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Author

Brouillette, Liane

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Supporting the Language Development of Limited English-Proficient Students through Arts Integration in the Primary Grades¹

Liane Brouillette

University of California, Irvine

Abstract: This article looks at how arts integration can boost the language development of limited English proficient students in kindergarten through second grade. Research on how young children learn is reviewed and the special challenges faced by children learning in an unfamiliar language are described. Arts-based mechanisms that boost the language development of limited English proficient students are identified. Strategies used by a successful urban arts-and-literacy program to enhance the language development of English language learners in the primary grades are examined. **Keywords:** arts integration, primary, literacy instruction, language development, ELL, limited English proficient

In recent decades the United States has experienced a dramatic increase in children entering school whose home language is not English. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2005) the general student population grew 9 percent from 1993 to 2003;

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during the same period, the percentage of English Language Learners (ELL) grew 65 percent. Presently, the ELL student population comprises 10 percent of all students (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel & Herwanto, 2005). In California, Texas, New York, Florida and Illinois, the percentage of English language learners is considerably higher.

California is the most heavily impacted state, with ELLs making up about 25% of the kindergarten population. However, the teaching methods currently used to teach limited English-proficient students have yielded disappointing results. Nearly 30% of Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) students placed in special classes for ELLs in the early primary grades remain in such classes as they start high school (Gorman, 2009). Startlingly, more than half of these students were born in the United States; three-quarters had been in the Los Angeles school district since first grade (Flores, Painter & Pachon, 2009).

Nor is this problem limited to California. The challenge of helping English learners become capable and engaged readers is one of the greatest facing urban educators today. Many teachers feel—and are, in fact—under-prepared to teach these students (Téllez & Waxman, 2005). In a survey of 3 million public school teachers, less than 13 percent reported receiving eight or more hours of preparation to teach English language learners (ELLs), even though 41 percent reported having ELLs in their classrooms (NCELA Newslines Bulletin, 2002).

Helping ELLs Build Vocabulary and Oral Language Skills

Young English language learners face daunting challenges. They are learning a second language at school, while simultaneously developing proficiency in their home languages (Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer & Rivera, 2006). Development of academic skills and English proficiency is influenced by a number of important factors, such as students' social and cultural backgrounds, their proficiency and educational history in their home languages, their length of

exposure to English, as well as classroom-level factors like as quality of instruction (Francis et al., 2006; Pianta *et al.*, 2005). Among the classroom-level factors, the quality and volume of oral language use promoted by teachers is critical (Peisner-Feinberg *et al.*, 2001).

To improve their oral language skills, English language learners need frequent opportunities to engage in structured academic talk with teachers and peers who know English well and can provide accurate feedback (Francis et al., 2006; Gersten *et al.*, 2007; Wong Fillmore & Snow 2000). Yet, in many classrooms the opportunities for structured and rich verbal interaction between teacher and pupil are limited by rising class size and the demands of a highly structured curriculum. Opportunities for individualized feedback may be limited. Theater arts and activities, in which nonverbal communication is utilized in combination with verbal interactions, are an effective way to encourage use of oral language.

Choral music can also provide an important piece of the puzzle. When children are learning English, they are internalizing the rhythm, the flow of the language. We sing in syllables. So, singing helps children to hear the sounds of English. The class can clap out syllables in songs, then say the lyrics. This helps children to hear the word breaks in English and how the words fit together. That way, what they are singing is rooted in meaning; it is not just a blur of sound. Through sound and rhythm, children gradually become familiar with the intonation and patterns of the language, how it is structured and how it fits together.

This article examines the role that the arts might play in supporting the learning of ELLs. We have briefly looked at research literature on the role that oral language plays in English language development. Next we will consider the role that theater arts might play in enhancing oral language development, along with the pivotal function of motor behavior in the learning of young children. The potential of motor activity for boosting learning currently receives little

attention in the elementary school curriculum; yet movement is a key aspect of learning in the arts. The following section investigates the role that dance could play in the education of ELLs. Then we will look at strategies used by a successful urban arts-and-literacy program to enhance the language development of English language learners in the primary grades. Finally, we will consider how public schools might implement such programs in challenging economic times.

