying out a series of tasks written in the imperative mood, to practice commands; or completing tasks as though they were traveling around a particular region of a target language community, perhaps as part of a unit on outdoor activities. This kind of activity could be enhanced by using Flip, a popular video platform for educators, as a "Fliphunt." As students fulfill each task on the scavenger hunt, they could record themselves doing so and upload the videos to Flip, perhaps within a time limit set by the instructor. For example, students learning about Spain's Camino de Santiago, a well-known pilgrimage, might travel around the school in groups and complete a variety of tasks or questions at stations that represent some of the cities positioned along the Camino. These kinds of activities deliberately take kids out of the classroom and have them moving around, at times completing physical tasks, all while maintaining clear linguistic and/or cultural objectives.

Should a teacher want to grade a movement-based task, it may be useful to create a single-point rubric with the specific goals of the activity, perhaps culled from the NCCAS or generated with student input. Rather than a spectrum of performance descriptors, single-point rubrics present only the criteria for student success on a task and then offer space for the teacher to comment on where the student falls short of, or exceeds, the learning targets. It may also be possible to modify some of the rubrics from *Implementing Integrated Performance Assessment* (Adair-Hauck, Glisan, & Troyan, 2013) for this purpose; the "impact" section of the presentational rubrics could be edited to include specific criteria for movement.

Before assigning a grade or giving any kind of feedback, expectations for participation in movement or dance activities should be clear for all students, including those with injuries or physical disabilities, who may need alternate arrangements. In cases where a student may be reluctant to participate due to extreme shyness or fear of judgment from peers, educators may want to outline additional roles the student could take in order to stay involved in the activity. For example, a student could be the DJ, tasked with playing music for their group, or the director, charged with keeping the group focused and on task. Dance writer and photographer could be other responsibilities: Students could write a summary of the activity or, with permission, take photos of the activity to be included on a class website or newsletter. Over time, educators can hopefully cultivate classrooms in which everyone is comfortable moving with each other.

Advanced: Moving towards interdisciplinarity

Further along the continuum, a more experienced educator could establish an interdisciplinary classroom, in which movement would be embedded into both content and pedagogy–that is, movement could comprise *what* is taught and also *how* something is taught. Administrators, teachers, families, and students alike would understand the value of movement in education, which is to say that the school would support incorporating dance into its classes. Professional development and other resources would be available to help teachers incorporate movement into their curriculum. Embedding dance into each unit would be a school-wide endeavor. Assessment options would include movement-based prompts, such as

the aforementioned example from the NCCAS for sixth graders (easily adaptable for any age).

Novice Spanish students, for instance, could learn the vocabulary for flatware and serving utensils by studying the choreography and lyrics to the popular children's song "Soy una taza" ["I am a cup"], which encourages students to connect movement to new words and phrases. As a class activity or project, students could write and choreograph another verse, perhaps, or devise ways to effectively stage the choreography for an informal performance. Even a movement-inclusive classroom could strive for interdisciplinarity by offering a movement component as part of a choice board assignment or summative project options, for example.

Another pathway towards interdisciplinarity would be to create lessons or IPAs that center movement in all three modes of communication. In a unit on the global theme of contemporary life, students could watch a video of a tango performance from Buenos Aires. Using a handout of related vocabulary and sentence starters, they could engage in a think-pair-share activity to describe the performance and share their opinions. Independently, they could then read an article about how the COVID-19 pandemic affected tango culture in Argentina before working in groups to write a summary of the main ideas and supporting details. Finally, they could work in pairs either to learn a basic tango step or to create a series of tableaux that represent the changes that occurred for tango dancers due to pandemic restrictions.

Alternatively, students studying the Spanish conquest of the Americas could learn about Hernán Cortés' indigenous interpreter, known as La Malinche, by watching the 1949 modern dance trio "Malinche," choreographed by José Limón. After describing and reacting to the dance, students could compare Limón's representation of Malinche to the depiction of her in *The New Conquest of Spain*, written by historian Bernal Díaz del Castillo, who accompanied Cortés on his expedition. They could also study works of visual art that feature Malinche, including paintings by Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco. After using the think-pair-share strategy to discuss which portrayal of Malinche they enjoyed most, students could collaborate to create a tableau or movement pattern that expresses how they think Malinche might have felt, or to interpret a movement they watched in Limón's dance and explain how it connects to one of the other sources.

As an interdisciplinary classroom, as defined here, does not yet exist, we do not know what all of its qualities will be. Even the author, who has a successful career as a professional dancer, would place himself somewhere in the integration phase of his own continuum. The idea of an interdisciplinary classroom is optimistic yet ambitious, an idealized vision for what a movement-minded language classroom can be and how it can impact everything from students' physical well-being to their academic success. The fact that the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages state, under the Connections goal area, that students should "build, reinforce, and expand their knowledge of other disciplines" (The National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015, p. 1) certainly indicates a potential for serious collaborations with movement and dance.

Conclusion

While dance and movement activities can present challenges in the classroom, such as lack of space or reluctant student participation, they merit more attention in world language curricula due to similar goals around communication, cultural proficiency, interdisciplinary thinking, and lifelong learning. The author has found that students respond positively and energetically to activities that get them moving around the classroom or around the school, especially as learners report that in other classes they are still expected to sit for long stretches of time.

The continuum presented here can help teachers reflect on what roles movement and dance currently play in their classrooms, what role they would like them to have, and how they might accomplish that goal. What movement and language learning can achieve together is undoubtedly powerful, and language teachers have the tools to lead the way.

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