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Building the Oral Language Skills of K-2 English Language Learners through Theater Arts¹

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Abstract: *The current focus on high-stakes testing has pressured schools to focus on a narrow range of literacy skills at the expense of oral language, vocabulary, and background knowledge. This article argues that theatre arts lessons can be an effective way for teachers to engage in rich verbal interactions with many children at once, providing feedback and building vocabulary. A K-2 theatre arts program initiated in the San Diego Unified School District is described, with links to on-line lesson plans and streaming videos of classroom instruction. Participants comment on the effect K-2 theatre activities had on classroom culture and student learning especially the literacy skills of English language learners. **Key Words:** Oral Language, Theater, English Language Learner, Language Development, Drama, Arts, Literacy*

Linette Da Rosa, principal of Baker Elementary in San Diego, initially had reservations about theater lessons contributing to increased student achievement. She recalled her thoughts when she arrived at Baker Elementary: “This having been a low-performing school, I was worried that the arts might detract from core subjects. Now I see how low readers are motivated to read scripts and focus on literacy skills. We’re seeing improved CELDT scores in first grade.”

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In a school where over 70 percent of students are English language learners (ELLs), improved performance on the English Language Development Test (CELDT) is a key indicator of success. Nor is Baker the only school to have experienced improved performance on the CELDT after implementing the K-2 Teaching Artist Project (TAP). A partnership between the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) and the University of California, Irvine (UCI), funded by an Improving Teacher Quality grant administered by the California Postsecondary Commission (CPEC), the TAP program provides professional development to K-2 teachers at 15 San Diego elementary schools serving socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods.

In this classroom-based program, teachers learn how to effectively deliver theater, dance and visual art lessons by co-teaching with a teaching artist in their own classrooms. The standards-based arts curriculum was designed both to enhance oral language and to reinforce key literacy skills and concepts. A team led by Program Coordinator Denise Lynne, who has created choreographies that received state, national, and international acclaim, created the lessons. Lynne served on the state framework revision committee in dance and has made use of her extensive background in musical theater to create an engaging series of lessons that teachers without prior experience in the arts could quickly learn to deliver effectively.

Boosting the Oral Language of English Language Learners

It is not enough to teach language-minority students reading skills alone.

Extensive oral English development must be incorporated into successful literacy instruction... Literacy programs that provide instructional support of oral language development in English, aligned with high-quality literacy instruction, are the most successful (August & Shanahan, 2006).

Developing Literacy in Second-Language Learners (2006), a report of the National

Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth, asserts that oral proficiency in English is critical for teaching language-minority students to read and write proficiently. However, student performance suggests that oral language is often overlooked in instruction. Word-level skills—such as decoding, word recognition and spelling—are often taught well enough to allow language-minority students to attain levels of performance equal to those of native English speakers. However this is not the case for text-level skills such as reading comprehension and writing, where language-minority students rarely approach the same levels of proficiency that are achieved by native English speakers. Research suggests that the disparity between the word- and text-level skills of language-minority students is related to oral English proficiency.

In *Developing Early Literacy* (2008), the National Early Literacy Panel reported that oral language skills had been found to be a moderate to strong predictor of emergent literacy. This means that an over-emphasis on decoding skills and minimization of the role of oral language in the primary grades is problematic, since it deprives children who have not already acquired these skills of the opportunity to learn them. That handicaps young children who need on-going opportunities to learn word meanings in a range of linguistic contexts, as well as repeated practice in using them (Gutiérrez, Zepeda, & Castro, 2010).

As Catherine E. Snow has observed, oral language is good for all students “but the at-risk ones are totally dependent on schools to give it to them, while other kids can get it in other places” (Zehr, 2009, p. 8). For children who are dependent on schools for oral language experience, the quality and volume of oral language use promoted by teachers is critical (Peisner-Feinberg *et al.*, 2001). English 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).

Unfortunately, in many classrooms opportunities for structured and rich verbal interaction between teacher and pupil are limited by rising class sizes and a highly structured curriculum. In such circumstances, teachers may be at a loss as to how they might systematically teach oral language skills. Standards-based theater arts lessons provide an engaging means of meeting that critical need. This article describes a series of K-2 theater arts lessons that are freely available on-line, highly motivating, easy to implement, and highly accessible both to children with language delays and to English language learners.

