

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

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This article looks at how arts integration can boost the language development of limited English proficient students in kindergarten through second grade. I first review existing research on how young children learn and describe the special challenges faced by children who must learn in an unfamiliar language. I then identify arts-based mechanisms that boost the language development of limited English proficient students and examine strategies used by a successful urban arts-and-literacy program to enhance the language development of English language learners in the primary grades.

Keywords: arts integration, English language learners (ELL), language development, limited English proficient literacy instruction, primary students

In recent decades, the United States has seen a dramatic increase in the number of children entering school whose home language is not English. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES; 2005), the general student population grew 9 percent from 1993 to 2003; during the same period, the percentage of English language learners (ELLs) grew 65 percent. Today, the ELL student population makes up 10 percent of all students (Capps et al. 2005). In California, Texas, New York, Florida, and Illinois, the percentage of ELLs is considerably higher.

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

Nor is this problem limited to California. The task of helping ELLs become capable and engaged readers is one of

the greatest challenges facing urban educators today. Many teachers feel—and are, in fact—underprepared to teach these students (Téllez and 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 ELLs, even though 41 percent reported having ELLs in their classrooms (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition [NCELA] 2002).

HELPING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS BUILD VOCABULARY AND ORAL LANGUAGE SKILLS

Young ELLs face daunting challenges. They are learning a second language at school while simultaneously developing proficiency in their home languages (Francis et al. 2006). The development of academic skills and English proficiency is influenced by a number of important individual factors, such as students' social and cultural backgrounds, their proficiency and educational history in their home languages, and their length of exposure to English, as well as classroom-level factors like quality of instruction (Francis et al. 2006; Pianta et al. 2005). One of the most critical classroom-level factors is the quality and volume of oral language use that is promoted by teachers (Peisner-Feinberg et al. 2001).

To improve their oral language skills, ELLs need frequent opportunities to engage in structured academic talk

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

Choral music can also provide an important piece of the puzzle. Children learning a language internalize that language's rhythm and flow. The practice of singing in syllables helps children to hear the sounds of English. A class might clap out the syllables of a song and then recite the lyrics. This exercise helps children hear English word breaks and discern how the words fit together. As a result, what they are singing is rooted in meaning instead of being just a blur of sound. Through sound and rhythm, children can 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. I have briefly looked at research literature on the role that oral language plays in English language development. I will next consider the role that theater arts might play in enhancing both oral language development and motor behavior in the learning of young children. The potential of motor activity for boosting learning has not received much attention in the elementary school curriculum, although movement is a key aspect of learning in the arts. In the following section, I will investigate the role that dance could play in the education of ELLs. I will then look at several strategies used by a successful urban arts-and-literacy program to enhance the language development of ELLs in the primary grades. Finally, I 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 a primary language will transfer to a second language (Miller et al. 2006; Pearson 2002; Uccelli and Paez 2007). Since the development of oral language skills in a second language is closely tied to vocabulary expansion (Saunders and O'Brien 2006), creative expression through narrative could serve as a promising approach to vocabulary building. At the onset of language learning, children understand more words than they can produce. Children indicate this comprehension through gestures, behaviors, and nonverbal responses. Extended interactions that focus on acting out scenes from stories and fairy tales can easily build on these responses. Theater arts lessons therefore have the potential to provide all students with ac-

cess to specialized vocabulary and complex, low-frequency words.

English vocabulary development plays an important role in supporting later English literacy development (August et al. 2005). August and colleagues (2005) 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. 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, and Kucan 2002; Blanchowicz and Fisher 2004).

Initially, the productive vocabulary of English learners is typically composed of nouns. However, as time passes, students' vocabulary needs to incorporate a wide variety of words such as action verbs, adjectives, and adverbs (Jia et al. 2006)—the meaning of which can be illustrated and made memorable through creative dramatic activities. Such drama lessons also have the advantage of building vocabulary depth.

