

More Than Fluency: Artificial Stuttering as a Therapy in Drama Education in Palestine

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Abstract

This article explores the use of artificial stuttering as a powerful practice and therapy in higher education in Palestine where the need for applied drama is increasing. It specifically focuses on the artistic and/or performative re-employment of Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* to enhance the academic achievement and social development of dysfluent students throughout and beyond their university education. By using extra-curricular, art-mediated training and in-class performance of chosen passages from Dickens's narrative, students not only improve their linguistic and intellectual competencies but also develop dynamic confidence to articulate themselves in daily social contexts during self-presentation. This academic practice, which is part of a one-term educational disability programme, focuses on training a selected number of undergraduate students with a severe or mild stutter by relying on the technique of artificial impersonation of the stuttering of Smike, who is one of the most common Victorian dysfluent characters, in different melodramatic acts. In this experience, students show linguistic growth and social command of communication, and thus chart a new subjective identity.

Keywords: artificial stuttering; Palestine; education; Dickens; language; drama; communication



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Education and Disability in Palestine: An Overview

Education in the Occupied Palestinian Territories has always played a vital role in producing social, economic, and political changes. To indigenous Palestinians, teaching and learning not only produce critical thinking and sociopolitical awareness of surrounding conditions/events but also enable their formation and mobilisation of knowledge, as generally asserted by Giroux (2011) and McLaren (1995). Historically speaking, formal education in Palestine has constantly been administered by foreign systems. Barakat (2007), for example, points out that the British mandate over Palestine since 1917 fashioned a strict educational system that supplied British offices with civil servants. Because education in Palestine was directly centred on building certain power structures and granting a sense of authority to the ruling political elite, educational autonomy or self-rule was seen as a recurring threat to well-established social and political hierarchies.

Following the Palestinian *nakba* in 1948 until today, the Israeli occupation continues to target the educational system in the West Bank and Gaza through various military actions (Abo Hommos 2013; Asaad 2000). In 1987, for example, Mahshi and Bush (1989) note that the Israeli military forces closed down schools and universities and kept harassing students who sought many informal ways to reach educational centres and institutions. These attempts, however, became even more challenging for Palestinian students with disability. Abu Fedala (2009) and Jaradat (2010) assert that the idea of leaving home for many disabled students was clearly impossible; students with different mobility impairments faced serious additional hardships while crossing the Israeli checkpoints that separated these students from their universities in major Palestinian cities. The Palestinian families' concern about sending disabled students to universities due to dangers related to the practices of the Israeli army is also paralleled with the problematic public perception of physical and mental disability in Palestine. Snounu suggests that disability in Palestine has persistently been perceived as an ironic subject. While disabled individuals are to be pitied (Snounu 2015), they are regarded as heroes if their impairments are caused by the Israeli soldiers (Connell 2011). This means that disability in Palestine submits to a strict law of social categorisation and political standardisation. It is, therefore, important to understand how disability is recognised within the Palestinian society where traditions mostly hinder change (Burton, Sayrafi, and Abu Srouf 2013).

In this context, change is often viewed as an unwelcome expression of Western agendas that oppose and contradict the Palestinian national attentiveness and emphasis on political upheavals and national resistance to Israel's domestic policies and its international support. Due to the fact that Palestinian students with disability face a double-edged process of suppression, namely the Israeli occupation and cultural Palestinian traditions, interactive education has most recently become significant to change people's attitudes about disabled students and other social members who are treated as an incapable, "hidden, misunderstood minority, often routinely deprived of

the basic life choices that even the most disadvantaged among us take for granted” (Shapiro 1993, 11).

In Palestinian social reality and literature alike, the marginalisation of individuals with different types of disability is triggered by the public view of physical or verbal anomaly as evil, negative, and essentially different. Disabled individuals are normally ostracised from both social spaces and dominant textual terrains occupied by influential and powerful males and females who are politically and nationally more privileged than their “unfit” counterparts.

Herman Melville’s protagonist in *Billy Budd* ([1924] 2017) offers an excellent embodiment of innocent goodness being suppressed, marginalised, and even uprooted due to Billy’s vocal impediment; his stuttering leads to his tragic end as he strikes Claggart dead. In a different literary context that overheats with political tension, disabled characters in Palestinian fiction can be easily categorised as a social burden due to their inactivity on the ground. In his seminal novel, *Men in the Sun* ([1963] 1999), Ghassan Kanafani, a famous Palestinian author (1936–1972), portrays Shafiqqa as a social “burden” since she lost her leg “from the top of the thigh”, thus leaving her a “deformed woman” ([1963] 1999, 39–40, 64). If Shafiqqa occupies a space in Kanafani’s narrative, it is only recognised via the casual reminiscences of another male character. As suggested by the title of Kanafani’s novella, only men, that is, the three Palestinian refugees crossing the desert to work in the oil-booming industrial Kuwait, are fully exposed to the readers’ eyes because their journey represents a dominant political discourse that alienates the disabled, especially women, in the name of struggle, endurance, and national progress. The absence of focalised narratives of disability is not only characteristic of Kanafani’s fiction but it also underscores a politics of exclusion in the “writing (as yet unwritten) modern cultural history of Arab disability” (Hamdar 2019, 127).

