

# UC Irvine

## UC Irvine Previously Published Works

### Title

Advancing the speaking and listening skills of English language learners in the primary grades through creative drama

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6wr3450h>

### Journal

TESOL Journal, 3(3)

### ISSN

1056-7941

### Author

Brouillette, Liane

### Publication Date

2012-03-01

### DOI

10.1002/tesj.8

Peer reviewed

## **Advancing the Speaking and Listening Skills of K-2 English Language Learners through Creative Drama<sup>1</sup>**

During the early stages of learning a second language, children will utilize gestures, behaviors, and nonverbal responses to indicate understanding of the new language (Bialystok, 2001). Although children may be relatively nonverbal at this stage, it is important that they be included in a variety of activities that promote listening and comprehension. Creative drama lessons provide a natural opportunity for teachers to support the language development of English language learners through use of body language, gestures, and spoken language that is well-pronounced and utilizes concrete representations and visual aids as appropriate.

Most experts agree that development of oral English proficiency is an essential first step toward reading development (Goldenberg, 2008). Young English language learners need time to adjust and feel safe. They also need opportunities to engage with others. The playful atmosphere of creative drama lessons provides this combination of safety and interpersonal engagement, while also encouraging use of both nonverbal and verbal means of communication.

For young English language learners (ELLs), the quality and volume of oral language use promoted by teachers is critical (Peisner-Feinberg *et al.*, 2001). These children need frequent opportunities to engage in structured academic talk with teachers or peers who know English well and can provide accurate feedback (Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, Rivera, 2006; Gersten *et al.*, 2007; Wong Fillmore & Snow 2000). In addition to breadth of vocabulary (number of known words), drama activities also build vocabulary depth. To gain rich knowledge of a word

---

<sup>1</sup> **Citation:** Brouillette, L. (2012). Advancing the speaking and listening skills of English language learners in the primary grades through creative drama. *TESOL Journal* 3(1), 138-145.

and its use, children must have multiple opportunities to interact with the word in a variety of contexts (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2002). The following vignette provides a glimpse of a lesson in progress.

“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 drama lesson is using complex vocabulary words, but the children follow along easily because he is simultaneously demonstrating what they are to do. Most observers would not guess that a majority of these children spoke very little English at the beginning of the school year.

“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. When this happens, the teacher walks around the circle, gently showing confused children which hand is right or left. 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 this theatre arts class is a high point of their week.

### **A Drama Lesson in a Kindergarten Classroom**

The drama lesson described in the vignette was taught by Mike Sears, a professional actor who works with the K-2 Teaching Artist Project, a partnership between the University of California, Irvine and the Visual and Performing Arts Department of the San Diego Unified School District. This project is funded by an Improving Teacher Quality grant administered by the California Postsecondary Education Commission. Streaming videos of the kindergarten,<sup>2</sup> first

---

<sup>2</sup> Kindergarten Video Theater Lessons & Lesson Plans: <http://www.clat.uci.edu/theatre-k>

grade,<sup>3</sup> and second grade<sup>4</sup> lessons are available on-line, free of charge, along with detailed lesson plans and other lesson materials.

After the warm-up that begins with the words: “Actors – stand up and make a circle,” the children practice tongue twisters such as “purple peanut butter,” “sticky strawberries,” “gooshy, gushy grapes.” In the photograph below, classroom teachers lead children in a similar lesson. Children are asked to imagine a big marshmallow in the center of the circle. They mime breaking off a piece of the marshmallow and putting it in their mouths. Then all say “mmmm.”



Photograph: *San Diego kindergarteners mime breaking off a piece of an imaginary marshmallow during a drama lesson that builds oral language skills.*

Later, the same class practices the “Name Game.” One by one, the children step forward and say their names clearly. To encourage use of a strong voice and confident manner, teachers urge students: “Say your name in a loud voice, raising your fists in the air at the same time.” The class then practices punching the air as a group. Many giggle.

In the final exercise, small groups of children are given a pictorial representation of an

---

<sup>3</sup> Grade 1 Video Theater Lessons & Lesson Plans: <http://www.clat.uci.edu/theater-1>

<sup>4</sup> Grade 2 Video Theater Lessons & Lesson Plans: <http://www.clat.uci.edu/theater-2>

animal (lion, bird, dog, etc.) and asked to nod if they know what the picture is. Each group has a few moments to decide how to use movement and sound to represent their animal. Then each group represents their animal while the rest of the class tries to guess the animal's identity.