Theatre activities have long been known to boost literacy skills (Podlozny, 2000; Mages, 2006). However, many teachers feel there is no longer time for such activities. The current state and federal focus on high-stakes testing has caused schools to focus on a narrow range of literacy skills at the expense of oral language, vocabulary, and background knowledge. Teacher certification programs have responded by focusing on preparing novice teachers to meet the demands of a test-driven workplace. As a result, few teachers now entering the profession possess effective strategies for nurturing oral language.

Making the Curriculum Accessible to All

Current literacy instruction in the primary grades puts a heavy emphasis on decoding skills. Even in kindergarten, the curriculum focuses more on written work than on the cultivation of oral language. This is problematic not only for ELLs, but also for children with developmental delays. When they have decoding problems, such children may receive additional support in word recognition and spelling. However, they generally do not get the same instruction in comprehension skills as typically achieving children. This inadvertently deprives them of the opportunity to learn the skills needed to construct meaning from text.

Most reading in the primary grades involves simple, decodable text. Access to richer literature is provided when teachers read aloud to the class. Although the strategy of reading aloud works well for normally achieving native speakers, ELLs and children with language delays often lack the vocabulary to understand the story. So, they are less likely to benefit. Theatre lessons address the vocabulary gap by engaging students in acting out the plot.

Normally achieving students and native English speakers also benefit. Active learning helps all children. A growing body of literature demonstrates that best practices for promoting vocabulary knowledge among ELLs are also best practices for building breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge for all students (August et al., 2005; Beck & McKeown, 2007; Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Blanchowicz & Fisher, 2004; Carlo et al., 2004).

Building the Vocabulary of English Language Learners

Theatre activities, in which nonverbal communication is utilized in combination with verbal interactions, are an effective way to encourage oral language use and provide feedback. At the onset of language learning, children understand more words than they can produce. When children understand, they exhibit gestures, behaviors, and non-verbal responses that indicate their understanding of what they have heard. In theatre arts lessons these responses can easily become part of extended interactions focused on acting out short scenes from stories.

Research shows that narrative skills developed in the first language transfer to the second language (Miller, *et al.*, 2006; Pearson, 2002; Uccelli & Paez, 2007). Creative expression through narrative also serves as a venue for vocabulary building. Theatre arts lessons can be designed to provide ELLs and students with language delays with access to specialized vocabulary and complex, low-frequency words. The development of oral language skills in a second language is closely tied to vocabulary expansion (Saunders & O'Brien, 2006). English

vocabulary development plays an important role in supporting later English literacy development (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005).

The productive vocabulary of ELLs is typically composed of nouns. However, as time passes, their vocabulary begins to incorporate a wide variety of words such as action verbs, adjectives, and adverbs (Jia, Kohnert, Collado, & Aquino-Garcia, 2006). The meaning of many verbs, adjectives, and adverbs can easily be dramatized and made memorable by improvisational theatre activities. This enables all students not just to learn new words but to practice meaning construction skills. In addition, theatre activities are strikingly efficient. Traditionally, a teacher questions only one student at a time. In contrast, theatre activities allow many children to respond to a verbal prompt at once. This enables teachers to assess the comprehension of multiple students at the same time.

Teaching Theater Arts in a Kindergarten Classroom

In the professional development model used in the K-2 Teaching Artist Project, classroom teachers co-teach 27 arts lessons (9 theatre, 9 dance, 9 visual art) with a teaching artist during their first year in the program. The following year the teachers implement the same lessons on their own, with support from district resource teachers. Although lessons in all three arts disciplines incorporate oral language, teachers report that the theater lessons have had the strongest impact on literacy skills. What do these lessons look like? The kindergarten lesson described below was taught by teaching artist Mike Sears. Kindergarten lessons are 40 minutes long and begin with a warm-up that encourages total physical response, while also focusing pupils' attention on the sounds that make up words.

“Actors – stand up and make a circle!” Twenty kindergartners eagerly jump up and form a circle, standing in “5-point position,” with their hands at their sides, head high, feet together.

The teaching artist who will direct the theater arts lesson is using complex vocabulary words, but all children follow along easily because he is simultaneously demonstrating what they are to do.

“Stretch your right hand toward the middle of the circle.” As they begin the warm-up exercises, some children have trouble telling their right hand from their left hand. The teacher walks around the circle, gently showing confused children which hand is right or left. First the kindergartners pretend to be “raisins,” then “grapes.” When they are raisins, the children “shriveled up” (squatting down with their arms wrapped tightly around them). Then they grow into big grapes (standing tall with their arms outstretched). Their giggles and smiles make it clear that the theater arts lesson is a high point of their week.