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

Research has also established that ELLs need instructional support to achieve maximum literacy learning (Teale 2009). Goldenberg (2008) argues that this support requires the following kinds of instructional accommodations:

- 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 for the student;
- A focus on consolidating text knowledge by having the teacher, other students, and ELLs paraphrase and summarize meanings;
- Additional time and practice with reading and writing activities; and
- 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 to convey meaning. Drama lessons allow teachers to spend additional time on pivotal vocabulary and skills, and to provide a forum for ELLs to rehearse them in a memorable way. This approach helps children consolidate their

learning. Such oral language activities fit naturally into the daily scheduled literacy block. In addition, this type of arts integration, which children find enjoyable and highly motivating, strengthens both the arts and the language arts curricula.

THE ROLE OF MOTOR BEHAVIOR IN PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

Even as very young infants, children are highly motivated to explore, gain information, attend to, and engage their physical and social environments (Gibson 1987). As Gibson (1988, 5) explains, at this age, “we don’t simply see, we look.” Once young children have learned to crawl and walk, they spend roughly half (approximately five to six) of their waking hours involved in motor behavior (Adolph and Joh 2007). It is clear that perception and motor behavior play a key role in children’s experiences and psychological processes (Thelen 1995), as well as contribute to their psychological development. After all, psychology can be defined as the study of human behavior, and “behavior is movement” (Adolph and Berger 2005, 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 and travel the distance of more than 29 football fields. They travel over nearly a dozen different indoor and outdoor surfaces varying in friction, rigidity and texture. They visit nearly every room in their homes and they engage in balance and locomotion in the context of varied activities. (Adolph and Berger 2006, 181)

As they move from room to room, toddlers take in, organize, and interpret sensory information. The development of perception is also strongly related to the social-emotional domain—for example, young children learn to perceive the differences between various facial expressions and understand what these differences 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 that 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 and Russell 1999). It is these perception and motor processes (Meltzoff and Moore 1999) that make 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 has a special capacity to communicate through gestures. Normally 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. Using this capacity through dance may help limited English proficient children to 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 such an activity look like? Let us imagine a rainy day on which a restless group of kindergartners in southeastern San Diego needs to work off its pent-up energy. As the music starts, the children mirror their teacher’s motions. Awareness of contrast between words 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, in which the body stays in place (swinging, swaying, wiggling, bending, stretching) and *locomotor* movements, in which they walk, hop, slide, bounce, shuffle, and skip.

Like oral and written language, dance has both vocabulary and grammar (Hanna 2008). The vocabulary of dance consists of locomotion and gestures, while 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 idea” 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 its “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 strategy 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 and 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 implemented an integrated arts-and-literacy program for children in the primary grades at fifteen 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 twenty-seven lessons (nine in theater, nine in dance, nine in visual art) for each grade level that 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. During teachers' second year in the program, they teach the lessons on their own with the support of resource teachers. All lesson plans are available online and free of charge, along with streaming videos of the theater and dance lessons (see Appendix).

The contribution of the theater arts to language development has been discussed earlier in this article. But what does effective implementation of theater arts lessons in the early grades look like? Perhaps the teacher has just read students the story of "The Little Red Hen" and has asked them 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? Is she annoyed with the other animals and why? If you were annoyed, how would you act? Such a discussion contributes to the development of students' complex language. As they work with others to come up with their lines, children arrive at a deeper comprehension of the story. Theater activities may also become a bridge between social language and academic language. When children have to perform in front of a group, using full sentences and "big presenter voices," 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 next, children's verbal output is amplified through a technique called *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 she went to the park

with her family, and so, 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 would then add the sun. The teacher might then describe the picture aloud, saying: "It was a sunny day in the park. The park had lots of trees and flowers." The child would also verbally describe 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 could prompt, "Oh, you had a blue dress?"

