Strange encounters in times of distancing: Sustaining dialogue through integrating language and dance in primary education

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Abstract
This article focuses on experiences of resuming contact instruction in a project that integrated language and dance in a Finnish primary school during the COVID-19 pandemic. The article aims to explore how it is possible to sustain dialogue in times of distancing. It turns these exceptional, messy conditions into an opportunity to reconfigure the practice of embodied language learning. Through performative writing, the article weaves together the experiences and observations of the first author, a dance teacher, and two school teachers, and presents their reflections of embodied pedagogical practice in a transformed school reality. The narrative focuses on events and encounters that deviated from customary classroom situations, and the challenges, difficulties, and possibilities that emerged in seeking to explore pedagogical practices that made it possible to sustain dialogue. The authors argue that dance and language integration was able to support dialogue in early language education even when touching was not possible, materials not available, and distancing changed normal practices. It engaged both pupils and teachers in exploring new ways of communicating and co-existing in strange, more-than-human relations. The authors conclude that integrating language and dance offers a pedagogical tool for sustaining dialogue in a complex and continuously changing world.

Keywords: *embodied language learning; early language education; dance education; embodied research; performative writing*

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Strange times and messy conditions

This article focuses on a project that integrated language and dance in a primary school in Finland during the COVID-19 pandemic. It concentrates on the experiences of resuming contact instruction in the fall of 2020—the second academic term to be affected by the pandemic. When restarting the project after a period

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of distance teaching, the main concerns were the uncertainty about how long the contact instruction could continue and how the pandemic was affecting children. News were continually unfolding on the development of the crisis and its impact on schools, children's learning, and their lives in a broader sense. Inequalities among learners were increasing, children's opportunities to engage in physical, artistic, and cultural activities reduced and restricted, and their possibilities to interact with peers and to gain experiences of communality limited. The project offered the school's second graders the opportunity to take part in instruction that integrated language and dance. It provided pupils with possibilities to engage in face-to-face encounters through art, movement, and language during this time of distancing.

In this article, I (the first author) reflect on my experiences of carrying out the project *Dansa språk!* ["Dance Languages!"] in *Kiilan koulu*[1] in Raseborg, Finland. In this project, I as a researcher-language teacher collaborated with the school's teachers and a dance teacher from *Hurja Piruetti Western Uusimaa Dance Institute* to combine dance with the teaching and learning of Swedish as the second national language in grades 1–2.

The two-year project that had started in the fall of 2019 was interrupted in March 2020 and discontinued for the rest of the spring term. When it became clear that schools would return to contact instruction in the fall of 2020, all project partners—the school, the dance institute, and the Department of Teacher Education at University of Turku—agreed to resume the project. Close collaboration among team members and our prior experiences in the project became crucial for recommencing the project in these exceptional circumstances.

In August 2020, the dance teacher and I re-entered a school environment that felt both familiar and strange. The school appeared to be a place where life seemed "normal" with children playing on swings and in jungle gyms during recesses, and people recognizing us and exchanging friendly greetings. However, after months of distance working, I was struck by the strangeness of being surrounded by people. I became perplexed when a pupil ran towards us and hugged me spontaneously. Nevertheless, we were in a transformed school reality with new embodied choreographies of hand-washing and distance-keeping that were accompanied by repeated teacher instructions about not touching.

These strange times and messy conditions shaped the question guiding this study into the following: *"How is it possible to sustain dialogue in times of distancing?"* The pandemic made exploring embodied approaches in early language education more challenging. However, the situation also gave an impetus to reconfiguring the practice of embodied language learning.

This article highlights how such exceptional, messy conditions created the possibility to develop pedagogical practices. Through performative writing, I weave

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[1] The school and dance institute have given permission to use their real names for research purposes.

together my experiences, observations, and reflections of sustaining embodied pedagogical practice with those of the teachers. Before presenting a narrative of the strange encounters experienced during distancing, the article lays out the theoretical foundations.

The article brings together embodied, enactive, and socio-material perspectives on language education and insights from previous arts-pedagogical research projects in language learning contexts. In particular, the article explores languaging as a notion closely connected to embodied language learning, that is, the active engagement of human beings within their social and material environments. The focus is on the messy relations between human bodies and non-human things—pupils, teachers, objects, places, and now a virus—that easily blur into the background (Fenwick et al., 2011), but are at play in classroom situations (Hohti, 2016) and children's encounters with the world (Malone, 2016).

