

## Editorial

# Embodied language learning through engagement in the arts

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This special issue addresses embodied language learning through engagement in the arts. In recent years, research into arts and arts-based language pedagogies has gained more prominence in applied linguistics research. The intersections of language and arts-based approaches to teaching and learning have been increasingly explored through diverse theoretical and methodological lenses (Paulasto & Pöyhönen, 2020). It has been suggested that applied linguistics is undergoing a “creative turn” (Bradley & Harvey, 2019). These themes resonate deeply with us, the guest editors, as we share a keen interest in this research area.

Since 2021, we have been engaged in the interdisciplinary research project Embodied Language Learning through the Arts (ELLA; 2021–2024), collaborating multi-professionally with researchers, educators, and artists. Our objectives have been to broaden conceptions of language and language learning, investigate how embodied language learning through the arts may contribute to renewing pedagogical practices in various educational settings, and ignite critical discussions about how educational structures can become more responsive to societal changes. These aims set the current special issue in motion, seeking to create a forum for research on arts and embodiment in language education – extending beyond the ELLA project group. Thus, this special issue continues the themes covered by the pioneering special issue *Language and the arts – creative inquiry in applied linguistics*, edited by Paulasto and Pöyhönen (2020), with a more specific focus on the role of embodiment in combining language and the arts in educational contexts.

## 1 The pedagogical relationships between language and the arts

The notions of language and arts are multifaceted and can be understood and interpreted differently. Many researchers using arts-based or arts-informed approaches advocate for a more holistic understanding of language, one that considers the multimodal and multisensory ways of meaning-making in diverse contexts (see e.g., Bradley et al., 2018; Harvey & Bradley, 2023; Simpson & Bradley, 2024). In this discussion, the practical theory of translanguaging is frequently used to emphasize the idea that language users draw on and combine different semiotic resources in a situationally relevant way to work towards intersubjective understanding (Wei, 2018). Several articles in this special issue

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draw on and contribute new perspectives to current understandings of translanguaging.

The contributions to this special issue touch upon the pedagogical relationships between language learning and the arts. Central to this discussion are the notions of *arts-based* and *arts integration*. The term *arts-based* is widely used and combined with various perspectives – such as arts-based learning, arts-based teaching, arts-based pedagogy, arts-based methods, and arts-based activities – across scientific fields (e.g., Rieger et al., 2020; Sanz-Camarero et al., 2023). While the meaning and definition behind “arts-based” vary across studies, they generally involve learning, teaching, pedagogy, methods, or activities that are grounded in working and engaging with the arts; for example, using music or dance to promote learning in other disciplines (Sanz-Camarero et al., 2023).

In turn, *arts integration* refers to a teaching approach that combines a subject area with one or several art forms. There are several arts integration models, and the boundaries between arts-based teaching and arts-integrated teaching are somewhat fluid. However, scholars largely agree that teaching should strive for co-equal emphasis on the subjects and art forms included (e.g., Bresler, 1995; Buck & Snook, 2016; Jusslin et al., 2024; Sanz-Camarero et al., 2023). This endeavor has been conceptualized as *co-equal* integration (Bresler, 1995), *collaborative* integration (Sanz-Camarero et al., 2023), and *transdisciplinary* integration (Marshall, 2014), emphasizing that the arts (e.g., drama or music) are taught in equal balance with another subject (e.g., language).

A contrasting approach is using the arts superficially or instrumentally, merely as a vehicle for learning languages without substantive artistic or pedagogical emphasis on the arts. Such approaches have been conceptualized as *subservient* (Bresler, 1995) or *subordinate* (Sanz-Camarero et al., 2023) arts integration approaches. While there are arguments that “arts-based” can imply a subservient use of the arts (Sanz-Camarero et al., 2023), in the context of language learning, arts-based approaches do not necessarily suggest an instrumental or weak use of the arts, as demonstrated in several articles of this special issue. Additionally, we acknowledge that *arts-informed* approaches to language learning can play a crucial role in expanding teaching approaches in language education. The articles included in this special issue provide examples of how language learning and the arts can coexist in equal balance, despite certain challenges, which are also discussed in the individual articles.

## 2 Embodiment in language education

Engaging with the arts is inherently an embodied process, and the combination of the body, physical activity, and language learning is not novel. However, our previously conducted literature review on embodied learning and teaching approaches in language education revealed a surprising gap: Few previous studies on language learning and the arts address embodiment and adopt a theoretical framework of embodied learning and teaching (Jusslin et al., 2022). This insight inspired the current special issue, which aims to unite the arts and embodiment in language education.