In contrast with the rising interest in and demand for disability narratives in the West, especially in the pervasive domain of life writing or autobiographical literary correspondence, as noted by G. Thomas Couser (2009, 3), Arabic literary writing on disability is still dominated by what Abeer Hamdar calls “the culture of nondisclosure” (2019, 128), a culture that is built on the social practice of concealment, hence the alienation of disabled bodies in social, fictional, and even academic spaces. In the Palestinian culture of writing, it is difficult to depart from conventional national and/or political narratives that are always predominantly asserted. Accordingly, a drama-based programme was designed to establish and instil a counter politics of inclusion where minorities such as students with a developmental disorder, that is, stuttering, are brought into direct conversation with canonical social systems that embody well-established values, beliefs, and traditions by readapting Charles Dickens’s novel, *Nicholas Nickleby* ([1839] 1990), as a performative drama to enrich self-experience, personal development, and continued academic success. Dickens’s Victorian text—Smike’s initial alienation from his school, the Dotheboys Hall, his constant symbolic

withdrawals from the urban landscape of London due to his presumed linguistic unsuitability, and the subsequent frustration of his *bildungsroman*—is reappropriated and performed by university students in a new cultural Palestinian context.

The practice of teaching Dickens’s fiction in a Palestinian university and re-using his *Nicholas Nickleby* for a drama-based educational experiment were challenging. This challenge arises mainly from students’ deep-rooted views of Eurocentricity. The idea of getting Dickens to speak to the students in a new cultural voice was not easily negotiable. Despite the recurring demands of understanding English culture and building bridges between the life of a nineteenth-century metropolis thousands of miles away and contemporary Palestinian culture, students found the experience enjoyable and informative. To them, even nineteenth-century European literature can play an essential role in revealing cross-cultural concerns and promoting intercultural understanding of the unknown *other*.

More importantly, the use of Dickens’s narrative served a significant ethical and sociopolitical dimension. Students believed that Dickens possessed an exceptional ability to bring all governmental, social, and religious institutions into question. Dickens’s sociopolitical sensibility was particularly appealing to all students. His satirical commentary on governmental policies, severe criticism of economic practices in workhouses, and his call for a comprehensive social reformation were embraced by students, especially those with a stutter. The students’ emotional affiliation with Dickens’s text emanates from their steadfast moral commitment to review what Kylee-Anne Hingston calls the bleak nature of Victorian London and “the results of industrialization and its concomitant social disruption” (2019, 49). Dickens’s depiction of paralysed characters—whatever the type of paralysis is—marks “a corrupt economic and social system” that signifies disorder and a blatant decline of morality (Hingston 2019, 52). However, by underscoring nineteenth-century views of disability and highlighting the discursive merits and aesthetic means of bodily expression of non-abled characters, students believed that they could question the ethical system of the Victorian metropolis that Dickens frequently criticised. According to these students, Dickens was a champion of equal rights for minority groups whose members, as noted by Antony Johae, saw in his famous Victorian narratives a plethora of solutions that have “proved to be meaningful in the reformation of post-colonial societies in the Arab world” (1999, 330). In Dickens’s Victorian world in which he depicts social distortions of truth, economic hardships, and public common misrepresentation of minorities, especially the disabled, students considered Dickens’s discourse to be just and moral.

Focus Group and Research Method

Research Participants

The employment of drama in education becomes vital in academic spaces where disabled students do not normally enjoy equal privileges with their colleagues. Roberta Bramwell writes that using drama in the process of teaching provides “a voice for

minority cultures in education” as it successfully includes all types of unfairly represented students (1996, 55). Some students have certain bodily dysfunctions that hinder their belonging to the educational environment. The current study examines the impact of using drama in Palestine for teaching literature to students who have speech dysfunctions, that is, stuttering. An educational experimental programme was designed to last for two months during the entire fall term in 2018 in which in-class teaching not only focused on textual readings and analysis but also employed multiple theatrical performances of selected sections from Dickens’s *Nicholas Nickleby*. Seven students, almost one third of the class (22 students), stuttered, yet with varying degrees. This group consisted of five females and two males whose ages ranged from 20 to 23 years. The participants, who were third- and fourth-year undergraduate students of English language and literature, became the main participants in the programme at their own discretion. This drama-based programme was not funded by any external corporations, but it received sufficient aid from the university staff, necessary educational resources and tools, and other technical support available at the Department of English.

During the first week of the fall term, the researcher noticed that the students who became involved in this study experienced various speech impediments that had a tremendous impact on their psychological well-being, in-class performance, and social interaction. The researcher decided to change the plan of the course being taught, that is, *The Novel*, by introducing a drama-based programme that would not only take into account dysfluent participants but also include all other students in the classroom regardless of their academic potentials, gender, expertise, and interest. All 22 undergraduate students enrolled in this course, *The Novel*, were included in the study even though the main focus was on the seven students with a developmental stutter. The researcher did not predefine exclusion criteria as all included participants showed interest in becoming part of this study. However, all students had to undergo oral presentation as part of their class requirements at the beginning of the course, which is *The Novel*. Based on their oral presentations, students got scores on their linguistic performance, which were used confidentially by the researcher to observe their progress and assess their development. The inclusion and equal treatment of all students in this programme, whether disabled or non-disabled, was meant to create a co-operative and communal academic scene in which physical differences between students were disregarded. This allowed students with a stutter to integrate with other groups and gain self-confidence as they perform certain parts of Dickens’s narrative in a manner that would not make them feel alienated or estranged in the learning process.

The researcher contacted all interested participants, especially those with a developmental stutter, and provided them with information leaflets concerning the ethical guidelines of the research. In these leaflets, participants were given insights into the structure, manner of teaching, participation, and procedures followed in the research study. Following their agreement to participate and complete some interviews, each participant was provided with a consent form that indicated an ethical understanding of

their rights regarding the study and authorisation for their interviews to be written or recorded, used for analysis purposes, and published accordingly if necessary.