During the creative drama activities, children who are not yet fluent in English can figure out the meaning of an unknown word by watching their peers. Drama activities are also strikingly efficient. Traditionally, the teacher can only question one student at a time; whereas, drama activities allow many children to respond at once. That allows teachers to assess the comprehension of multiple students at the same time.

### **Using Creative Drama for English Language Development**

This article describes an innovative program, based on theory, which shows great promise of helping teachers to foster the language development of English language learners. The San Diego Unified School District sent teaching artists into K-2 classrooms at 15 diverse elementary schools to co-teach standards-based lessons with classroom teachers. The Visual and Performing Arts Department created a set of 27 lessons (9 for kindergarten, 9 for first grade, 9 for second grade) that addressed the English language development (ELD) standards. The year after they have co-taught the lessons with a teaching artist, teachers implement the lessons on their own. The following paragraphs provide an overview of the kindergarten theatre 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 a 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 teacher 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 sheet of aluminum foil. Children talk about the shape, and then they try to make that shape with their bodies. The teacher demonstrates how angles and sharp lines indicate strength or power, while curvy lines indicate 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 takes strong focus and concentration.

Lesson eight focuses on 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 could 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 create *tableau* (frozen pictures of their chosen scene). Then the kindergartners investigate how performing in a theatre works. The (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 while the rest of the class practices being a good audience.

### **Teachers Describe Impact of Drama Lessons**

To get teacher feedback, interviews were carried out with 24 participating teachers. The teachers interviewed about the project most often mentioned the impact that drama-based activities had upon fluency and vocabulary acquisition. The following comments were typical:

- \* About 95% of my kids are ELL. At beginning of school year, half did not talk at all. But in the arts lessons they are excited, using their vocabulary.
- \* Every teacher I have talked to will say that the ELL children understand the language because they physicalize it.

In describing the impact of the program, kindergarten teachers tended to focus on engagement, fluency, and learning vocabulary. This 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 on improvement in their pupils' writing, especially writing about characters in stories. After children had acted out a story, their writing about that story was much more detailed and descriptive. A 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...?'"

## **Conclusion**

There is an urgent need to find effective ways of helping young ELLs to master oral English. Unfortunately, few elementary teachers have specific training in facilitating the development of oral language. Texts are available, but a text does not adequately convey the nuances of gesture, posture, intonation and facial expression that are key elements in oral communication. Creative drama lessons provide a highly motivating first step, providing English

learners with opportunities to engage in extended interactions with teachers and peers.

Since the theatre arts lessons were aligned with the oral language segment of the *California English Language Arts Content Standards*, San Diego teachers regularly employed strategies from drama lessons in daily literacy instruction. After the first year of the Teaching Artist Project, kindergarteners taking the California Test of English Language Development (CELDT) showed almost twice the expected growth on the speaking section, the listening section, and the overall test. Teachers reported that the streaming videos, which demonstrated how a professional teaching artist delivered each lesson, proved invaluable. Since these materials are cost-free and readily available on-line,<sup>5</sup> they may also become a valued resource for teachers of English language learners outside San Diego.

## References

- Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., & Kucan, L. (2002). *Bringing words to life: Robust vocabulary instruction*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Bialystok, E. (2001). *Bilingualism in Development: Language, Literacy, and Cognition*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Francis, D.J., Rivera, M., Lesaux, N., Kieffer, M., & Rivera, H. (2006). *Practical guidelines for the education of English language learners: Research-based recommendations for instruction and academic interventions*. Portsmouth, NH: RMC Research, Center on Instruction.
- Gersten, R., Baker, S. K., Shanahan, T. Linan-Thompson, S., Collins, P., & Scarcella, R. (2007). *Effective literacy and language instruction for English learners in the elementary grades, An IES practice guide*. Washington, DC: IES, Department of Education.

---

<sup>5</sup> On-line Theatre lessons: <http://www.clta.uci.edu/theatre-grades>



Goldenberg, C. (2008). Teaching English Language Learners: What the Research Does—and Does Not—Say. *American Educator* 32(1), 8–23, 42–44.

Peisner-Feinberg, E. S., Burchinal, M. R., Clifford, R. M., Culkin, M. L., Howes, C., Kagan, S. L., Yazejian, N. (2001). The relation of preschool child care quality to children's cognitive and social developmental trajectories through second grade. *Child Development* 72(5), 1534–53.

San Diego Unified School District (n.d.). K-2 theater lesson plans and video lessons. retrieved on 10-10-10 from: <http://www.clat.uci.edu/theatre>

Wong Fillmore, L., & Snow, C. (2000). *What teachers need to know about language*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.