Languaging in strange assemblages

The idea that embodiment and language are intertwined in the ways in which human beings communicate is at the core of the research project *Embodied Language Learning through the Arts* (ELLA),[2] to which this study and the doctoral project *Dansa språk!* are connected. As a doctoral researcher, I am part of the ELLA research team that is led by the second author, Eeva. In this article, we continue exploring the theoretical and methodological approaches to investigating embodied, dance-integrated pedagogies in language education previously explored by Eeva (Anttila, 2019). Together, we draw on frameworks of embodiment, enactment, and socio-materiality to move beyond seeing bodies and language as separate "tracks" in communication, where the non-verbal is secondary to the verbal, and explore them as inseparably entangled (Toohey, 2019, p. 944). For us, this holistic, integrative view of language use and learning is concretized in the notion of *languaging*.

The term languaging takes diverse forms and meanings, and especially translanguaging has gained ground in various fields, including applied linguistics, education, and the arts (Wei, 2018). We have chosen to focus on languaging and approach it through enactive and socio-material theories.

The enactive approach focuses on concrete, embodied languaging as enactments that take place in the socio-material world, and thus, learning language occurs through "being immersed in interactions" (Di Paolo et al., 2018, p. 9). Enactivism emphasizes the participation of our bodies together with other bodies in meaning-making and recognizes that sensorimotor, social, and linguistic skills are intertwined in learning. From this perspective, language learning is not merely about learning skills, vocabulary, rules, or interactional styles, but about learning new ways of acting, being,

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[2] https://sites.uniarts.fi/en/web/ellaresearchproject/home

experiencing, and participating "in relation to the new elements of sense-making" and other bodies (Di Paolo et al., 2018, p. 252).

Within socio-material approaches, languaging is used to focus on language as activity (Toohey, 2019). Despite a shared emphasis on languaging as embodied enactments in the socio-material world, socio-material theories take the enactive approach further by approaching languaging as intra-active practices, that is, the gathering, acting, changing, and becoming together of human and non-human beings and things (Fenwick, 2015; Toohey, 2019). Accordingly, they shift the focus from individual learners and language users to relations between humans and non-humans. Socio-material approaches challenge a common view in language education that language is learnt in communicative situations for communicative objectives: to come to mutual understanding at the level of verbal meanings (Pennycook, 2017). Instead, they put forward the idea that communication generates understanding that is "messy, incomplete, different, complicated and never entirely shared" (Pennycook, 2017, p. 107). Learning language is suggested to take place "in and around a much wider set of semiotic assemblages including touch, smell, taste, things, and places" (Pennycook, 2017, p. 131).

Our focus is on languaging in the emergent assemblages of pupils, teachers, "linguistic and other semiotic resources" (Pennycook, 2017, p. 51), spaces—and a virus. For us, these groupings become *strange assemblages* (Domanska, 2011) in that they challenge our understanding of language and push us towards rethinking languaging as an activity involving entire human bodies and various non-human elements (Toohey, 2019).

We, thus, turn our attention from a "mutually comprehensible dialogue" between individuals to approaching meaning-making relationally (Pennycook, 2017, p. 107). For us, this builds towards an expanded understanding of dialogue as involving not merely human bodies interacting, but changing groups of human and non-human bodies intra-acting (Chappell et al., 2019). What becomes central is attuning and responding to multiple "others", their alterity, and what is emerging (becoming) in their intra-actions as well as intervening and interrupting through listening, participating, and collaborating creatively (Brigstocke & Noorani, 2016; Fenwick, 2015; Pennycook, 2017).

