Beyond Words: Nonverbal and Minimal-Verbal Strategies for Inclusive Contemporary Dance Pedagogy in Multilingual Contexts

Ke Huang

Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, London, United Kingdom

Abstract. This project starts with a simple question: what happens when oral instructions become difficult to understand in dance classes? I have a deep sense of this feeling. As an international student studying dance abroad, and hope to become a dance teacher one day, in the face of such questions, I am very interested in it that I would like to explore whether we can convey the ideas we usually express in words through action demonstration, gestures, rhythm sensing, space utilisation, eye contact, gentle touch and music. By doing this, I organised three workshops with a total of six participants to assist me in trying. In many ways, reducing language communication does help people understand and maintain a high level of concentration. However, everyone's experience of "silence" is different. Some people feel that silence allows them to devote themselves to the perception of the body and rhythm; others feel uneasy and even a little anxious. This difference changed my original opinion. I used to think that reducing the use of spoken English would naturally make dance classes fairer, but now I understand that things are far from that simple. Language and physical communication are both effective communication tools; we must choose the most suitable way according to the specific person, action and situation.

Keywords: Contemporary dance teaching, nonverbal communication, embodied teaching and inclusive learning methods.

1. Introduction

This research question mainly comes from my learning experience as an international student when I studied contemporary dance in Trinity Laban. Many times, I can learn movements quickly, but it becomes difficult to explain movements in English. For example, the teacher may use long sentences to explain the movement itself, image or detailed action processing in the combination, but when I understand, the course progress has often advanced to the next stage. This sense of gap and the pressure of not being able to keep up have always haunted me, and it prompts me to explore: when verbal expression is no longer a bridge of communication, but an obstacle, how should dance teachers communicate clearly and effectively?

I also noticed another situation: when the teacher stopped explaining and turned to re-demonstrating the movement combination, playing the rhythm by hand, or dancing with us, I could keep up with the progress confidently. This contrast contributed to this study. I don't advocate completely abandoning language in teaching, but I hope to explore a model that reduces dependence on language and gives full play to the role of physical teaching.

This study explores the teaching methods of using non-verbal or minimalist language in contemporary dance technique courses, especially in the context of students with different language backgrounds. The research mainly focusses on two questions: how can movements, gestures, facial expressions, rhythms and other body signals play the role of teaching or auxiliary teaching when the use of spoken language is reduced? How can these methods help students from different languages and cultural backgrounds deepen their understanding, enhance their sense of connection and maintain a state of full attention?

The theoretical basis of this study includes Hanna's theory of dance as a non-verbal communication [1], Maiorani's motion function grammar [2, 3] and Katan-Schmid's Gaga dance practice [4]. In addition, McCarthy-Brown's culturally responsive teaching framework [5] and Amin's initiative to decolonise dance courses [6, 7] also support this study.

At first, I firmly believed that reducing the use of spoken English could create a more equal teaching space. But after three workshops, my idea is no longer so certain. Teaching through the body has raised few new problems: how to control the pace of teaching? When is it beneficial to have physical contact? Who can keep up with the progress and who will feel left behind? When should I explain again? These moments made me rethink "tolerance" itself and what it means to "teach with the body".

2. Context and Theoretical Framework

These days, dance studios bring together people from different languages and cultural backgrounds around the world. Our teaching method has gradually become a core topic, not just a practical content. When not everyone can master English equally, our explanation, teaching and demonstration methods will affect which people can confidently stick to and successfully complete the learning process. Criticism of the "language-dominated" and "Western-centred" teaching methods [5, 8] is jointly applied with the "somatic" perspective [4, 9] that regards the body as a source of knowledge. These concepts guide my workshop practice. At the same time, I also pay close attention to the inconsistencies between the theory and the actual situation in the classroom.

2.1 The Cornerstone of Contemporary Dance Teaching Method

Dance teaching has gradually got rid of the rigid or fixed pattern and paid more attention to reflection and adaptability. This is very important, which means that we should not only focus on "what to teach", but also to "how to teach". Warburton links rigorous technical training with body perception consciousness [9]; Sööt and Viskus explore how educators can adapt to the changing needs of learners [10]; Brinson [11] and Hagood [12] pointed out that the connotation of dance education is far more than simple skill cultivation. It also covers creativity, physical cognition and the values we convey. These views made me realise that if half of the people in the classroom can't understand the teacher's explanation and what the class is expressing, then even if the course content is explained clearly, it will not be truly inclusive teaching. In a multilingual environment, communication is as important as the action itself.

2.2 Nonverbal Communication And Motion Semiotics

My entry point is an obvious factual phenomenon: dance itself can communicate without language. Hanna describes it as a system that carries meaning by action, space and rhythm [1]; Bouissac [13] and Maiorani [2, 3] further analyse the operation mechanism of this process. After reading their views, I began to think about whether these principles are also applicable to teaching: since gestures and rhythms can convey meaning on the stage, can they be used to guide movement correction in the classroom? This is exactly what I am trying to verify. Demonstration, gestures, rhythm and space prompts have become my main teaching tools, while the use of language has been minimised.