As the teacher circulates throughout the classroom, this scenario would be repeated again and again until each child's picture is full of details. While the teacher collects the art materials, each child would describe the details in his or her picture to a partner. Then, one at a time, the children would come up to present their pictures to the class. Gradually, rich language will emerge. A description that started as "I went to the park and had a party" will eventually become: "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 can find many things about which they can talk and write. Instead of minimizing the output expected of ELLs, the teacher can use 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 of the program on students' school engagement 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. The analysis controlled for month and school. Results showed that students were significantly more likely to attend school on the days of arts lessons.

A comparison of participating and control schools' second grade scores on the California Standards Test in English Language Arts found no significant effect. 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 did 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 did ELL students of teachers who showed less fidelity.

When twenty-four 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 about the effect of enhanced motivation on the production of oral language. One 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 effect of the drama activities on her class: “A lot of my students were super-shy and now they have blossomed.”

SUPPORTING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS THROUGH ARTS INTEGRATION

The association of arts participation with increased school engagement (Deasy 2002) and improved academic achievement has been widely recognized (Catterall 2009; Brouillette and Fitzgerald 2009). As Vaughn and Winner 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” (2000, 88). Nevertheless, 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, and 89 percent fail to offer a standards-based course of study in all four disciplines—music, visual art, theater, and dance (Woodworth et al. 2007). Most elementary-level arts instruction in the state is provided by classroom teachers who have had inadequate preparation in the arts. Moreover, urban ELD programs face challenges that in some ways mirror those that limit arts instruction.

Demographic changes have led to a mismatch between the teaching style of many veteran teachers and the increasingly

diverse student population they serve. Teaching methods that were effective in the past may no longer work well with linguistically diverse students. Some experts have suggested using 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 and Ballantyne 2010, 21). This is the same logic that led San Diego to employ teaching artists to assist classroom teachers in implementing lessons that combine arts content with ELD 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 program but have few resources to spare address such issues as content, resources, personnel, scheduling, teacher professional development, goals, and objectives for student learning? Let us briefly look at how individual schools might address each of these challenges.

Content

San Diego teachers agreed 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 the development of verbal skills (Winner and Hetland 2004). However, drama is not commonly taught at the elementary level. A survey carried out by the NCES in 2009–10 found that only 4 percent of elementary schools offered instruction that was designated specifically for drama or theater, and only 3 percent offered instruction that was designated specifically for dance (Parsad, Spiegelman, and Coopersmith 2011).

If schools are looking for the biggest “bang for their buck,” it makes sense to focus on theater arts. The San Diego teachers involved in the Teaching Artist Project also found that theater was the easiest discipline to implement, since teachers in the primary grades already routinely read aloud to children. Teachers found that 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, the co-teaching component was seen as being less pivotal in theater arts than it was in dance and visual art. For schools that are interested in adopting this model, the San Diego lesson plans and streaming videos are available online and free of charge, but texts that are already available at the school could readily be adapted for this purpose as well.

Resources

If a school is considering implementing an arts/ELD theater program, two questions should be explored. First, is there a local theater group that might be a good partner in

implementing such a project? Many theater groups operate through grant funding that requires them to engage in outreach, so they may be willing to provide services free-of-charge. Otherwise, the theater group may have a development officer who could approach a foundation for funding. Second, is there a local foundation or business that has a history of giving small grants to schools to implement innovative ideas?

Personnel

Parents are a valuable 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 fundraising or (if some stakeholders have drama or teaching backgrounds) assistance with classroom implementation? Alternatively, is there a thriving local high school or college theater program? Parents might facilitate the setting up of an arts/ELD service learning program in which older students could act as drama coaches for K–2 children and teachers could supervise and join in when ready.

Scheduling

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

Teacher Professional Development

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) collaborate with K–2 teachers in revising their existing curriculum to add theater-based activities that focus on the development of enhanced oral language skills.

CONCLUSION

The key in starting this kind of arts/ELD program is to get a conversation going that will 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. San Diego teachers repeatedly explained that 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 policymakers will recognize the value of these benefits and act accordingly.

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APPENDIX

Online 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>