Throughout the programme, Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* was used as a focal experience of in-class theatre for a number of reasons. First of all, this novel traces the journey of one of the most famous stutterers in Victorian literature, that is, Smike, a small boy to whom dysfluent students can easily relate. Taking into account the status, dismal conditions, poor schooling, and disability of Smike, the participating students agreed that Smike could offer an authentic embodiment of their educational experience and social lifestyle. The plot of Dickens's narrative, moreover, includes the performance of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in which Nicholas Nickleby and Smike play major roles. This performance, as regarded by most students in the classroom, was unique because it functioned as a passageway into a new mode of powerful being, psychological integrity, and social agency. Students who stuttered, in particular, considered Smike's powerful control of language while playing the apothecary, a rich experience that could produce fruitful benefits if re-performed in a new cultural and educational setting. In the classroom, where interactions between teachers and students can be complex, however, certain biases may often overshadow personal reactions and academic practices in the classroom. While the participants' awareness of their disability initially affected the natural flow of in-class drama activities, it sometimes produced negative impacts on students' personal feelings, social life on campus, classroom participation, and interaction with peers. Yet, with the continued repetition of drama activities, students began to experience a different sense of the classroom as a caring, supportive place where everyone was constantly valued and respected, a sense that can prompt students to participate more in the learning process (Lumsden 1994). In order to rebuild the classroom as a welcoming space and cultivate a sense of familiarity between students and this learning space, the teacher/researcher played an instrumental role in providing a safe and orderly climate in which stress was reduced and productive relationships were nurtured.

Research Design, Data Sources and Measurement Tools

In order to generate these desired effects in a new educational context, the programme was carried out over two months during which students completed 16 theatrical workshops. Each workshop lasted for one hour and a half without a break, twice a week. The first workshop in each week was designed to teach students to understand and appreciate Dickens's text and enhance their potential for literary analysis, reflection, and criticism, whereas the second workshop was solely used for drama-based practices in the classroom. Various performative activities were undertaken by the students and the teacher—the researcher himself—with the help of the Department of English Language and Literature, which contributed to the completion and success of this programme by offering administrative support. Throughout all practical workshops, Charles van Riper's model of artificial or pseudo-stuttering was used as a therapeutic method during the theatrical readaptation of selected passages from Dickens's text. The rationale for using Van Riper's approach was that people who stutter can bring this kind

of verbal disorder under control and create fluent speech for a long time if they purposefully stutter in an intense manner (1973). Van Riper's technique engages the stuttering individual in a process of unlearning maladaptive behaviours, such as struggling with words, and learning to employ new adequate behaviours, such as speaking with ease. The practice of stuttering at ease implies that participants have to practically face their speech dysfluencies in order to produce what Van Riper calls "fluent stuttering".

This study used a qualitative approach to explore the employment of artificial stuttering in teaching long fiction to undergraduate students with a developmental stutter in a drama-based course at An-Najah National University in Palestine. To reflect on the impact of using artificial stuttering on students' in-class performance, the researcher used a number of measurement tools to assess students' speech dysfluencies and subsequent improvement. These measurements included informal observation, oral examinations, and short interviews. The researcher, firstly, kept a personal log to record the development of students' performance. Here, students were also given equal opportunities to record their feelings, thoughts, and opinions as well as write any specific notes in their own personal journals. Not only were these journals important data sources in which students' participation in the programme was cited, but they also helped the teacher/researcher to observe and assess their continued change and improvement.

The researcher, moreover, used oral examinations to assess students' fluency throughout the entire programme. Oral tests varied from monologic conversations with the researcher to dialogic performances among groups in the classroom. Due to their value as diagnostic sources of information, these tests contributed to the overall assessment of students' ability to express ideas fluently, deliver messages in organised ways, and keep good language in terms of intelligible pronunciation, appropriate grammar, and word choices. In dialogic performances, students were given the opportunity to discuss certain literary topics in Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* of their own choice. Finally, individual and group interviews with all students regardless of their disability were also recorded. While these interviews were designed to monitor students' understanding of Dickens's narrative and capability of fluent literary expression, they included discussions of students' academic interests, strengths, challenges, and extracurricular activities outside the university. In many of these interviews, students were given the chance to express what they thought and felt about their stuttering and how it was impacting them on campus. The interviews were significant to monitor the students' development and subsequently became an invaluable source of descriptive data and thematic analysis of the methods used to demonstrate how the performing students' emotions, thoughts, communication, and social behaviours changed on a weekly basis.

The aim of these different procedures is to show how using theatre in the classroom can change students' perception of the educational process, especially those with verbal

disabilities. The activities outlined in the programme, moreover, promoted empathy and collaboration among students who, in return, felt empowered to develop their interpersonal and social skills of communication. The designation of the classroom for the creation of a multicultural and multifunctional environment where students who stutter communicate with one another freely improved their language, expression, and self-representation without necessarily becoming victimised by forces of suppression, which are mainly the Palestinian sociocultural traditions and the persistent Israeli policies of educational exclusion.