Based on this discussion, we approach languaging as an embodied, embedded activity, in which language is enacted in unpredictable ways among people, semiotic resources, materials, the environment, and a virus. This leads us to the question of the role of dance (or dancing) in relation to languaging. Previous arts-pedagogical responses, by Eeva and other researchers and artists, to the increase in Finnish society of an immigrant-based diversity unravel how combining language learning with embodied, artistic activities, including dance and social circus, can support communication and interaction through embodied means (Anttila, 2019; Lilja et al., 2020; Nikkanen et al., 2019). Practices that combine embodied activity, collaboration, imagination, and performative elements of acting and witnessing others act

with an openness to unexpectedly emerging possibilities for action can engage pupils in embodied dialogue (Anttila, 2015, 2019). Embodied, collaborative, and creative action can nurture a sense of communality, which can encourage joint meaning-making (Lilja et al., 2020). At best, embodied, arts-based activities encourage challenging conventional ways of communicating by creating alternative ways of interacting (Anttila, 2019; Lilja et al., 2020). From a socio-material perspective, arts-integrated pedagogies may generate dialogical spaces where pupils' bodies dynamically intra-act with other bodies, objects, and the environment (Anttila, 2019; Chappell et al., 2019). This possibility seems of particular importance when attempting to sustain dialogue in strange, messy conditions.

Strange style

During this enforced long break in the project, I (re)turned to the theory and my experiences from the first project year. This period inspired ambitious ideas for when the project could restart. However, although I was already familiar with the messiness of doing research at school, the practice became even messier in these exceptional conditions. While sound theoretical foundations guided the *Dansa språk!* project team's efforts to combine dance and language meaningfully, the altered conditions became the real starting point for developing our pedagogical practices.

Embracing the mess through embodied research

In seeking to strengthen my attunement to embodiment in practice, I continued reflecting on my experiences and observations in writing after co-leading classes and discussing with the teachers their experiences and observations. By reflecting in writing, my intention was to document "fleeting moments of embodied knowing and sense making" (Ellingson, 2017, pp. 52–53). As I noticed that my own experiences and observations were blended with the teachers' experiences, I let these multiple perspectives merge in my reflections. Instead of focusing on individual voices, I used a collective, co-created voice that was still anchored in my own experiential perspective. I also interwove written reflections by the teachers posted in a teacher diary on the school's online project platform. I later revisited and refined these experiential accounts using the video recordings of the classes that I filmed. The video recordings acted as support for my memory, and enabled me to expand and enrich the accounts.

In my reflections, I did not seek to focus on experiences of how the pandemic affected our practice. I followed an embodied research approach (Ellingson, 2017), and therefore came to "embrace the mess" instead of "trying to avoid and mini-mize the messiness of bodies intra-acting within a field setting" (Ellingson, 2017, pp. 53–54). In line with post-qualitative research methodology, this means to "take the side of the messy" (Lather, 2010) and involves broadening the scope and going beyond language to include bodies, materials, relations, movements, and becom-ings (Ceder & Gunnarsson, 2018; Gunnarsson & Bodén, 2021). Accordingly,

I endeavored to infuse my written reflections with bodies and senses, the material and the mundane—the embodied, messy side of what happened (Ellingson, 2017). Less intentionally, my reflections became infused with traces of the coronavirus situation in which the practice was embedded. These traces made apparent how once the material world was let in, it "kicked back" by shaping both the research process and empirical material in unanticipated ways (Gunnarsson & Bodén, 2021). When I let go of ideas of the researcher in full control and the research process as predetermined, it became necessary to accept the strange and unexpected.

Moving into the strange through performative writing

I experimented with performative writing (Pelias, 2005, 2019) by turning the experiential accounts into a narrative. Performative writing involves attending to arresting moments of lived experience. In seeking to both resist and embrace (Braidotti, 2020) the complex circumstances, I focused on strange moments, that is, events and encounters that departed from customary classroom situations. Selected accounts focused particularly on the bodily, affective, material, and spatial effects of the virus on the practice. Despite a focus on the extraordinary, sometimes the strange was exemplified by the ordinary.

Drawing on pandemic-time experiences of time "becoming blurred" (Damsholt, 2020), I chose to merge accounts from one or several sessions to account for the challenges, difficulties, and possibilities of practice. I interlaced accounts in the narration in order to let pedagogical practices that enabled sustaining dialogue emerge. I indented and used italics for *events and encounters*, and a different font for narrated experiences, observations, and reflections. I blurred snapshots of videos of the classes.