Theater Arts and Language Development

Research shows that narrative skills developed in the first language transfer to the second language (Miller, *et al.*, 2006; Pearson, 2002; Uccelli & Paez, 2007). Since the development of oral language skills in a second language is closely tied to vocabulary expansion (Saunders & O'Brien, 2006), creative expression through narrative could serve as a promising venue for vocabulary building. At the onset of language learning, children understand more words than they can produce. When they understand, children exhibit gestures, behaviors, and non-verbal responses that indicate understanding of what they have heard. These responses can easily be built on through extended interactions focused on acting out scenes from stories and fairy tales. Theater arts lessons therefore have the potential to provide all students with access to specialized vocabulary and complex, low-frequency words.

English vocabulary development plays an important role in supporting later English literacy development (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005). Initially, the productive vocabulary of English learners is typically composed of nouns. However, as time passes, their vocabulary will need to incorporate a wide variety of words, such as action verbs, adjectives, and adverbs (Jia, Kohnert, Collado, & Aquino-Garcia, 2006), the meaning of which can be illustrated and made memorable by creative drama activities. In addition, drama lessons build vocabulary depth. August and her colleagues have noted that, to know a word, a student must know its

pronunciation, both its literal and connotative definitions, its semantic relationship with other words, and how that word is used in different contexts (August et al., 2005). To gain this rich knowledge of a word and its use, children must have multiple opportunities to interact with the word in a variety of contexts (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2002; Blanchowicz & Fisher, 2004).

Carefully designed theater arts lessons provide a vehicle for expanding both the breadth (the number of known words) and the depth of the vocabulary knowledge of ELLs. Nor are such lessons beneficial only to English learners. Drama lessons provide a means of building oral language skills that have instructional merit for all students. A growing body of literature has pointed out that best practices for promoting vocabulary knowledge among English learners have also proven to be best practices for building breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge among native English speakers (August et al., 2005; Beck & McKeown, 2007; Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Blanchowicz & Fisher, 2004; Carlo et al., 2004; Townsend & Collins, 2009).

Research has also established that, if maximum literacy learning is to take place, English language learners need instructional support (Teale, 2009). Goldenberg (2008) argues that the following kinds of instructional accommodations are indicated:

- Extended explanations with redundant information such as gestures, pictures, and other visual cues;
- Extra attention to identifying and clarifying key and difficult vocabulary;
- Texts that have a degree of content familiarity;
- A focus on consolidating text knowledge by having the teacher, other students, and English learners themselves paraphrase and summarize;
- Additional time and practice with reading and writing activities;
- Extended linguistic interactions with peers and teachers.

These supports can readily be incorporated into theater and dance lessons, which naturally use gestures and other visual cues. Drama lessons allow teachers to spend additional time on pivotal vocabulary and skills, rehearsing them in a memorable way. This helps children to consolidate what they have learned. Such oral language activities fit naturally into the daily scheduled literacy block. Both the arts and the language arts curriculums are strengthened through this type of arts integration, which children find enjoyable and highly motivating.

The Role of Motor Behavior in Psychological Development

Even as very young infants, children are highly motivated to explore, gain information, attend, and engage their physical and social environments (Gibson, 1987). As Gibson (1988, p. 5) explains: “We don’t simply see, we look.” Once young children have learned to crawl and walk, they spend roughly half of their waking hours involved in motor behavior – approximately five to six hours per day (Adolph & Joh, 2007). Perception and motor behavior play a key role in children’s experiences and psychological processes (Thelen, 1995). They also contribute to psychological development. After all, psychology can be defined as the study of human behavior--and “behavior is movement” (Adolph & Berger 2005, p. 223).

The interrelation of perception and motor behavior becomes clear when one watches young children in action. On a daily basis, infants who have learned to walk take more than 9,000 steps, traveling the distance of more than 29 football fields and visiting nearly every room in their homes and they engage in balance and locomotion in the context of varied activities” (Adolph & Berger, 2006, p. 181). As they move from room to room, toddlers are taking in, organizing, and interpreting sensory information. Perception is also strongly related to the social-emotional domain, for example when young children perceive the differences between various facial expressions and learn to understand what they may mean. Diamond (2007) has noted that

perception, motor behavior, and cognition occur in the context of culture, emotion, social relationships, and experience, which in turn influence physical and mental health.