Limitations of the Study

The findings of this research are those of a small number of participants who belong to a specified academic setting in Palestinian higher education, which is An-Najah National University in Nablus. Despite the cultural differences between all participants, these findings do not comprehensively reflect the perspectives of teachers and researchers from a wide range of geographical regions on the appropriate use, pedagogical design, and potential impact of drama-based teaching or training on participants with a developmental stutter. The ability to generalise this study is limited to students from the Department of English at An-Najah National University and may not be relevant to academic institutions larger than those in the study. Moreover, the classroom environment on campus was not properly designed for theatrical performances due to the lack of physical room. In fact, the quality and preparation of learning spaces do not necessarily ensure change, but they are important as they encourage new ways of interaction and joint learning activities. Another constraint that created obstacles for the researcher's collection of data is the Israeli policies in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. In major Palestinian cities, particularly Nablus, Israel has increasingly imposed strict restrictions on travel. These restrictions affect nearly all students, especially the focus group of the research. Accordingly, some classes were frequently postponed because of the participants' inability to arrive on time or be physically and psychologically ready for performance. The final limitation is the duration of the participants' interviews. While some interviews took 30 minutes, others did not last for 10 minutes. This wide range of duration of interviews may have led to some participants' data contributing more to the findings of the current study.

Drama and Stuttering: Towards a Performative Teaching

If the words “impairment”, “illness”, and “disease” describe individuals' physical differences and bodily dysfunctions, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues, then “disability” refers to “the social and political context in which our bodies operate” (2001). Within this context, the discourse of disability, Tobin Siebers asserts, does not denote “a physical or mental defect but a cultural and minority identity” (2008, 4). The recognition of disability as identity *per se* shows that it “is not a biological or natural property but an elastic social category both subject to social control and capable of effecting social change” (Siebers 2008, 4). The ability to categorise the human body on the basis of different forms of impairment, either physical or mental, implies that the

concept of disability is a tricky one that is hard to realise as a definitive category. A person with chronic rheumatoid arthritis in this case is no different from a short-sighted person who may use glasses to see clearly and thus become categorised as non-disabled. Tom Shakespeare notes that “disability is a multi-dimensional concept, which should be understood in terms of a continuum” (2018, 5). The fact that a definition of disability can be subjective or objective means that “disability is a social category, so any prevalence estimate will depend on the definition of disability we adopt, and the boundaries of the category” (2018, 7). While it is difficult to underpin disability as an overarching category, this discourse incessantly breaks down into the deaf, the blind and the prostheses, to mention but a few, “when one scrutinizes who make up the disabled” (Davis 1995, 10). In other words, the categorisation of disability lies in the power of “a society invested in denying the variability of the body” (10). The social resistance to this variability can be noted in the supplementation of the disabled “from public visibility by a market that thrives upon icons of the healthy and wholesome” (Snyder and Mitchell 2006, 30). Yet, it is vital to understand that the human body is a flexible material entity whose variability and/or liability for change can reshape our understanding of the nature, context, and place within the environment it operates.

The perception of the human body as flexible or fluid means that the disability of stuttering cannot be subject to certain social configurations. The very fundamental definition of stuttering remains a riddle of unknown causes even in the midst of today’s scientific and medical progress (see Kalinowski and Saltuklaroglu 2005, 3). In its basic definition, Bloodstein and Bernstein Ratner (2007) view stuttering as a verbal dysfluency that affects a small minority of the world’s population. The speech of individuals who stutter, as noted by Guitar (2006), is often filled with repetitions, stoppages, elongations, and hesitations. The fact that stuttering remains associated with unidentified cognitive, environmental or neurophysiologic disorders that affect the production of language and speech implies that individuals who stutter can overcome the possible causes of these disorders such as shame, guilt, and fear (see Blomgren 2013; Ludlow 2000). Taking into account the academic and social pressures on university students who stutter and the interviews made with them, the researcher seeks to mitigate the cognitive and environmental causes that mostly affect students’ behaviour, progress, and language during the production of speech. Stuttering can be hugely challenging to the personal and academic progress of university students who may feel oppressed by their inability to control language, especially during oral presentations.

In two sets of interviews on 15 September 2018 held before and after performances with students who stuttered, it was noted that their stuttering in front of large groups of people, either on campus or outside the university, “increased the sense of consciousness of their speech disorder”. These students, who confirmed their permission to publicise their experience in this research, added that their stuttering was also essentially tied with a buried desire for the presentation of linguistic perfectibility in both social meetings and in-class sessions. Barbara Amster and Evelyn Klein (2005) argue that individuals

who stutter strive to avoid mistakes in dialogues because they view them as reflective of their general personality.

The stutterers' inclination to avoid speech errors only increases their stuttering as they become more aware of the desire for perfect self-presentation, leading to negative emotional attitudes and reactions. In a later interview with these students on 10 October 2018, a female participant named A with a severe stutter remarked that "over-monitoring her speech plan and fluency" reinforced her image as a devalued subject within her social environment. She added that "my heightened self-awareness of my speech while meeting with friends impacted negatively on my academic performance because I thought I would be easily picked out as different and strange". The notes gathered from most interviews show that the students' over-consciousness of their own stuttering in multiple academic and social settings increased their verbal disability and mental alienation. In a few instances during in-class performance, participant A tried to avoid producing certain words even though she knew exactly what words she wanted to say. In chapter one in *Nicholas Nickleby*, this student avoided using the word "churchyard" while performing Smike's turn in the chosen characters' dialogues. Here, the student anticipated that she would stutter and that some words would not come out in the way she thought and desired. Thus, instead of risking the possibility of stuttering she started producing this dysfluency as a delaying tactic. In other words, she hoped that dropping or delaying the feared word long enough, she could avoid stuttering on it after all. It was necessary, thus, to apply Van Riper's approach to the treatment of speech disorder, that is, pseudo-stuttering, by engaging students in theatrical performances of certain parts from Dickens's text. By pretending to emulate Smike's stuttering and/or fake his verbal dysfluency in different in-class dramatic activities, students with a stutter managed to reduce and, at certain times, eliminate the severity and frequency of speech disruptions.