I endeavored to meet the aims of performative writing and post-qualitative inquiry to move beyond merely reporting, describing, or representing experiences and practices in complex, messy conditions; this was to shape them into a story that could move, touch, and incite dialogue (Gunnarsson & Bodén, 2021; Pelias, 2005, 2019). In doing so, I creatively and playfully experimented with language and structure—*a strange style*. The embodied responses and memories that emerged during this process invited me to revisit the video recordings from time to time to refine the narrative. Overall, in merging, unmerging, and remerging accounts, I held on to a sense of truth, or verisimilitude, to create "a story that can be trusted and a story that can be used" (Pelias, 2005, p. 418). After reading the outcome of this process, the teachers confirmed that they relate to it and recognize the events it presents.

Eeva, who had not participated in the teaching, made critical responses to the work-in-progress. Ultimately, a performative narrative of *strange encounters in times of distancing* unfolded. The narrative moves into experiences, observations, and reflections of practice to share "a story about issues that matter" (Pelias, 2005, p. 420) in a way that can move and touch. Hence, we invite readers to move or gesture with the story and "taste" the foreign language. After composing the narrative, we refined its

theoretical framing. The article's last sections move back from the actual events to key concepts to produce new insights into sustaining dialogue.

Strange encounters in times of distancing

While the teaching took place physically in the school, all team meetings were held remotely. The team remained the same as in the previous year, apart from a new second grade classroom teacher joining us. We had scheduled eleven 45-minute sessions via e-mail for both groups in the second grade as part of their Swedish language lessons during August–December, including an extra session to compensate for the missed ones from the previous spring term. Most second graders had already participated in the project in the previous year and were familiar with the approach. Based on the dance teacher's suggestion, we started the planning by establishing a practical framework for instruction. Following current, local and national safety guidelines, we agreed to design the exercises so that they did not include any physical contact. We also decided not to use materials, even if, based on our previous experiences, they supported engaging and managing the group, meaning-making, and inciting imagination. Although the framework made the embodied pedagogical practice more challenging, they also forced us to think creatively.

Distancing

Figure 1. Creating a circle

> *We create a big, big circle through extending our arms instead of holding hands. Bigger, bigger still!*

The sense of intimacy, of closeness, that I so closely associated with dance was lacking. I remember feeling slightly overwhelmed. With physical distances, safe distances, the group of 19 children and four adults (the dance teacher, two school teachers, and myself) filled a big part of the open space, the gym, and came across as a big group. Seeing and hearing pupils and other teachers, communicating with each other across the floor in the echoing space became more challenging. The pupils didn't seem to want to stand still. They hadn't been in the gym yet during this term and the classroom was filled with desks arranged spaciously in neat rows. With many absences in the first weeks, we recycled familiar expressions and exercises with some variation to engage all pupils.

> *"Vad. Heter. Du?"* [What's. Your. Name] *[CLAP]*
>> *The whole group joins in, shifting their weight, stretching their hands towards the middle*
> *"Vad heter du?" [CLAP]*
>> *We repeat the phrases and movements all together a couple of times, the pupils' voices become more and more audible*
> *"Vad heter du?" [CLAP]*
>> *The pupils take turns presenting themselves and giving the turn to somebody else*
> *"Vad heter DU?" [CLAP]*
>> *The name game starts quite smoothly, the pupils seem to remember the phrases*
> *"Vad heter du?" [CLAP]*
>> *Some are still very quiet, not daring to raise their voice, hesitating in choosing who to send the tag tooo–*
> *"Vad heter du?" [CLAP]*
>> *It goes quite slowly, the pace picking up from time to time*
> *"Vad heter du?" [CLAP]*

The name game involved presenting and orienting oneself towards somebody else bodily and linguistically, while keeping a physical distance. One pupil's spontaneous use of the movement gesture when addressing a visitor later in the fall revealed how the bodily and linguistic parts of the act became interconnected, at least for some, and at least in this context. However, (re)acting on cue seemed challenging for some and turning to a neighbor eventually led to a swifter start. Nevertheless, in these routine communicative exercises with simple and playful embodied and linguistic elements, presentations and greetings were re-configured verbally through a foreign language and bodily through embodied expressions that did not require physical contact. Engaging and joyful encounters in and through art, movement, and language seemed to emerge even during distancing.