2.3 Culturally Responsive And Inclusive Dance Education

Reducing the use of language is not the same as adopting a certain "common language". This is an important lesson I learned in the process of reading. McCarthy-Brown advocates culturally responsive practices [5]; Amin challenges dominant norms [6, 7]; Masunah emphasises the way of cognition rooted in culture and through the body [14]. These views prompted me to abandon the presumption that "silence means clarity". In different cultures, training backgrounds and personal experiences may carry completely different meanings. The workshop I designed aims to observe under what circumstances "minimalistic language teaching" is effective and under what circumstances it can cause confusion or discomfort.

2.4 Body Practice And Sensory Imagination

Katan-Schmid shows how senses and actions work together to build understanding in Gaga practice [4]; Galili also emphasises the importance of sensory awareness [15]; Fraleigh and Mertz regard physical experience as one independent form of knowledge [16, 17]. These ideas are very important because dancers often perceive the weight, direction and timing first, and then express them in words. This is exactly the teaching strategy I rely on in the workshop: rhythm, clear demonstration and focus on the senses constitute the main communication channels, while language is secondary on this basis.

3. Practice-Led Workshop: Process And Reflection

This project consists of three workshops. After the three workshops, I have a new reflection: my predictions are not always consistent with what actually happens.

3.1 Pure Nonverbal Demonstration And Participant Response

The first workshop taught two short phrase combinations, and I had almost no language communication throughout the whole process. One of the combinations has a soft style, emphasising the sense of release of the body; the other is crisper and has more gestures. In order for the participants to better understand these two combinations, I repeatedly demonstrate these movements. We use mirror imitation, gesture signals that guide repetition and flow, and music that carries rhythm and movement texture. Only with explicit permission will I guide the direction or convey the feeling of movement through gentle touch and only speak when necessary.

Participants have different reactions. Visual learners can quickly master the movement, while others are willing to mirror imitation. These two ways can help them find their own inner rhythm and the way to learn movements without language teaching. However, one participant was anxious about the silence and silence caused by non-language teaching. This silence reminded her of the rigorous training experience of the teacher many years ago when she was in the dance school; even if she did not actually lag behind others in movement learning, she was still worried that she could not keep up with the progress. She proposed to slow down the pace of physical teaching and increase the pause between each movement.

This workshop proves that teachers can also teach short movement combinations with very few languages and only focussing on body language teaching. However, silence has different effects on everyone: some people feel free, while others feel insecure. This confirms McCarthy-Brown's view that we must respect and adapt to the current state of the participants [5].

3.2 Longer Action Combinations, Whole-Body Movements And Group Interactions

The second workshop adds a combination of longer and more difficult phrases. We first practiced the familiar ground movement sequence and then carried out a faster-paced and more demanding movement segment. The teaching process mainly maintains nonverbal form, and is carried out through complete demonstration, agreed gesture signals, mirror imitation and hierarchical guidance. I first show the route and rhythm of the movement, and then explain the details of the limbs, such as knee position and wrist posture. Physical contact can only be carried out after obtaining permission.

After three demonstrations, the familiar ground movement exercise progressed rapidly. The new action combination poses a challenge to two participants who have never been exposed to similar content. They chose to keep up with the progress by observing their companions and following the music prompts. Participants said that watching the complete movement demonstration and getting targeted guidance are very beneficial to learning. The sense of trust within the group also makes this kind of "silent teaching" seem natural and smooth.

Throughout the process, I have always been in a dominant position: deciding what to show, when to repeat, who needs extra help, and when to assist learning by touching. This makes me deeply realise

what is most important: informed consent, rhythm control and emotional care are not details; they are the core of practice in themselves.

3.3 Improvement of Complexity, Tactile Guidance And Ethical Reflection

The last workshop used a combination of contemporary dance techniques that lasted nearly three minutes. The sequence constantly switches between the tone of endurance, rhythm, height, and tension and relaxation. As a teacher, I first demonstrate the movement and then add gesture signals to let the participants better understand the details of the movement. The mirror practice continues. At the same time, the music also guides the participants to feel the texture brought by the action and how the sense of music affects the embodied action learning. I have added physical guidance for everyone in this workshop, and it is always based on informed consent. At the beginning, I explained various gesture signals one by one to ensure that everyone can establish a universal communication system.