Throughout their early years, much of the learning children experience takes the form of imitation. Long before they learn to speak, infants are predisposed to imitate facial and manual actions, vocalizations and emotionally laden facial expressions (Bard & Russell, 1999). Such imitation involves perception and motor processes (Meltzoff & Moore, 1999), making possible the imitation games in which adult and infant mirror one another's vocalizations and behavior. Imitation is crucial in the acquisition of cultural knowledge (Rogoff, 1990) and language.

Generally speaking, the use of communicative gestures precedes a child's first words (Carpenter, Nagell, and Tomasello 1998). Acredolo and Goodwyn (1997) argue that the human infant appears to have a special capacity to communicate with gestures. Typically developing infants seem so intent on communicating that they find creative ways to do so, even before they have mastered words. Nor does the ability to communicate with gesture disappear once the child enters school. Utilizing this capacity through dance may help limited English proficient children assimilate the language of instruction more easily, promoting academic achievement.

Dance as a Form of Literacy

Dance activities provide an environment for limited English proficient students to act out vocabulary terms, using their bodies to express meaning. What does this look like? On a rainy day, a restless group of kindergartners in southeastern San Diego needs to work off their pent-up energy. As the music starts, the children mirror their teacher's motions. Awareness of contrast is amplified as the teacher asks them to "reach high" and "bend low," or to "wiggle" and then "freeze." Following her movements, children experiment with ascending movements (moving upward "like smoke," "a flower," "a bird") and descending movements ("melting," "sinking,"

“spiraling”). At the same time, children learn the basic vocabulary of dance by carrying out movements that are “high,” “middle,” and “low” with respect to the floor. They carry out *axial* movements where the body stays in place (swinging, swaying, wiggling, bending, stretching) and *locomotor* movements in which they walk, hop, slide, bounce, shuffle, skip, etc.

Like oral/written language, dance has vocabulary and grammar (Hanna, 2008). The vocabulary of dance consists of locomotion and gestures; the grammar of dance involves the way that certain movements logically follow other movements to create a sequence. Children in the early grades easily learn to visualize how the “big idea” or main purpose of a dance relates to the “big ideas” or main topic of a story. Working collaboratively children can choreograph a dance that tells the story of a familiar fairy tale, learning in the process to analyze the structure of the story and construct ways to represent the plot using movements. In this way, they learn to use different actions, levels, directions, shapes, and energies within a dance to support their “big idea,” in the same way that a written text is constructed to support a main idea.

ELLs who are unsure of the meaning of verbal instructions can use physical cues from the teacher and other students to deduce what is meant. This helps children to express themselves through movement even when they are unable to find words to express what they want to say. Expression in motion is a step toward expression in words. The physicality of the activity also helps children stay interested and focused, allowing them to think conceptually and verbally while moving, instead of always being confined to a desk or chair (Rabkin & Redmond, 2006). The following section describes what such arts integration might look like when implemented in a large urban school district.

The San Diego Teaching Artist Project

The San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) has created an integrated arts-and-

literacy program for children in the primary grades at 15 diverse elementary schools. Undertaken in partnership with the University of California, Irvine, the program is funded by an Improving Teacher Quality grant administered by the California Postsecondary Education Commission. The San Diego Visual and Performing Arts Department developed 27 lessons (9 in theater, 9 in dance, 9 in visual art) for each grade level; these lessons address both the arts content standards and the English language development (ELD) standards. During their first year in the program, classroom teachers co-teach standards-based arts lessons with a teaching artist. Between these weekly lessons, the teachers rehearse skills and vocabulary with their students. Their second year in the program, the teachers teach the lessons on their own with the support of resource teachers. All lesson plans are available on-line (free of charge), along with streaming videos of the theater and dance lessons. (Please see “On-Line Resources” at end of this article.)

The contribution of the theater arts to language development has been discussed earlier. But what does effective implementation in the early grades look like? Perhaps the teacher has just read the story, “The Little Red Hen”. Now the children are going to act it out. There are many questions to discuss: What is the little red hen going to say? What is she going to do? Why is she annoyed with the other animals? Or is she? If you were annoyed, how would you act? During this discussion, complex language develops. As they work with others to come up with their lines, children come to a deeper comprehension of the story. Theatre activities also become a bridge between social language and academic language. For, when children have to perform in front of a group, utilizing full sentences and their “big, presenter voice,” the formality of their language instantly increases, becoming more like the language used in writing.