> *Greeting each other by waving the toes invites smiles and giggles that are contagious, "Hej!"* [Hi!]. *Another round, now by clapping rhythmically on the floor, "Goddag!"* [Good day!]. *The school bell rings, but the pupils stay focused and the greeting keeps moving forward in the circle. The atmosphere feels warm. A positive start.*

Bug, bugs, bugging

The unusual conditions set in motion by a strange bug, the coronavirus, propelled us to explore alternative solutions and we moved the class outdoors. The main exercise in these sessions focused on exploring surroundings, the schoolyard, in small groups. Since we had experienced challenges with small group work previously, especially when there were more groups than adults, a teacher joined each group. The exercise involved moving around the yard as different animals, choosing an item and bringing it back to the group. While sharing and collectively exploring findings bodily and verbally, the groups created and rehearsed a dance to perform to the others.

> *"Vad har du?"* [What do you have?] *We reveal our findings one at a time. There are sticks, stones, leaves. What do they look like? How do they move?*
>
> *"Vi har…"* [We have…] *Another round, presenting findings collectively with words and movement. It seems a little chaotic. I wonder what this will become. I feel rusty. I haven't been around a pupil group, teaching, since March.*
>
> *One more round. We get into a brief moment of flow!*
>
> *When we have gone through all of the pupils' findings, one pupil asks me, in Finnish, "What about your pine cone?"*
>
> *Surprised, I join their dance.*

Inciting imaginatively engaged pupils to explore their surroundings and in small groups work with a teacher activated the pupils to explore movements and positions together. There seemed to be a need to practice not only be(com)ing seen and heard, but also seeing and listening to movement, language, and each other. Introducing verbal interaction into the performance using a familiar dialogue from the group work directed the audience's attention towards the performing group and kept the performances a shared activity. While the outdoor space, especially the noise, easily distracted attention and challenged group management, it was filled with stimuli for movement and languaging. One particular outdoor encounter became an incentive for the following sessions indoors.

> *As we are leaving the school, the dance teacher shares an idea for the next theme: bugs. One pupil had picked up a stone expecting that there would be ants under-neath, but there had been none. What could we come up with bugs?*

When we re-connected with the teachers on Zoom, we decided to connect the world of insects with different ways of moving, directions, and tempo—verbs and adverbs. We designed leading-following exercises for both the whole group and small groups to explore giving, following, and making meaning of instructions with language and movement.

> *Forming ant lines in small groups, taking turns leading and following. Walking, crawling, rolling, and jumping—stopping. Moving forward, backward, to the side. One pupil asks what "turning" is in Swedish. "Snurra". Some start making com-binations on their own, "spring snabbt"* [run fast]. *Another pupil repeats teacher instructions, "sitt ner"* [sit down], *"stå upp"* [stand up].

Working in small, familiar groups created opportunities to interact with peers (and teachers), become heard more easily, and speak (more). The opportunity for the pupils to make their own choices and react to embodied and linguistic expressions of their peers invited different movement solutions that appeared to lead to a need or wish to engage with all linguistic resources at hand, as if bitten by a bug! The more variation in movement, the more variation in language—it seemed to go both ways.

> *Back in the circle, stretching legs forward, moving backward, lying down, turning, jumping, standing up. Saying goodbye, "Hejdå!" A few pupils complain that they don't have energy. Some are sitting by the walls. What's bugging?*

However, we also met something that appeared to us as resistance from pupils that was expressed in noisiness and restlessness, sitting by the walls or moving around, not participating, not listening, not speaking (up). This made us wonder if for some pupils, working in this big a group was (too) challenging.

Be(com)ing up-side-down

The classroom teacher sent me a text message late in the evening. There have been potential corona exposures at the school and some groups are staying at home for safety measures. We can still hold the class the following day.

