

# **DEVELOPING SOMATIC UNDERSTANDING IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

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As a kindergarten teacher teaching in second-language immersion classes, French in Canada and English overseas, my approach was based on songs, stories, humour and play. As my Masters coursework progressed, I realized that having a strong theoretical base for my teaching practice would help me become a more purposeful educator and could improve my students' second language learning. I learned more about Egan's socio-cultural theory of learning and cognition, and the principles in his work enhanced my classroom practice, which already followed similar methods. Egan's theory informed my developing belief that fostering somatic understanding is important in a second language context, particularly with beginning second language learners.

In Egan's theory, cognitive tools, which are the mental skills and abilities we use to develop knowledge, develop from one's particular environment. Somatic understanding, which is learning based in the senses, is the first set of cognitive tools to develop. As a kindergarten teacher I used elements of somatic understanding to facilitate language development in my immersion classrooms. My pedagogy supports a major emphasis on furthering these somatic tools in the early years, which I argue may be advantageous for second language development.

For Egan (2008) the origin of somatic understanding is the idea that "our body shapes our language" (p.45). Our first experiences of learning come from our bodies' connections with the physical world and our reactions, both physical and emotional, to this contact. Other researchers have also noted the significance of this connection. Monica Garcia Pelayo (2007) states, "An emotional linkage exists between imagination and feelings, a reciprocal bond. For students to construct knowledge, they must also make use of reason or intellect that includes affectivity, that is, student feelings and emotions" (p. 3). It follows that fostering this emotional connection with imagination through somatic understanding is the first step in learning. Stimulation of the senses, of humour, and of the emotions (Egan, p. 48), provide young learners with the experience that forms the basis for language and the language-based forms of understanding that follow: reading and writing.

Egan makes the point that meaning is derived from one's experience, it is not something inherent in the language itself. Trying to teach a second language to someone who doesn't have an emotional connection with that language, no personal experience to associate with its expressions and nuances, can be a great challenge. Returning to the way children learn when they are very young, through rhythm and rhyme, pattern,

music, and humour, is a way for the learner to develop connections with the language on the most basic, personal level. In addition, this provides experiences that they can then use that language to express. Students need to feel like the new language will give them greater power to express themselves and their experience rather than limiting their ability to do so. Somatic understanding is the only one of Egan's toolkits that exists prior to *and* develops concurrently with language, which makes it unique in that it is therefore the most accessible for all students, and particularly appropriate for a classroom in which students are learning a new language.

How to foster this sense of freedom in one's second language? An environment where classroom activities foster communication and exploration, where students by necessity must develop new uses for language as new situations arise. Avoiding what Egan calls a "happy clappy" lesson, which trie[s] to make the children's experience pleasant but at the cost of trivializing the subject matter," (p. 100) is important. The learning environment should be highly interactive, with a focus on stimulating the senses and eliciting emotional responses. Methods include activities to develop familiarity with patterns and rhythm in the language of instruction such as songs, dialogues, chants, and pairing movement with rhythm, a way to embody the experience of learning the language. In my classroom I would have my students make up dances to go with songs we were learning, and have them hop to chants. I'd ask them to clap out the rhythms they heard in their favourite songs and poems, use new words, and retell the stories through dance and drama.

Developing humour, a key tool in the somatic toolkit, is effective in an early-years second-language learning classroom not only because it is enjoyable for students, but also because of the communicative nature of humour. According to Jyotsna Vaid (2006), in a humorous mode of discourse the unconventional and the illogical are accepted (p. 153), which to me indicates that its use in the second language classroom sets a wide comfort zone where language play is welcomed and errors are merely food for fun. Vaid addresses the point that using humour in one's second language can be difficult because it requires an understanding of socio-cultural norms (p.155), but she describes how, in the right environment, errors can in fact create or add to humour; she describes the "violation of expectations" (p.154) as an integral part of humour. In my kindergarten classrooms, I have since found that using humour as a teaching tool is effective with young students because it is accessible, and because it transgresses language rules, which is unexpected and sometimes shocking, adding to the appeal. For humour to be effective there must be a shared experience to base it in and a way to express that experience. In particular, maximizing student-student and teacher-student interaction in the classroom supports the use of this tool.

Because somatic understanding is based in the body, it is a shared experience for students and teacher. In the kindergarten immersion classroom, where there can be a significant language barrier between the teacher and students, this mutual experience also helps to build trust. Using humour in our classroom allowed me to share in the students' experience and be a more empathetic teacher. If somatic understanding is "the embodiment of being and doing," (Matthews, 1998, p. 3), my approach to immersion teaching in the kindergarten classroom is in keeping with Egan's method. Rather than a childish, simplistic way of learning to be discarded with age, somatic

understanding may be the key to truly embodying a love of learning (Matthews, p. 4). Aneta Pavlenko (2006) explores the connection between emotional withdrawal and low proficiency, which, to me, highlights the role that somatic cognition can potentially play in the second-language classroom. Teaching to develop this cognitive toolkit can help immersion students connect emotionally with their second language. In turn, this may result not only in stronger literacy development and reasoning ability in that language, but also an embodied desire to continue learning in that language. Curricula for second-language instruction may be enhanced by accessing the somatic learning and cognition and provide frameworks for teachers to plan lessons within these forms.

## References

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## Biography

Katherine Ireland received her undergraduate degree from the University of King's College and her education degree from St. Thomas University. She taught in the Halifax Regional School Board and at an international school in Japan before returning to New Brunswick in 2011 to begin M.Ed. work. Her thesis focuses on Kieran Eagan's imaginative education.