*Embodiment* can be theorized in various ways (e.g., Anttila, 2015; Csordas, 2002; Sheets-Johnstone, 2015), as illustrated in the articles of this special issue. A common underlying idea is recognizing the human body as a basis for learning. However, embodiment does not refer only to human bodies. Depending on the

field, embodiment may encompass phenomena ranging from microscopic life forms (cells, bacteria) to complex systems and ecologies comprising both living and non-living elements and their relationships. In studying embodiment, technology (for example, robotics, artificial intelligence) and natural science intersect with humanistic disciplines such as phenomenology, anthropology, linguistics, cultural, and somatic studies. Researchers share interests and recognize the need for interdisciplinary collaboration to grasp the complexity of embodied systems (see e.g., Shapiro & Spaulding, 2024).

The increasing focus on this interdisciplinary field of study is connected to an epistemological shift, known as the *embodied turn*, challenging dualistic views on the mind and the body as separate from each other. Although this shift remains ongoing, it is now widely accepted and recognized that embodiment is central to consciousness, cognition, and learning (see e.g., Johnson, 2008; Thompson, 2007). The embodied turn has great implications for education. When used in educational contexts, embodiment typically refers to human bodies. Embodiment in this sense supports understanding human existence as it becomes manifest through and in our bodies, encompassing bodily sensations, lived experiences, and physical actions. However, even when focusing on human meaning-making, it is important to bear in mind that learning and all cognitive processes are always connected with the social and material conditions in which human beings are situated. Learning and thinking understood in this way are dependent on the environment, and these processes are only partially within our conscious control.

In arts and play, the notion of embodiment has yet another meaning, as it connects with imagination and creativity (Crowther, 1993). Artistic and creative activities broaden human meaning-making processes and incorporate inanimate objects and materiality in unexpected ways. Through these activities, materials and objects become embodied, or animated, and generate new meanings. Arts and play, thus, have great educational potential in encouraging learners to explore new ways of expressing themselves, including through linguistic means.

The embodied turn has also given rise to the notion of *embodied learning*. Over the last decade, this comprehensive view on learning has gained ground in many fields, including education and linguistics. Researchers now widely acknowledge that language learning is an embodied process. As stated in the literature review that we conducted within the ELLA research project, “embodied learning can be broadly defined as a conception of learning where learners are holistically engaged and intertwined in their social and material surroundings” and that, in embodied learning, “the human body—i.e., the learner's body—is actively engaged in learning processes” (Jusslin et al., 2022, p. 2). The ELLA research team also maintains that bodily engagement involves more than visible movement, that is, physical activity. It also accounts for inner bodily sensations, experiences, and physiological changes. Consequently, embodied learning goes beyond learning through movement.

An embodied turn and an increased focus on embodied learning have also occurred in relation to language use and learning (e.g., Atkinson, 2010; Macedonia, 2019; Nevile, 2015), with different theoretical perspectives acknowledging that language and language learning are grounded in embodied processes. Our previously mentioned literature review (Jusslin et al., 2022) illustrates that previous research on language education acknowledging the body's role in language learning and teaching has mainly, but not exclusively, drawn on theories of embodied cognition and ethnomethodological, sociocultural, and multimodal theories. In addition to the theoretical perspectives

found in the review, another theoretical movement gaining visibility in applied linguistics research is posthumanist and new materialist theories (e.g., Pennycook, 2016; Toohey, 2019). Overall, these theoretical perspectives underscore the significance of embodied processes in language learning, illustrating how the body is integral to understanding, learning, using, and doing language(s). Some of these perspectives are also put to work in the articles included in the current special issue.

### 3 Contributions to the special issue

The call for papers for this special issue engaged scholars working with various art forms in language education, including dance, literature, visual art, and music. Eight articles, authored by 13 contributors, were developed and accepted for publication. These articles explore different educational contexts and age groups, from children to adults. They provide diverse examples of how language learning happens in, with, and through the arts, highlighting how embodiment underpins learning, teaching, and practice in both languages and the arts. Consequently, all the articles present transdisciplinary approaches to applied language studies. Next, a brief insight into the eight articles is presented.

In the first article, *What's art got to do with it? Contemplations on art, language, and embodiment*, Eeva Anttila unravels the meaning of art in embodied language learning. The conceptual framework for this inquiry revolves around language, (trans)linguaging, art, and arts education. Anttila's methodological approach draws from the notions of sensing and seeing. She examines a videotaped excerpt from an art pedagogical project, attending to its material, sensory, and affective elements. As a conclusion, Anttila proposes that the notion of (trans)linguaging is pivotal to understanding how art works in educational situations. She also asserts that artistic practice *is* (trans)linguaging and, further, that arts education *is* language education.

Kaisa Korpinen's article *"Wild" languaging: A practice of embodied language learning when integrating dance in early additional language education* explores how language and dance integration can create opportunities for children to learn language in embodied ways in an instructed context. The research is part of Korpinen's doctoral project combining dance with Swedish language teaching in grades 1–2 at a Finnish primary school. The results indicate that communicative and collaborative creative movement activities engaged children in languaging in creative, spontaneous ways, and allowed their bodies and the materialities of the space to become agentic in the process.

