Eurythmy and Reading Comprehension

Eurythmy is a movement discipline with numerous applications. Among them are performance, therapeutic and pedagogical support. The entirety of pedagogical eurythmy is vast and beyond the scope of this article. Here I will introduce one important aspect of pedagogical eurythmy, specifically the use of “sound gestures,” also called “speech eurythmy” with respect to strengthening reading comprehension in the small child. Though thorough research remains to be done, current studies suggest that activity like eurythmy, indeed eurythmy itself, may prove invaluable for the development of reading comprehension skills.

First I will explain what eurythmy is and give examples. Following I will discuss how eurythmy relates to reading comprehension. I will do this by addressing two necessary neural functions for reading comprehension, one that takes place in the left hemisphere of the brain and the other on the right. I will share how eurythmy encourages cross-integration between the two hemispheres thus strengthening neural capacities needed for reading comprehension.

What Does Eurythmy Look Like?

Eurythmy for the young child, which encompasses kindergarten through grade 2, is often done standing in a circle while enacting stories, poems and songs that are memorized and narrated by the eurythmy teacher. Students enact these stories in eurythmy according to the sound that are spoken. The children follow the teacher’s lead by mimicking her eurythmy gestures as she speaks the story, and specifically, while she highlights specific phonemes featured in the story.

Eurythmy gestures correspond directly to individual speech sounds. For example, the eurythmy gestures for the sound “Bbb” is made by taking your two arms out in front and performing a movement similar to hugging something, except this something is empty space. We wrap our arms around an imaginary something and “squeeze” a little. This performs the eurythmy gesture: “Bbb”. The eurythmy gesture for the sound “Kh” is made by bringing arms out in front, then sharply bending at the elbows and bringing arms down in something reminiscent of a karate chop. This is the eurythmy gesture: “Kh.”

There are distinct eurythmy gestures for many sounds of speech. The children perform these gestures each time the sound or phoneme appears in the story. For example, they perform “Kh” with the teacher when the story tells of a “king,” a “kettle” or a “kite” They perform “Bbb” when the words: “baby,” “butterfly” and “bread” appear.

Throughout the story a single speech gesture will be performed in various ways to help build a picture of the word’s meaning. For example, the eurythmy gesture: “Bbb” can be performed in a large burly manner to express the word “bear,” but in a small delicate manner to express the word “bird.”

How Does Eurythmy Support Reading Comprehension?
Reading comprehension requires functions in both sides of the brain. The first is connected to logic and involves linking abstract shapes (letters) to sounds, and ultimately words. This takes place in the left hemisphere of the brain. The second is a right brain activity, which transforms words and group of words to inner pictures. This second process is more creative.

Reading comprehension requires both logic and creativity. It requires logic to decipher the language code from sounds into letters, into words and ultimately into paragraphs. It requires creativity to transform this deciphered code into images and meaning. Eurythmy requires both these activities at the same time thus strengthening the neural pathways connecting the two hemispheres.

**Right and Left Brain:**

When a child performs shapes with her limbs relating to a speech sound she secures an experience of linking abstract shapes to speech sounds. Although the eurythmy gestures do not always immediately link to the shape of a specific letter (though often they do!) the left brain neural activity connecting shapes to sounds is very active. With repeated practice this neural function grows stronger and stronger.

When a child performs the shapes with her limbs in connection to the speech sound, and at the same time builds a picture of the word’s meaning then the right brain is also involved. There is enough given in the words of the story and the gestures we perform to open the imaginative life of the child. This year one child remarked: “Wow...cool” when during the story, to the princess’s surprise, she found herself surrounded by a shower of pure gold. Another child in a different class blurted: “Awesome!” when the gold was found to cling to her so that she shimmered.

The goal is to engage the child so thoroughly in the imagination of the story that the logic needed to get there is effortless. The story becomes more lively and multidimensional for many children as they act it out. This also helps engage the child’s understanding and memory of the shape and it’s relationship to the sound and word.

The approach of linking left and right brain activity is not unique to Waldorf. In an article entitled: “Building Neural Pathways Between Hemispheres in the Brain,” Child 1st Publications describes how linking words to images helps build these inter-hemispheric pathways. Specifically, the article discusses one example of combining the forming of words to the forming of pictures. Describing the benefit of this the author writes: “The power in the practice lay in the fact that writing (linking sounds to letters in order to form words) and drawing (making images) were left and right brain functions and we spent time every day doing something that was building connections between the hemispheres!” (Italics mine)

Speech eurythmy is one activity that also engages this process. In speech eurythmy, sounds and shapes together are immediately brought before the child as an imaginative picture. When the child does this she not only experiences a link between the shape she is making and the sound she hears, but she also immediately engages the forming of pictures related to the word’s meaning; she utilizes both left and right hemisphere of her brain.

Approaching language in this way is especially useful for visual and kinesthetic learners. Acknowledging this the same article states: “The more the hemispheres are communicating, the

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better a visual-spatial learner will do. Like any other skill, however, it takes time and repeated activity to grow and strengthen pathways between the hemispheres of the brain.”

Mirror Neurons:
In addition to strengthening connections between the left and right hemispheres of the brain, eurythmy also offers a potential window into the application of “mirror neurons” for reading. We are all equipped with “mirror neurons,” which are neurons in the brain that fire both when we perform an activity ourselves, and when we observe another performing the same activity, if we have already physically performed the act ourselves. In eurythmy, it is essential that students physically perform the shapes of the sounds as they hear them in the story. This may encourage the firing of the same neurons later when they see the similar shape (the letter) printed on the page in front of them. This hypothesis requires more research, but is worth mentioning here as a preliminary indicator of how eurythmy may serve to develop reading comprehension skills.

Somatic Memory:
Also, in eurythmy children often recall specific words of a long story week after week. This is undoubtedly connected to the fact that we physically perform the sounds of the words. This year children have also recalled specific words to stories from last year, thus demonstrating a great retention of our lessons together. It seems that many know the words intimately, and enjoy performing them when the corresponding sounds are spoken. Conversely, many children enjoy remembering words they’ve heard week after week (many hands go up in the air at once) once they see or perform the shapes that go with the sounds. When this happens consistently we again see the effects of the two hemispheres of the brain working smoothly and joyfully together.

These are a few important contribution eurythmy makes to Waldorf education. Other contributions from eurythmy include utilizing gesture and speech together as a foundation for all language arts\(^2\), strengthening proprioception, building social and spatial awareness, and practicing balance, grace and ease in the way one physically occupies and move through space. Together with the many rich activities and subjects within the Waldorf curriculum, eurythmy helps support a holistic approach to language, reading and memory.

\(^2\) In *Teaching Language Arts in the Waldorf School*, Steiner describes how language originally derived from gesture (65). Gesture is an early form of language. In eurythmy we build on this innate predisposition in small children to help start the language arts process.