In addition to the arts lessons, teachers are encouraged to make use of questioning techniques taught by the SDUSD Office of Language Acquisition. In the first grade visual arts

lesson described below, the children's verbal output is amplified through a technique entitled *talking-drawing*. The goal of this activity is to get ELLs to talk about what they are drawing. For example, a child may have decided to draw a picture of what she did over the weekend. Perhaps, the child went to the park with her family. In answer to the teacher's inquiry, she says, "We went to the park and had a birthday party." Her picture shows people and a cake. While the other children talk with partners, the teacher asks: "What else was in the park? Were there trees?" "Yes." "Don't forget to put in the trees." A little later the teacher might query: "Was it a sunny day?" The child adds the sun. Then, the teacher describes the picture, saying: "It was a sunny day in the park. The park had lots of trees and flowers." The child also verbally describes the picture. Then, the teacher might ask: "What did you wear?" "I wore my new dress." "What color was it?" If the child says "Blue", the teacher prompts: "Oh, you had a blue dress?"

As the teacher circulates through the class, this scenario is repeated again and again, until each child's picture is full of details. While the teacher collects the art materials, each child describes the details in his or her picture to a partner. Then, one at a time, children come up to present their pictures to the class. Gradually, rich language emerges. A description that started as "I went to the park and had a party" eventually becomes: "It was a beautiful, sunny day at the park. The park was full of trees. A dog was running by. We had a birthday party." Through art, children find there are many things they can talk about and write about. Instead of minimizing the output expected of ELLs, the teacher has used art to help children amplify their output.

Quantitative and Qualitative Evidence of Effectiveness

This section examines quantitative and qualitative evidence to determine the impact of the San Diego Teaching Artist Project. The effect on school engagement of students was measured by comparing attendance on days with and without scheduled arts lessons at five large

urban elementary schools. Day of the week was not a confounding variable, since the art lessons were given at one of the schools every day of the week, throughout the school year. Month and school were controlled for in the analysis. Students were significantly more likely to attend school on the days of arts lessons.

When second grade scores on the California Standards Test in English Language Arts for participating and control schools were compared, no significant effect was found. However, on the California English Language Development Test (CELDT), paneled ELL students with two years of exposure to the Teaching Artist Project manifested greater gains than controls. Students exposed to the highest levels of teacher self-reported implementation of the arts integration curriculum also showed greater gains on the CELDT than ELL students of teachers who showed less fidelity.

When 24 teachers were interviewed about their experiences in integrating arts-based activities into their classroom teaching, their comments echoed descriptions found in the research literature. A kindergarten teacher described her experience:

I found acting it out would help my English learners remember the message of the story. They need visuals. They need to see it to make connections.

Many teachers mentioned the impact of enhanced motivation, which they attributed to the children's enjoyment of the arts lessons and follow-up activities. Typical comments included:

- * For me, it's bringing the fun back in the classroom. The children are moving. Before (all the testing) there used to be more ways for children to learn.
- * I can see my kids more involved and excited. Drama is the fun time of the day. So, that gets them going. It gets them excited about the day.
- * It makes children want to come to school and do well in other areas.

- * There is a lot of enthusiasm and eagerness to participate. As soon as the teaching artist arrives, they are up and ready to go.

Other teachers talked of the effect of enhanced motivation on the production of oral language. A teacher noted: “Kids who are afraid to speak, when they have a line to speak [while acting out a scene] are able to get up and speak alone.” Another teacher observed: “They were volunteering, while other times they were not.” A third teacher summed up the overall affect on her class: “A lot of my students were super-shy and now they have blossomed.”

Supporting ELLs through Arts Integration

That arts participation is associated with increased school engagement (Deasey, 2002) and improved academic achievement has been widely recognized (Catterall, 2009; Brouillette & Fitzgerald, 2009). As Vaughn and Winner (2000) have observed: “the best independent schools in the United States have always retained an important place for the arts. It is only in our financially strapped public schools that tight budgets have led to arguments that the arts can be cut because they are not essential” (p, 88). Yet, cuts to school arts programs have been severe.

In California, 61 percent of K-12 schools do not have even one full-time arts specialist; 89 percent fail to offer a standards-based course of study in all four disciplines--music, visual art, theater, dance (Woodworth, Gallagher, Guha, Campbell, Lopez-Torkos, Kim, 2007). Most elementary-level arts instruction in the state is provided by classroom teachers who have had inadequate preparation in the arts. Moreover, English Language Development (ELD) programs in urban schools face challenges that, in some ways, mirror those that limit arts instruction.