Halfway through the workshop, I deliberately wore a mask to explore whether facial expressions were really indispensable in language-free teaching. After three complete combination demonstrations with masks, only about half of the participants could fully recall the movements and combinations. Because I couldn't see my facial expressions, those subtle soothing facial expressions disappeared, and the participants' sense of uncertainty increased. At this point, I found that when teachers choose non-language teaching, the vast majority of participants rely on observing the teacher's facial expressions to judge whether the actions are correct and whether they understand the teacher's instructions. Therefore, I increased the hand gesture and made it clearer: for example, drawing a circle represents repetition, stretching the palm flat represents staying still, and pointing to a specific body part is used to guide attention. At the same time, the tactile guidance also clarifies the rotation action, the contact with the ground and the texture of the action.

Most participants responded well to the guidance method that combines gestures, touch and music. However, a participant who was absent from the last class found it difficult to cope. In the absence of verbal assistance, she felt that the pace was too fast and it was difficult for her to keep up, resulting in frustration and anxiety. Her experience made me clearly realise that language-free teaching methods are not naturally suitable for everyone.

Throughout these three workshops, I have gradually formed a kind of reflective thinking: nonverbal guidance strategies can not only support trained professional dancers who are familiar with such situations, but also bring new cognitive and emotional challenges. I realised that focussing too much on the teaching method itself sometimes leads us to ignore the real needs of individuals. Remaining silent is not only a teaching skill, but also a choice that requires flexibility, informed consent and continuous care.

4. Analysis and Critical Reflection

After the three workshops, my analysis and reflection have changed. The key thing I pay attention to is not only whether this nonverbal teaching method works, but also when, for whom and under what circumstances it will fail. Among them, movement demonstration and silence are particularly prominent; at the same time, physical contact, mutual learning between peers, rhythm control and music use also run through every moment. Those unexpected discoveries often bring me the most profound inspiration.

4.1 The Power And Limitations of the Body Demonstration And Gesture System

Clear and complete movement sequence is always effective. The participants said that watching the complete movement demonstration not only helps them master the movement form, but also allows them to understand the rhythm, texture and intention of it. The addition of conventional gesture signals in the follow-up link further reduces the confusion in communication.

Hanna [1] and Maiorani [2, 3] explained the reason: the action itself carries the meaning. Katan-Schmid [4] further pointed out that learners do not simply imitate movement forms but interpret physical sensations and dynamic textures. I clearly observed this in the third workshop: through repeated demonstrations, music accompaniment and targeted guidance, the participants learned a set of longer action sequence combinations with almost no need for verbal communication.

However, this method also has limitations, which is especially obvious in the "mask experiment". When facial expressions are missing, the participants' sense of security gradually weakens, and the uncertainty and anxiety increase. In addition, the same is true when dealing with longer and complex technique sequences. Demonstration alone is not enough. Learners also need to practice repeatedly, through gradual guidance and personalised attention. Therefore, demonstration is not a universal solution; it is just a resource that must be constantly adjusted and evolved according to the teaching content and the specific situation of on-site participants.

4.2 The Inclusive Potential Contained in Emotional Security, Anxiety And Silence

The impact of silence on the participants exceeded my expectations. Some people feel calm and at ease, while others feel exposed and uneasy. Silence is by no means neutral: it can not only create space for physical awareness, but also make people feel at a loss.

This changed my view of "inclusive practice". As McCarthy-Brown [5] and Amin [6, 7] pointed out, established systems often favour specific communication methods. I thought that reducing the use of English could weaken the concept of hierarchy, but the workshop experience showed that this was not necessarily the case.

One participant linked the long silence with the rigourous training experience in the past; even if she could keep up with the progress, she was still worried that she would fall behind. Another participant who joined halfway was overwhelmed by the fast-paced teaching of movements without verbal explanation. These situations made me realise that just reducing the verbal communication cannot eliminate the sense of rejection. The meaning of silence varies according to personal culture, self-confidence, training background and learning preferences.

Although this kind of experience is uncomfortable, it is very necessary. As a dance speaking English as a second language, I am well aware of the feelings of language barriers. But at the same time, I learned the same important lesson: it is by no means true tolerance to sacrifice the comfort of the participants in order to adhere to the established methods. Whether it is choosing silence, explaining, slowing down the pace, or physical guidance, these are ethical choices involving power, trust and responsibility. Inclusive teaching is not looking for a "perfect" method, but willing to flexibly adjust the teaching method according to changes in needs.

4.3 Physical Contact, Peer Learning, Rhythm Control And Music

With the increasing difficulty of teaching content, the role of physical contact, observation between peers, rhythm control and music is more and more prominent. With the consent of the participants, limb guidance can help them perceive the perceptual changes and movement direction of specific parts of the body. The sense of boundaries is always crucial, which is also part of ethical teaching practices. Peers learn from each other and have the same remarkable results: observing others can provide additional reference clues for unfamiliar actions, making the whole group a part of the teaching process. In addition, rhythm and structural arrangement also play a key role. If the teaching pace is too fast, it will increase the pressure, and breaking down the content into action path, rhythm and detailed points can make the learning process easier to master. Music is very helpful to some students, but if the volume or style interferes with the exercise content, other students will feel distracted.