> *There's uncertainty in the air when the pupils enter the gym. The classroom teacher is missing; the dance teacher and I are wearing masks. I feel nervousness gathering in my belly. I wonder how the pupils are feeling. I take a few deep breaths.*
>
> *Greeting game, name game. We try to pull through a new rhyme. We stay in the circle too long. The pupils are getting more and more restless.*
>
> *Finally, moving freely in the space. When the music pauses, changing which body parts are towards the floor and lead the movement. Belly, knees, elbows, head, hands and feet… The dance teacher invites pupils to verbalize body parts in Swedish at first, but it doesn't work. There's plenty of noise, but movement and contact with the floor seem to engage the pupils.*
>
> *Then, a new exercise, moving like robots. To the side, up, to the side, down. The pupils don't pick up saying the phrases aloud. I suggest repeating the phrases together, but it doesn't work at all. Changing exercises on the fly. A pupil finds the light switch, the gym lights go ON–OFF–ON–OFF.*
>
> *Re-gathering the circle, we miss how one pupil tries to re-start the "goodbye" game. We imagine that we glue our feet on the ground, hands on top of our heads, and count to 30 for the first time.*
>
> *A brief, concentrated moment.*

There wasn't much speaking in Swedish, maybe because of the masks that covered our mouths and a large part of our faces. Our speech became muffled. Facial expressions, moving lips, small, yet important cues, were all lacking. It seemed harder to engage the pupils

in speaking, especially in a new exercise, when they couldn't see what we were saying. It was harder to communicate with the dance teacher, too. Nevertheless, the pupils heard Swedish, words and expressions to anchor in movement. While focusing on learning something new didn't work, the routine and movement exploration exercises did. Through a familiar exercise with a new linguistic challenge, we achieved a moment of success. There was some progress, too. This time no one complained that they didn't understand Swedish.

This session offered us a glimpse of what the current everyday reality at the "frontline" was like. Both literally and metaphorically everybody and everything was be(com)ing up-side-down, from our bodies in the robot dance to the class and then to the overall situation at the school and more broadly in the world. Every week that we could continue with the teaching, every session we could hold, felt like a victory.
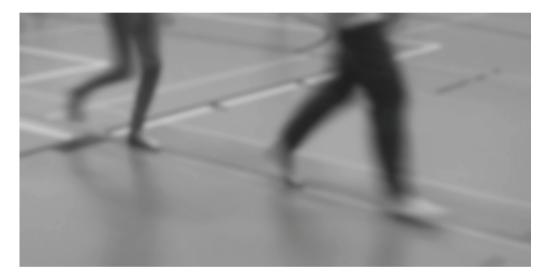
Coping

Figure 2. Moving along lines

> *The dance teacher has a new idea: moving along the lines on the gym floor. I'm slightly worried at first that the pupils will bump into each other, but to my surprise, it goes well. The atmosphere is focused, the pupils share and negotiate the space with each other, recreating paths in inventive ways. They seem to enjoy the task.*
>
> *A new song. Walking forward. A group of girls starts forming a line. On the pause, everybody asks "Vad ska vi göra nu?"* [What are we going to do now?] *at different times.*
>
> *Walking backward. A boy enters the emerging line. The group counts to three, everybody joins in, "Vad ska vi göra nu?"*
>
> *The pupils in the line are negotiating something. They seem to be switching whose turn it's to lead. More pupils are joining.*

> *When it's time for jumping, something happens. Almost all pupils join the line that now goes around the whole gym. For a moment, they become a moving rectangle.*

During the term, we struggled with inventing ways to form pairs and groups spontaneously. We couldn't use tag or any other exercises that involved physical contact—strategies that had been central the previous year in creating seemingly natural interactive situations that blurred the focus of language learning. Ultimately, we adopted a simple teacher-pupil dialogue in the moving to music exercise; this is a warm-up exercise where movement exploration was combined with a linguistic task. However, the moving along lines exercise generated encounters from which a shared formation and rhythm, and a sense of communality grew momentarily. In this arresting but fleeting moment, embodied dialogue emerged unexpectedly through actions, encounters and negotiations among pupils.

> *We carefully form two circles, facing each other. Everybody finds a friend. We enact a dialogue with movements, and then shift pairs.*
> *"Everybody together!" the dance teacher encourages.*
> *"Hur mår du?"* [How are you?]
> *We change places again, and again.*
> *I become immersed in each encounter. Asking, replying, changing pairs on the clap. I sense that we're moving faster, reaching a shared rhythm for a brief moment. Everybody participates.*

I didn't hear complaints about pairs; they were overcome through a carefully structured task, in which a textbook dialogue became enacted bodily and verbally. The verbal greeting phrases, eye contact, gestures, and movements all formed part of the dance. As pupils encountered pupils, teachers encountered pupils, and teachers encountered teachers, a moment of embodied and linguistic interaction emerged not only in the encounters face-to-face, or body-to-body, but also among the whole group.