In using theatre to develop the academic potentials of students who stutter, their speech fluency and self-confidence, instructors may apply various types of "dramatic activities" in the learning process inside the classroom and even in public arenas. The term "dramatic activities" can refer either to traditional drama such as the performance of a play or imply other in-class techniques such as role-playing, games, competitions, and songs. For John Dougill, the traditional former concept is called "theatre" while the latter implies "informal drama" (1987, 1). Both types of "dramatic activities", however, do not only mean the act of performance *per se* but also the whole process of learning language, communication skills, and effective social discourses during the active performance on stage. The use of dramatic activities in education, generally speaking, "goes back as far as schooling itself", as Ken Robinson (1980, 141) notes. Drama, nevertheless, did not become recognised as a significant part of the literature curriculum in many places around the world until the early 1950s when Peter Slade established a kind of "child drama" in which children played the central part of performances. These performances advocate spontaneous creative activities by which children are educated about the essential meaning of their individuality and its relation to the social world

surrounding it (see Slade 1954). If “education is concerned with individuals”, as Brian Way in the opening of his famous *Development through Drama* argues, then “drama is concerned with the individuality of the individuals, with the uniqueness of each human essence” (1973, 3). Way’s explanation of the functions of drama points to its necessary inclusion in teaching curricula through which students acquire social skills. According to Dan Urian, these social skills may reflect students’ knowledge of “etiquette, hospitality, use of the telephone, visiting the dentist, job interviews” (Urian 2000, 3). The dramatisation of these skills creates a motivating collaborative environment for the participating students since dramatic activities manifest their real life and, hence, draw on “the entire human resources of the class and that each technique, in its own way, yields a different, unique result every time it is practiced” (Maley and Duff 1982, 13).

In dramatic performances, students use all available human resources because of the unpredictable or random nature of these performances in which all kinds of activities, language, and feelings are produced spontaneously. The aspect of spontaneity releases students from the pressures of the text and the over-conscious process of reading and allows them to open up to one another as they lose their primary diffidence or self-consciousness during performance. Moving out of the students’ rigid zone of inhibition is fostered by their customary physical mobility that stimulates the construction of a safe, co-operative, and gender-friendly environment. The creation of a friendly atmosphere of the theatre encourages students to “take risks in the language” (Maley and Duff 1982, 14). If drama offers additional contextual values for the same reading of a text since it is used to “speak the silence of stories” (Hendy and Toon 2001, 76), it also provides meaningful perspectives or contexts for emotive writing. Linguistic spontaneity prompts students to develop their understanding of major literary themes and go beyond the linguistic contours of the performed text by expressing its silent unintelligible structures in ordinary or uncomplicated forms of communication. By reproducing the original text and real events in their life in their own dramatic language, students who stutter can authenticate their experiences and interpret meaning from a specific context. Dramatic activities, in such cases, give students who stutter the chance to “look at language from a different angle, to go behind the words to the actions they are most likely to perform in the language” (Maley and Duff 1982, 10). Here, Dougill reminds us that the body is an endless possibility of human experiences whose performance abridges the ever-present “gap between the carefully controlled classroom work and the complexity of language in the outside world” (1987, 145).

Speech disorders such as stuttering have been conventionally represented on stage as a vocal and linguistic challenge.¹ This challenge stems from the stutterer’s constant fear

¹ Jeffrey Johnson argues that stuttering is often portrayed as a negative quality in various types of media. He suggests that “while crime stories in television and films sometimes portray stutterers as inhumane criminals, comic books extend this idea and often invent evil stuttering villains that have non-human/animalist characteristics” (2014, 171). The stutterer is someone who cannot live up to the level of the miraculous hero and protagonist due to his/her visual or hearing disabilities. To earn the

of self-misrepresentation by which his/her identity on stage, which is based on the strong connection between thought and voice, becomes subject to failure and deformation if voice distorts the content of what is voiced.

In her commentary on the relationship between voice and thought in drama, Petra Ragnerstam argues that from a humanist perspective, “the idea that every utterance must have an origin in a subject—that an utterance is the effect of an inner process made by the consciousness of the subject—is central” (2016, 74). The production of thought by a means of vocalisation centralises the speaker within the process of production by making him/her the material origin of vocal/linguistic presence. The representation of the speaker’s internal thoughts on stage, either in an actual theatre or in the classroom, is truly complicated because dramatic activities imply the necessary movement of the speaker/performer from thinking to saying. Within the speaker’s interiority, the content of thought and the process of thinking about the self, its desires, and emotional state of being are straightforward and effortless. The problem lies in the conscious expression of the speaker’s interiority and the personal and social demands for eloquence and physical perfection. While students who stutter become directly involved in a self-based conflict to make words convey what they think, there is a dramatic anxiety to make these words live up to the social experiences of the audience. This shows that words uttered on stage also embody the social expectations of the audience whose roles, identities, and realities seek to recapture or reform the speaker’s words as an entity that is separate or different from his/her identity during performance. Such performance, therefore, demands certain methods or strategies in drama to produce the desired effect of the speaker’s interior thoughts, beliefs or information. Timothy Scheie argues that the speaker’s success at delivering the message cannot only take place via linguistic performance but also through the embodiment of the inner sign in exterior action:

The men of ancient Rome portrayed in Hollywood films, for example, are riddled with internal conflict. How does the spectator know this? Not by apprehending the character’s interior psychology but by viewing a simply exterior sign: the beads of sweat on their foreheads. (2000, 167–168)

Scheie affirms that the theatre offers additional opportunities for speakers/performers, here students who stutter, to approach or socialise with the audience by virtue of nonverbal production techniques. Acting on stage does not only involve the use of language in order to communicate a certain feeling or thinking. In fact, acting a part of a play, novel, short story or poem also entails the employment of the body and its physical behaviours and multifunctions such as gestures, eye contact, sweat, breath, reaction to light, modes of food consumption, and listening skills. These physical functions are productive modes of correspondence that also link students who stutter to their interior thoughts and embody creative means of interactive dialogue with the audience. The theatre, therefore, can function as a rich landscape of the senses where

archetypal title of hero, the main character must be Hercules-like, strong, adventurous, and confident, which are qualities that stutterers clearly lack in many visual media.

performing students feel free and safe to enact their identities and reflect their internal selves without their persistent dependence on language. Yet, the core value of these dramatic activities is to encourage students who stutter to improve their social skills regardless of the means of contact with the audience—physical or verbal—they use during group performance. This improvement can be achieved by using different approaches such as pausing between words to reduce the frequency of overt stuttering behaviours (Reitzes 2006). Other significant methods include pseudo-stuttering, which allows students to work together in pairs and compare the perceptions of speakers and listeners while carrying out performances in the classroom (see Hughes 2010; Klein, Cervini, and Clemenzi 2006). Pseudo- or artificial stuttering, as defined by Van Riper, means “desensitizing clients to their own stuttering” (Kalinowski and Saltuklaroglu 2005, 20). This method combines the techniques of repetition and prolongation, among others, which are produced artificially in order to control the number and duration of dysfluent productions of speech under “some form of voluntary control” (2005, 20–21). Fake repetitions and prolongations identify the desensitisation phase where students who stutter learn about their stuttering behaviours and normal dysfluencies and help them to realise what a person who stutters is likely to be (see Reitzes 2007). Knowing this, students who stutter will dissociate the negative feelings that accompany verbal disfluencies from the act of stuttering itself. This creates a kind of immunity to the negative emotional repercussions that are normally attached to stuttering. While students replicate models of stuttering artificially, they become voluntarily capable of recreating their own patterns of stuttering. As a result, they can control their fear of speech loss and “may begin to feel more in control of the moment” (Kalinowski and Saltuklaroglu 2005, 158). Following the application of the method of pseudo- or artificial stuttering to replicating Smike’s stuttering in Dickens’s *Nicholas Nickleby* in the drama classroom, it was noted that students not only gained confidence in public but also controlled their production of speech in a more voluntary manner.

Performing Smike: The Artificial Tongue of Subjectivity

Through the researcher’s role as a lecturer of English literature in Palestine, students were given the chance to draw parallels between characters they fancy in literary works they read inside or outside the classroom and their own personal, social, political or cultural experiences. In this drama-based programme, students chose to read Dickens’s *Nicholas Nickleby*, yet with a particular focus on the passage where Smike plays the apothecary in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* in the novel. In playing Smike in the classroom, students who stuttered were asked to imitate Smike’s behaviour and embody his experiences as a student at the Dotheboys Hall and as an actor at the Vincent Crummies Company. During the imitation of Smike’s conversations at school and dramatic dialogues on stage, students intentionally employed artificial stuttering to enact Smike’s linguistic journey of development. The use of pseudo- or artificial stuttering in this programme helped to introduce this speech disorder at the beginning as a controllable one. If students felt they could control their production of speech, then the problem of stuttering would no longer be viewed as a perennial moment of fear.

Stuttering, to put it simply, became disclosed and mollified as a normal conduct of speech.

Dickens's novel, as suggested by many students in the classroom, does not give justice to Smike, who struggles to leave his assigned role as Nicholas Nickleby's accomplice and the novel's clown until his death towards the end of the narrative. Following their escape from the Dotheboys Hall where he is abused physically and verbally by the schoolmaster, Smike sets out towards London with Nicholas, who saves the former from the schoolmaster Squeers and his family. A few days later, both Nicholas and Smike leave London with the intention of finding a job; they head to Portsmouth where they join the theatrical company of Vincent Crummies as hired actors. The dramatic dialogue between Smike and Nicholas provoked several responses by students who argued that both characters' linguistic interplay subverted the unquestioned assumption that Nicholas constantly emerged as a triumphant living subject. Students remarked that the fact that much emphasis is placed on Nicholas, who continues to dominate his sidekick throughout their journey, was seen as a terribly unwelcome practice in the Victorian moral system.

In an interview dated 18 September 2018, the female participant B with a mild stutter pointed out that "the conflict between Nicholas and Smike was rooted in the industry of language and the desire for perfect representation and subjectivity, meaning that both sought to govern the narration and act as the centre of the text, either consciously or unconsciously". Here, students insisted that subjectivity was only offered as a temporary experience that could be used to re-embody Smike in a theatrical moment of power. Therefore, students who stuttered decided to *re-present* Smike on stage with a special focus on the part where he performs the apothecary in Shakespeare's play and where he is involved in conversations with other characters, especially Nicholas. Students who stuttered were main actors who alternately took part in the most essential readapted scenes in Dickens's text. In addition, they were given the responsibility for directing the final production of the play, which took place inside a spacious classroom that was considerably prepared for this activity. In each performance, the actors were mainly four to five students who exchanged roles in the play whenever it was necessary to do so. The movement from Smike to Nicholas or vice versa was meant to break the social categorisations and linguistic ordering of subjects that were normally taken for granted when the audience saw and thought of these two characters.