Demographic change has led to a mismatch between the teaching style of many veteran teachers and the increasingly diverse student population they serve. Once-effective teaching methods may not work well with linguistically diverse students. Some experts have suggested

the use of coaches to work with teachers who are not well-versed in ELD strategies: “Coaching increases the teachers’ implementation of new learning and the reflection elicited through coaching contributes to future use of the strategies” (Casteel & Ballantyne, 2010, pg. 21). This is the same logic that led San Diego to employ teaching artists to assist classroom teachers in implementing lessons that combined arts content with English language development strategies.

Conceptually, building bridges between arts education and English language development makes sense. Still, the San Diego program was made possible by grant support. So, an important question remains: How might schools that wish to implement an arts/ELD programs—but have few resources to spare—address such issues as content, resources, personnel, scheduling, teacher professional development time, goals and objectives for student learning? Let’s briefly look at how individual schools might address each of these challenges.

Content. There was a consensus among San Diego teachers that, among the arts disciplines, theater lessons had the greatest impact on English language development. This perception is supported by a meta-analysis of data from 188 studies that found “reliable causal links” between classroom drama activities and verbal skills (Winner & Hetland, 2004). Yet, drama is not commonly taught at the elementary level. A survey carried out by the National Center for Education Statistics found that, in 2009-10, 4 percent offered instruction that was designated specifically for drama/theatre; only 3 percent of elementary schools offered instruction designated specifically for dance (Parsad, Spiegelman, Coopersmith, 2011).

If schools are looking for the biggest “bang for the buck,” it makes sense to start by focusing on theater arts. The San Diego teachers also found that theater was the easiest discipline to implement, since teachers in the primary grades routinely read aloud to children. Teachers found it was relatively easy to coach their students to act out stories. The opportunity to co-teach

with a professional teaching artist in their own classrooms enabled teachers to build confidence. However, co-teaching with a teaching artist was seen as less pivotal than in dance and visual art. The San Diego lessons plans and streaming videos are available on-line, free of charge, but texts already available at the school could readily be adapted for this purpose.

Resources. If a school is considering implementing an arts/ELD theater program, two questions should be explored: 1) Is there a local theater group that might be a good partner in implementing such a project? Many theater groups have grant funding that requires them to engage in outreach, so they may be willing to provide services free-of-charge. Or the theater group may have a development officer who could approach a foundation for funding. 2) Is there a local foundation or business that gives small grants to schools to implement innovative ideas?

Personnel. Parents are a resource that is often overlooked. Although the San Diego project was structured as a teacher professional development program, a school might structure a similar program as a partnership with parents and community members. Are there local stakeholders who could help implement the project, either through fund-raising or (if some stakeholders have a drama or teaching background) assistance with classroom implementation? Alternatively, is there is a thriving local high school or college theater program? Parents might facilitate setting up an arts/ELD service learning program in which older students acted as drama coaches for K-2 children; teachers could supervise and join in when comfortable participating.

Scheduling. Since in most states there is considerable overlap between theater standards and the oral language aspects of the English language arts standards, the theater lessons need not be treated as an add-on; they could be scheduled as part of the daily morning literacy block.

Teacher professional development time. If opportunities for teachers to co-teach with a teaching artist during the school day cannot be arranged, professional development in theater

might also be carried out through intensive summer workshops in which local theater artists (or university faculty) collaborated with K-2 teachers in revising their existing curriculum, adding theater-based activities that focused on development of enhanced oral language skills.

The key is to get a conversation going, to pull together a group of stakeholders interested in creating a learning community focused on the arts and English language development. Next in importance is flexibility--and having fun. Repeatedly, San Diego teachers explained it was the liveliness that the arts injected into the school day that drew children in and made the arts lessons a highlight of the week.

The arts can build camaraderie and a sense of community in schools, while contributing to the achievement of a wide range of learning goals. Introducing theater, dance, music and visual art in the early grades also builds a foundation for arts learning in later years. In times characterized by economic and other stresses, it is to be hoped that local policy makers will recognize the value of these benefits and act accordingly.

On-Line Resources

K-2 Theater Lessons and Videos: <http://www.class.uci.edu/theatre-grades>

K-2 Dance Lessons and Videos: <http://www.class.uci.edu/dance-grades>

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