We then moved to small groups, where one pupil at a time uses an imaginary remote control to give their peers, the robots, instructions on how to move.

> *"Alla robotar…"* [All robots…] *The pupil who starts the game seems to have trouble choosing. I try suggesting. We end up borrowing another pupil's suggestion,* "far framåt" [go forward].
> *Some pupils are quick to give instructions. They don't stick to the given ones (sitting, standing, lying down). The robots turn on the bottom, walk backwards, they DANCE.*
> *We switch leaders several times.*
> *"Alla robotar stå upp"* […stand up] *The pupil who was first chooses quickly, pressing a finger on the palm, the remote control, saying the phrase quietly but on their own.*

Meanwhile, a few pupils had formed a fourth group with the assistant teacher. Observing new confidential relationships emerging was moving. In the small groups, pupils engaged in languaging together with their peers and the teacher, making and expressing meaning collaboratively. They attuned and responded spontaneously to the possibilities of action by creating different solutions, solutions that differed from the instructions. In this and other small group exercises, we also witnessed increasing courage and initiatives among pupils to move and to speak, to make their own choices—yielding experiences of success.

Be(com)ing up-side-down together

Back into a circle, checking the time. Five minutes left. I suggest that we still do the robot dance. Without saying anything, the dance teacher puts on the music. The pupils recognize the song. The last ones stand up. When the dance teacher walks in the middle, hand behind the ear, voices rise immediately. The dance teacher puts the thumbs up, maybe smiling behind the mask. I notice that I forget to speak, but I don't need to, the words are part of the pupils' dance now. Everybody is dancing and languaging, be(com)ing up-side-down, together.

<p align="center">
HEAD
to the side
to the other side
to the side
to the other side
MOVING
up-side-
down-side-
up-side-down
SPEAK(ING)
up, UP!
down, DOWN
GOING
back and forth
and forth and back
aaand forward, forward CLAP!
aaand backward, backward STOP!
BENDING-STRETCHING-
TURNING-STOPPING-
BENDING-STRETCHING-
TURNING-STOPPING-
</p>

Moving out of strange encounters: Distancing (again)

This article was intended to, and still seeks to, unpack experiences of combining language and dance in primary education. However, a non-human element, a virus, interjected itself into the inquiry and reframed the development of pedagogical practices until its effect could not responsibly be reduced to a mere backdrop. Instead, the strange, messy conditions became a chance to reconfigure the practice of embodied language learning.

The transformed school reality generated both challenges and unexpected possibilities for an embodied approach to early language education. The new practical framework required redesigning and implementing activities that did not involve touching people or even materials. Following these restrictions, the team adapted and developed pedagogical practices.

The practices of *distancing* included creating new routines, varying familiar embodied and linguistic elements, and creating a safe environment for languaging. The significance of these practices grew the more the crisis affected school life, the more *up-side-down* the situation became. When facing restlessness, we wondered what was "*bugging*": the pedagogical approach, the schedule (lessons occurred only once a week), or the uncertain situation. Ultimately, however, pupils and teachers learned to *cope* with the new, strange conditions. Moments of dialogue emerged through creative and playful encounters that invited actions and negotiations with and among peers. Coming together to co-explore new ways of dancing and languaging in this new school reality nurtured a sense of communality. Navigating this messy situation became possible by literally *be(com)ing up-side-down together*.

These practices evolved through embodied pedagogical practice. They add to previous research (Anttila, 2015, 2019; Lilja et al., 2020) by illustrating how practices that combine embodied and linguistic activity meaningfully, that involve interaction, collaboration, performative elements, and imagination, can engage pupils in languaging even in exceptional conditions. These practices should not be considered "best practices", fixed or static, but emerging and ever-shifting in relation to their socio-material realities (Toohey, 2019).

An embodied approach that involves moving and encountering more freely differs from everyday pedagogical practices in "normal" conditions (Anttila, 2015, 2019). However, this was even more evident in these exceptional ones, in which pupils had fewer opportunities to meet, interact, and collaborate with peers in (and outside of) the classroom. Despite being a stripped-down version, the project created possibilities for acting, encountering, and languaging more spontaneously in a school reality with new spatial arrangements and pre-planned, choreographed embodied patterns.