In the article *The frictions and blessings of doing community arts in school with multilingual pupils: Ethical considerations*, Riina Hannuksela, Angela Aldebs, and Niina Lilja draw on data engendered in two projects with multilingual preparatory-class pupils to discuss ethical challenges in facilitating community arts projects in primary schools. They use autoethnographic methods and thematic analysis to focus on *ethically important moments*, which are generally "difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 262). They describe frictions that arise when artists balance between school norms, the hectic everyday life of the school, and the ethos of community arts to nurture the pupils' creative potential. Hannuksela, Aldebs, and Lilja conclude that conflicting ethical

frameworks in multiprofessional collaborations as well as the ethical dimensions of art as pedagogy, warrant further attention in academia.

In the article *Å tenke med Polanyi's kunst- och kunnskapsfilosofi. Om kroppslighetens plass og det språkutviklende potensiale i verdensorientert litteraturundervisning* [Thinking with Polanyi's philosophy of art and knowledge. The place of embodiment and the language-developing potential in world-oriented literature education], Elin Aaen and Nikolaj Elf think with the Hungarian scientist and philosopher Michael Polanyi, who sees metaphorical expressions in poetry and art as equally valid modes of knowledge as those of science. Studying theoretical and empirical aspects of how Polanyi's main concept, the structure of tacit knowing, can be used to understand literature teaching in upper secondary Nordic classrooms, their article reveals new insight into the connection between literature as art and language comprehension. The main finding is that Polanyi's framework offers profound insights into the structure of intentionality that is particularly helpful in understanding the role of embodiment and the complexity at work in world-oriented literature education.

Anu Muhonen's article, *Students' drawing as a way to visualize goals for target language use*, investigates how drawings created by Finnish as a second language students in Canadian university function as visualizations that support an arts-informed approach to knowledge production. The study explores how students represent their aspirations and objectives for future language use and study through embodied visualizations. Muhonen's study is grounded in reflective arts-informed language pedagogy, and it employs multisemiotic content analysis. Through drawing, students visualize their imagined potential selves as future language users in different situations, activities, and tasks, and with different people. While language learners traditionally express their thoughts through oral and written language, and commonly in English, drawings offer an alternative artistic avenue for knowledge transmission and communication during the initial years of language learning.

The article *Embodied and arts-integrated languages and literacies education in primary teacher education: Becoming-teachers' diffractions of opportunities-and-challenges*, by Sofia Jusslin, Kaisa Korpinen, Riina Hannuksela, and Charlotte Svendler Nielsen, delves into student teachers' diffractions of opportunities and challenges of using embodied and arts-integrated teaching approaches in languages and literacies education. Their study is based on a workshop series in primary teacher education during which the students worked with dance and visual arts in languages and literacies education. Results indicate that the students developed new conceptions of languages and literacies as embodied processes, and while they expressed enthusiasm for applying these teaching approaches in their future classrooms, they also voiced concerns about being able to assess children's learning based on these approaches due to their open-ended nature.

In their article entitled *Teachers' expanding roles and tasks: Integrating embodied and arts-based language pedagogies in physical education for cultural and linguistic awareness*, Mariana Siljamäki and Eeva Anttila focus on physical education students' views on cultural and linguistic awareness as part of their future work as physical education teachers. To complement students' reflections, they also explore Finnish as a second language teachers' views on embodied and arts-based pedagogies in teaching language. The authors conclude that embodied and arts-based approaches have great potential in developing cultural and linguistic awareness in and beyond physical education.

In the final article, the conceptual article *From intra-action to intratwining? Language learning as an embodied activity in and through music education*, Johanna Lehtinen-Schnabel and Sanna Kivijärvi examine how transdisciplinary research and pedagogical practice on integrating music and language education could be strengthened through conceptual coordination. The context of their study is embodied (holistic) language learning in and through music and musical activity. Dismantling the boundaries between the disciplines of music education and applied linguistics towards transdisciplinary thinking, *intratwining* as an example of theorization (coordinating the notions of intra-action and intertwining) is introduced. Lehtinen-Schnabel and Kivijärvi's study contributes to an expanded understanding of transdisciplinary research and pedagogical practice that needs to deal with the conceptual multiplicity of different theoretical perspectives.

Our intention in creating this special issue was to create a forum for research exploring how the arts, with an emphasis on embodiment, can contribute to language learning. The eight articles create the foundation for this forum, also made possible by the constructive and critical input of peer reviewers throughout the review processes. We extend our sincerest thanks to all reviewers for their valuable contributions to this special issue. Our hope is that the content will engage researchers and educators across fields, including applied language studies, language education, and arts education – and possibly beyond.

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