To expand phonemic awareness, the children practice tongue twisters such as “purple peanut butter,” “sticky strawberries,” and “gushy, gooshy grapes.” Mr. Sears asks the class to imagine a big marshmallow in the center of the circle. The children mime breaking off a piece of the marshmallow and putting it in their mouths. They rub their tummies, saying “mmm.”

The activities that follow the warm-up change from week to week. (Please see the “On-Line Resources” section at the end of this article to access downloadable lesson plans, materials used in lessons, and streaming videos of the entire series of K-2 theater lessons.) The focus of the first lesson is on helping children introduce themselves clearly and with confidence.

Lesson two introduces the story *We’re Going on a Bear Hunt*. As the teaching artist tells the story, children repeat his words and mimic his gestures. The third lesson is built around the same story, but focuses on using the body and voice to bring the story to life. In the fourth lesson, kindergartners perform the story *Goldie Locks and the Three Bears*. The class identifies the four *characters*, the *setting*, and *sequence of events*. In groups, children create improvisations and pantomimes that highlight characterization and story points.

The fifth lesson focuses on two poems: “Cat” and “Two Little Kittens.” While reading the first poem slowly, the teaching artist discusses and models movements a cat would make. After reading the second poem, children act out and discuss similarities and differences between the movements of the imaginary kittens and a real cat. Lesson six asks students to make shapes, using a lump of clay or a sheet of aluminum foil. Children talk about the shape, then try to make that shape with their bodies. The teaching artist demonstrates how angles and sharp lines can be used to indicate strength or power, while curvy lines suggest softness and flow.

In lesson seven, children observe their hands and discuss the ways hands move. Pairs of children sit facing one another, taking turns mirroring the hand motions of their partner. This requires both strong focus and body awareness. Lesson eight explores the use of props. The children are asked: When did you last dress up as someone else? (For Halloween?) Did you move or speak differently? Did you use a prop? The teaching artist uses various props, demonstrating movements that might help define a character. Children are asked: Who was that character? What clues helped you to guess? Then each child chooses a prop and creates a character.

In lesson nine children choose scenes for role-playing; then they create *tableau* (frozen pictures of their chosen scene). Creating a tableau requires children to pick a moment that encapsulates the meaning of the scene, then to represent the action taking place at that moment through the motionless poses of the characters involved. This requires children to understand both what action is taking place and how specific characters are reacting to what is going on.

Once the tableaus are created, the kindergartners explore how performing in a theater works. An (imaginary) curtain is closed; actors enter; the curtain opens; actors perform. At the end, the actors freeze. The audience applauds. The curtain closes. The actors exit. One group of

kindergartners at a time walks through this sequence; the rest practice being a good audience.

Although theater lessons take only an hour each week, the impact of the activities is enhanced through extension strategies that teachers employ during literacy instruction. The arts staff and participating teachers have developed the extension strategies through an on-going process of experimentation and revision. Strategies developed by San Diego teachers include:

- Have students explore pace and volume in their oral reading of texts. (*“How can we read this poem to make sure our audience understands the message?”*)
- Have students act out the poem by creating movements to accompany key words (e.g., float, waving, brave, strong, true, stand).
- Practice sequencing by pantomiming a procedure with which students are familiar, such as a fire drill or leaving school at the end of the day. Switch the sequence around. Ask students if it makes sense. Why or why not?

The extensions designed to enhance a specific arts lesson are provided at the end of each downloadable lesson plan. Some extensions are simply brief interludes used to ease classroom transitions (for example, asking children to practice “creeping quietly” back to their tables after circle time or “standing stiffly like wooden soldiers” when getting in line for recess). Overlaps between skills taught during the 9 weeks of theater arts lessons and the 9 weeks of dance lessons in the K-2 Teaching Artist Project program reinforce the skills that have been learned.

Teachers Implementation and Feedback

The extensive on-line materials, hosted by the UC Irvine Center for Learning through the Arts and Technology, were created to help teachers remind themselves of lesson details in the years following initial implementation of the K-2 arts program. The on-line videos and lesson materials proved equally helpful to new teachers who joined the staff at participating schools

after the initial year of co-teaching with teaching artists was over. Since the on-line material is based on the California content standards, teachers in other districts may find it equally useful.