The above shows that no strategy can have exactly the same effect on everyone. Effective teaching does not completely abandon language, but seeks a balance between demonstration, physical contact, rhythm, music and language explanation, and always makes flexible adjustments according to the on-site situation.

4.4 Summary Reflection

When demonstration and body language can clearly convey the teaching content, reducing language explanations in dance classes shows great potential. Among them, physical contact, peer support, music guidance and hierarchical guidance can enhance the teaching effect. However, there is not a way can work for everyone. The final result often depends on the complexity of the action, the familiarity of the students, the learning style and the emotional sense of security.

At first, I simply thought that "less English explanation" was equivalent to more equitable teaching. However, the experience of a series of workshops has shaken this belief: some students perform well in a quiet atmosphere, but some students need detailed language explanations, slower teaching combination rhythms or more detailed explanations. Those moments full of uncertainty are especially crucial. They reveal a truth: silence itself is not naturally equivalent to tolerance. Non-verbal teaching is not a universal teaching method, but a situational choice.

At this point, I no longer insist on finding a "correct" method but began to pay more attention to observation. For me, the value of "embodied teaching" is not to reduce words, but to force us to really see the person in front of us. In future practice, language, gestures, physical contact, music and demonstration will be listed as various dance teaching tools, which can be used by teachers at any time as needed, instead of a single option.

5. Conclusion

This study stems from my personal experience as an international student: when language became an obstacle in dance classes, it was difficult for me to keep up with the pace of the course. In order to realise practical research, I held three workshops to explore whether dance can be taught by reducing language explanation and increasing physical demonstration. However, the answer is not black or white. Because I found that some participants felt that keeping quiet helped them build a deeper connection with the movement; while others felt confused or uneasy due to the lack of verbal guidance. This experience has changed my view: reducing the use of language does not mean that dance teaching classes will naturally become fairer. Inclusive teaching is not to stick to a specific method, but to keenly perceive the on-site atmosphere, understand the needs of each student, and adjust flexibly, whether through language explanation, physical demonstration or slowing down the pace, as long as it is the most appropriate way at present. Furthermore, language and silence are not opposites; when we learn to teach according to talent and truly fit the current state of each dancer, both are valuable gifts we can give to student in the classroom.

References

[1] Hanna, J. L. (1979). To dance is human: A theory of nonverbal communication. University of Chicago Press.

[2] Maiorani, A. (2017). Making meaning through movement: A functional grammar of dance movement. In M. G. Sindoni, J. Wildfeuer, & K. L. O'Halloran (Eds.), Mapping multimodal performance studies (pp. 53–78). Routledge.

[3] Maiorani, A. (2024). The functional grammar of dance applied to ELAN annotation. Journal of World Languages, 10(1), 221–249.

[4] Katan-Schmid, E. (2016). Embodied philosophy in dance: Gaga and Ohad Naharin's movement research. Palgrave Macmillan.

[5] McCarthy-Brown, N. (2017). Dance pedagogy for a diverse world: Culturally relevant teaching in theory, research and practice. McFarland.

[6] Amin, T. N. (2016). Beyond hierarchy: Reimagining African diasporic dance in higher education curricula. The Black Scholar, 46(1), 15–26.

[7] Amin, T. N. (2019). The semiotics of artefacts. In N. McCarthy-Brown (Ed.), Dance pedagogy for a diverse world (McFarland).

[8] Østern, T. P., Mabingo, A., & Skånberg, A. (Eds.). (2025). Dance education and pedagogies in contemporary contexts. Stockholm University Press.

[9] Warburton, E. C. (2019). Dance pedagogy. In S. Dodds (Ed.), The Bloomsbury companion to dance studies (pp. 81–110). Bloomsbury Academic.

[10] Sööt, A., & Viskus, E. (2014). Contemporary approaches to dance pedagogy. Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences, 112, 290–298.

[11] Brinson, P. (1991). Dance as education: Towards a national dance culture. Falmer Press.

[12] Hagood, T. K. (2006). A history of dance in American higher education. Edwin Mellen Press.

[13] Bouissac, P. (2013). The semiotics of clowns and clowning. Bloomsbury.

[14] Masunah, J. (2016). Multicultural dance education for teaching students with disabilities. Multicultural Education, 23(3–4), 2–6.

[15] Galili, D. F. (2015). Gaga: Moving beyond technique with Ohad Naharin. Dance Chronicle, 38, 360–382.

[16] Fraleigh, S. H. (1987). Dance and the lived body. University of Pittsburgh Press.

[17] Mertz, A. (2002). The body can speak: Essays on creative movement education. Southern Illinois University Press.