The performance started with the students' introduction of themselves to the audience, followed by a sad story narrated by a female student, participant C, about a Palestinian boy who dropped out of school because of his stuttering. This boy, named Khalid, became a subject of sarcasm and prejudice, which was a genuine obstacle to his educational progress and personal development. Khalid's story was promptly linked to the life of Smike, whose stuttering prevented his *bildungsroman*. The first scene in the play showed a number of students entering an old, run-down school where poor Smike was speaking to Nicholas:

“Tell me,” urged Smike, “is the world as bad as dismal as this place [school]?”

[...]

“Should I ever meet you there?” demanded the boy, speaking with unusual wildness and volubility.

“Yes,” replied Nicholas, willing to soothe him.

“No, no!” said the other, clasping him by the hand. “Should I—should I—tell me that again. Say I should be sure to find you.” (Dickens [1839] 1990, 144)

The conversation between two male participants, student D and student E, playing Smike and Nicholas, ran with some difficulty until the former student stumbled over the words “Should I—should I”. Student D, who actually had a speech dysfluency, continued to repeat this phrase in an artificial way while moving around the room and staring at its walls, which were revamped to look less attractive, damp, and dilapidated. When the latter participant, student E, who played Nicholas, tried to intervene and stop this soliloquy-like scenario, the former raised his voice and spoke directly to the audience as if he was addressing them directly with “should I—should I” and questioning their understanding. The repetition of this act was meant to artificially show that the student playing Smike was incapable of maintaining the flow of his communication with Nicholas. The student’s repetition of “should I—should I” seemed to signify his frustration, fear, and consciousness of immobility or of being powerless to make progress. Smike’s description of his school as “bad” and “dismal” in Dickens’s text was paralleled with the acting student’s movement around the classroom and stuttering artificially into its dirty and damp walls. The more the student stuttered, the more the present audience became aware of the sense of sarcasm that was aimed at the schooling system that created individuals incapable of using language to represent their identity because of fear.

Menzies, Onslow, and Packman (1999) write that those who stutter are threatened by fears and anxieties in social situations, which can easily produce negative self-evaluations and expectations of social harm. These expectations result from common safety procedures that stutterers take during speech, and these include “avoidance, lack of eye contact, and self-monitoring in social situations” (Iverach and Rapee 2014, 73). Even though the student performing Smike, participant D, felt shy and insecure as he met the eyes of spectators, he then notes in an interview dated 12 November 2018 that “my understanding of my role as an artificial stutterer made me realise that my fear—Smike’s projected fear—was also artificially manufactured. I think I successfully improved the skill of eye-contact during speech. After the fifth performance, I easily faced the crowd.” The act was repeated by the same group of students who reintroduced Smike as an eloquent character. In the second performance, Smike did not repeat phrases or struggle with words, an act which the stuttering student concluded by informing the audience without deviation that schools could be places that produce victims of stationary prison-houses of language. During this performance, it was noted that the student with a stutter was more motivated, confident, and more commanding of language. The scene was closed with the stuttering student’s eloquent hint to the legendary love story of Romeo and Juliet as he left the classroom stage.

In a different scene, Smike, Nicholas, and other characters, performed by a new group of students, entered the stage at the Vincent Crummies. The meeting of the main acting students, who played Smike and Nicholas, now became more dramatic as they conversed about the performance of *Romeo and Juliet* during which Smike insisted that he must play the apothecary. In performance, Nicholas agreed to Smike's demand on the condition that the latter remembered the following question prior to the beginning of their performance:

"[...] 'Who calls so loud?'"

"'Who calls so loud?'" said Smike.

"'Who calls so loud?'" repeated Nicholas.

"'Who calls so loud?'" cried Smike.

Thus they continued to ask each other who called so loud, over and over again [...] until at midnight poor Smike found to his unspeakable joy that he really began to remember something about the text. (Dickens [1839] 1990, 329–330)

The students performed this scene while they were sitting on the stage facing each other. The students, one of whom was a female performer with a severe stutter under the pseudonym F, spoke to each other and used their bodies to show disappointment at the other speaker's lack of understanding of this phrase, "Who calls so loud?" The use of the body in the form of gestures, rapid movement of hands, and curious facial expressions was successfully associated with the pseudo-stuttering of "Who calls so loud?" In this scene, the use of the body becomes a powerful medium that "combines the communicative resources of speech, gesture and act" (Smith-Autard quoted in Franks 1996, 244). Smith-Autard argues that "the body is the pre-eminent form of representation [...] which represents emotions, social relations, habit of thought and behaviour, the history of the person and so on" (244). In performing Smike, participant F *re*-presented her language through physical rejections of social habits through which stuttering was categorised as a serious cultural public issue. The participant's use of direct eye contact, right- and left-hand movements, and relaxed walking among the audience gave her "a powerful impression that [she] was narrating a language of her own", as she noted in an interview dated 4 November 2018. This scene was frequently repeated in order to boost the students' confidence of the reality of their physically and linguistically performed scenes, and the conversation between both students who played different roles continued until the student playing Nicholas, here called G, began to stutter. To the surprise of the audience, participant F (the female student playing Smike) stopped stuttering in a way that signified her reappropriation of Nicholas's discourse. She, in other words, readapted the language of the male performer (participant G) playing Nicholas, and reproduced herself as a fluid, absent-made-present theatrical subject who re-employed Nicholas's question as her own. By reappropriating the language of the male actor, who artificially started to stutter henceforth, she denied the sociocultural law of entrapment, which was represented by the astonished audience. Through this act, participant F displayed her mental development and ability to transform from a crushed stutterer playing the double self, image or reflection of the