When teachers were asked about their experiences implementing the program, responses varied by grade level. Kindergarten teachers focused on verbal fluency and vocabulary building, especially among ELLs. Of course, the children also heard English words in the cafeteria and on the playground. However, the vocabulary used in the theatre lessons was more complex and included high-utility academic words. The following observation was typical:

“When we acted it out, more of the kids were engaged, even the kids who couldn’t say the words yet. At the beginning of the year, they copy movements. Eventually, they understand how to say that, using language.”

In contrast, first and second grade teachers focused more on the transfer of verbal skills to written language, comparing the performance of their current classes to previous years. Teachers reported that, when children wrote about characters in stories, the writing was more detailed and descriptive. Explaining how she had built on the theater lessons, one teacher recalled, “When we were discussing characters from stories, I’d say: ‘Remember when you had drama, how you felt when you acted it out...?’” She found that recalling what it had felt like to act out a character enabled children to better articulate what that character was like and its relationship to others.

Implications for Practice

As San Diego Visual and Performing Arts Director Karen Childress-Evans pointed out, “When kids fail in school, they usually fail because we are failing them. We keep trying to teach them the way we were taught. If they don’t learn the first time, we give them more of the same. We’ve got to think of what engages them. We’re a very visual and auditory society... If we use the arts as a vehicle, we can pull kids’ attention back to what we’re teaching.”

Arts-based instructional strategies give teachers a broad range of options with which to engage students (Rooney, 2004). Student engagement has been tied to improvements in student behavior (both increases in prosocial behavior and decreases in antisocial behaviors), improved learning outcomes, and greater respect for the rights of others (Brouillette, 2009 & 2010; Covell & Howe, 2001; Decoene & De Cock, 1996; Howe & Covell, 2007). There are positive effects for teachers, as well. Covell, McNeil and Howe (2009) found that low engagement is a contributing factor in teacher burnout, whereas increasing student engagement can reduce teacher burnout and increase teacher self-efficacy.

What the success of schools like Baker Elementary (mentioned at the beginning of this article) shows is that standards-based theatre arts lessons not only can co-exist with a rigorous literacy program but such activities can help renew the enthusiasm of teachers and their pupils. In 2010, Baker second graders scored 48% proficient and advanced on the California Standards Test in English-Language Arts, compared to 38% in 2009 and 27% in 2008. On the California Standards Test in Math, the second graders went from 44% proficient and advanced in 2009 to 60% in 2010. Many factors have contributed, none more important than the expertise and dedication of the school staff. However, the arts appear to have played a significant role in supporting student learning and making the classroom an engaging place to be.

The implication of these findings for practice is subtle but far-reaching. Most K-2 teachers sense that elimination of the arts costs their pupils valuable learning opportunities. Yet, many teachers feel they have no choice. Recent research on arts integration provides teachers of ELLs with a reasoned response, should they be questioned about time spent on theatre arts. As a teacher in the K-2 Teaching Artist Project observed, “I don’t have to be ashamed of doing the arts any more.” Other teachers described how arts integration had helped their pupils:

- * “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.”

Schools are under intense pressure to raise test scores. This has caused school districts to narrow the curriculum, putting a heavy emphasis on skills thought likely affect performance on high-stakes tests. A 2006 national survey by the Center on Educational Policy found that 71 percent of the nation’s 15,000 school districts had reduced the hours of instructional time spent on social studies, the arts, science and other subjects (April, 2010). Ironically, there is evidence that the performance of ELLs has been undercut by this narrowing of the curriculum.

The San Diego experience suggests that theatre arts instruction contributes to building oral language skills that can boost the text-level reading comprehension of ELLs (August & Shanahan, 2006). Theatre lessons also bring a sense of fun into the classroom. When classroom teachers choose to implement such lessons themselves (or recruit parent volunteers with theatre experience to assist with the lessons), little expenditure is needed. This makes it possible for effective—and highly motivating—support for oral language development in the primary grades to be made available in every California elementary school.

On-Line Resources

Kindergarten Video Theatre Lessons & Lesson Plans: <http://www.clat.uci.edu/theatre-k>

Grade 1 Video Theatre Lessons & Lesson Plans: <http://www.clat.uci.edu/theatre-1>

Grade 2 Video Theatre Lessons & Lesson Plans: <http://www.clat.uci.edu/theatre-2>

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