Although the focus of language learning is on human beings, we have challenged conventional conceptualizations of language learning as only occurring in human-to-human interaction. Even when invisible, non-human elements are always present,

affecting human action and communication (Fenwick, 2015; Pennycook, 2017; Toohey, 2019). The coronavirus has made this impact visible and concrete.

The different groupings of pupils, the teachers, the linguistic resources, the virus, masks, the gym, the schoolyard, etc., all made tangible the entanglement of bodies and materials in enacting language, and the messiness and uncertainties of communication and meaning-making (Pennycook, 2017; Toohey, 2019). This process has made us rethink embodied language learning not only as connected to, but also as occurring in and through languaging as a dance within and among strange assemblages (Domanska, 2011) that encompass human and non-human bodies (Pennycook, 2017; Toohey, 2019).

This insight has implications for early language education. According to the current national core curricula, a central goal for early language learning is using language in everyday interactive situations to make meaning with the help of non-verbal resources like gestures and facial expressions, and material resources like technology (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019). Here, we have explored how an embodied approach to early language education involves a more radical understanding of bodies and materials as being intertwined with language (Toohey, 2019). We have seen how languaging entails being actively engaged and attuned to multiple, changing sets of elements; it involves acting, and affecting while tolerating a not fully shared understanding. These encounters not only generated a shared experience of being together as humans in a crisis, but involved coming together and actively exploring how to co-exist in a shared, more-than-human world (Pennycook, 2017).

Sustaining dialogue

By focusing on experiences of resuming contact instruction in a project that integrated language and dance during the COVID-19 pandemic, we have explored how it is possible to sustain dialogue during distancing. Through a performative narrative, the article unpacks how dance and language integration supported dialogue even when touching was not possible, materials were not available, and distancing changed practice. The project created possibilities for creative, collaborative languaging through which moments of dialogue emerged. Languaging engaged participants in exploring new ways of communicating and co-existing in strange more-than-human relations, which included a virus. These practices made it possible to sustain dialogue, despite, or even with, the virus.

Shaping such dialogical spaces (Anttila, 2019; Chappell et al., 2019) in exceptional circumstances has pedagogical value. They enabled embodied, playful encounters with peers and the environment when human contacts were restricted. They nurtured a sense of stability and safety for pupils in uncertain times. Co-exploring how to stay in touch in shifting relations has meaning for early language learning in a complex world.

For us, integrating language and dance aligns with an affirmative approach (Bodén & Gunnarsson, 2021; Braidotti, 2020). It enabled turning messy conditions into an opportunity to transform embodied pedagogical practice creatively and collaboratively, and thus, to sustain dialogue despite considerable challenges. Sustaining dialogue requires that we, teachers and researchers, dare to affect and be affected, even in, or perhaps especially in a crisis.

We recognize that lived experiences of the pandemic differ globally (Braidotti, 2020), and that researchers and teachers elsewhere might face other difficulties and possibilities with the practice of embodied language learning. However, creating stories from experiences of embodied pedagogical practice in a global disruption of the "normal" may incite dialogue about what kind of "new normals" can be co-created.

The pandemic brought into awareness that even invisible materiality, which would not be easily recognized in normal circumstances, significantly affects human interaction. Distancing, among other effects of the virus, underscored that communication engages the entire human being. This awareness of the role of bodies and materiality in children's encounters presents a possibility to move towards embodied pedagogies in early language education. This study contributes to this endeavor, but more research is needed to articulate the potentials of embodied language learning through the arts.

In conclusion, integrating language and dance in primary education has value beyond learning language or dance. It invites rethinking and reconfiguring how we learn, language, and live together in a complex, continuously changing world. In doing so, it offers pedagogical tools for sustaining dialogue in, with, and beyond distancing, a world post-COVID-19. This has significance for decreasing inequalities and increasing dialogue.

Epilogue

The pupils are jumping with hands up and exchanging "Goodbye's" with their neighbors on their turn.

Changing direction. "Vi ses!" [See you!] *A movement for each word, a clap on the lap and a jump with hands up, "VI. SES."*

We try faster. The pupils get very excited. It gets noisier.

Somebody says,

"AGAIN!"

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