able-bodied Nicholas to a unique speaker whose words were carefully uttered and strenuously fought for. In a 30-minute interview with this participant on 14 November 2018, however, she clarifies that her “advertisement of Smike as a stutterer provided me with a therapeutic agency by which I occupied the position of a clinical practitioner who could easily separate Smike’s stuttering from its general negative views to the public”. In the same interview, participant F also highlights that “this agency made me realise my own potential. I could easily reproduce Smike by bestowing on him a new linguistic and social identity that is naturally tainted by biased public philosophies of tactful communication.” The repetition of this act, moreover, carried other rich significations at the level of social communication with the audience. With the final repetition, both male and female performing participants F and G faced the audience and started signing “Who calls so loud?” in a comical way. The audience burst into laughter since the final act was meant to ridicule this ironic question. The students’ reproduction of this question as a joke in the classroom reinforced the idea that stuttering is a social construct that can be deflated of the negative meanings assigned to it; it is not a serious medical condition that justifies others’ derision and scorn.

The emphasis on the necessary public shift of understanding stuttering was also reflected in the final act in the students’ performance. One of the disabled students, participant B, re-enacted Smike’s performance of the apothecary in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, which was a more thorough continuation of the previous performance of the ironic question “Who calls so loud?” Participant B, who is a female student with a mild stutter, took her place in a dark, seemingly abandoned corner behind a decayed desk in the classroom. Dressed like a male apothecary, who purposely looked innocent, wise, and humane, participant B was awakened by the footsteps of the approaching Nicholas/Romeo, a role which is performed by a non-disabled female student named H. Aroused by Romeo’s screams, the apothecary rose from his chair and looked to the source of noise in his shop. Participant H started to stumble over words and recollect Nicholas/Romeo’s language in an artificial way whereas the apothecary remained silent most of the time. When the apothecary finally understood what Romeo came for, the female student playing the apothecary (student B) recited a short quotation from Shakespeare’s play. The quotation was spoken slowly in the form of fragments for the sake of semantic emphasis while participant H looked immensely agitated and annoyed. Participant B slowly and clearly uttered these words to the audience:

Such mortal drugs I have, but Mantua’s law
Is death to any he that utters them. (Shakespeare [1597] 1992, act 5, scene 1, 66–67)

The artificial stuttering of the student playing Nicholas/Romeo, participant H, on the one hand, was meant to ward off associations between able-bodiedness and linguistic perfection. On the other hand, the articulate, leisurely statement of Shakespeare’s words by the dysfluent participant B functioned as the absolute assertion of the concluding remark of the play. The measured articulation of the apothecary’s words by the female student did not signify her stuttering or the consciousness of her speech disorder; it

indicated her centrality in the production of the final thematic lesson or semantic gist in the play. By embodying Smike's role on stage, this student was capable of generating an unconscious desire for the artificial speech of the apothecary's essential language of drugs. In playing Smike/apothecary, the student became unconscious of her own stuttering as she focused on the subjective, philosophical or imminent linguistic delivery of the messages of Dickens's and/or Shakespeare's fictional characters. In an interview with this student at the end of the programme, dated 15 December 2018, participant B asserts that "it was easy for me to fathom my own potential for speech by fashioning a stuttering tongue even though I perfectly knew I was a stutterer". The fragmented, ponderous speech of this stuttering/non-stuttering female participant, during which she held old bottles of herbal medicine to the audience, pointed the spectators to the necessary thinking of the rearrangement of the human self during the production of speech. More important than her expression of linguistic eloquence, thus, was the student's display of medicine to the curious eyes of the attendants who understood the important connection between words and drugs. If the apothecary's drugs sped Romeo to his death, they also functioned as the fastest passage to reunite him with the source of his life, hope and continuity, which is Juliet. In a similar sense, the place of the stuttering participant B, her artificially played language and her theatrical body represented the storehouse of medicinal language that was, metaphorically speaking, given to the audience to subvert their systematic or prejudiced social process of linguistic invalidation and educate them about the true value of human action via performance.

Conclusion

This dramatic experience, which was aimed at undergraduate third- and fourth-year students who stuttered employed the technique of artificial stuttering in performing chosen passages from Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* on stage. The activity was undertaken to evaluate the effects of theatre on the language, communication skills, and social behaviours of these students. The results of these effects, first of all, showed that students learned new speaking skills that facilitated their fluent speech during performance in classroom spaces and in public events, during which they also became more capable of controlling the frequency of speech. Students, moreover, developed a dynamic, proactive attitude to the improved production of speech. This attitude emerged as a result of the students' increasing wholesome understanding and acceptance of stuttering. The employment of artificial stuttering while playing Smike on stage, in addition, helped them to manage public anxiety that usually emanates from stuttering. In fact, the ability to manage stress improved students' self-confidence, which reflected positively on their speech in real-life situations. Students, in other words, became more self-assured when they spoke about their opinions in front of others outside the classroom. The results of the students' experience, which showed tremendous linguistic, communicative, and educational development six months later, were truly encouraging to reuse drama-based activities in other literature courses.

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