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# All the World's a Stage: Reaching English Language Learners through Drama

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All the World's a Stage:  
Reaching English Language Learners through Drama  
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University of Nebraska – Lincoln  
A Summative Project  
In partial fulfillment of the Masters in Education  
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### Abstract

The use of drama with language instruction has long been considered a legitimate practice. A recent survey of the literature shows that English Language Learners (ELLs) may have even more to benefit from the use of drama in the classroom. Studies showed an increase in language and problem-solving ability, as well as student self-efficacy that was transferrable across activities. Following an analysis of the literature is a proposed curriculum based on the findings of the researchers cited. This unit is centered on dramatic activities that make use of all four language domains and includes the examination of plays in writing, on the stage, and as a playwright. In the end, students will be asked to combine all of their skills to put on a completely student-created production. An analysis of the factors surrounding the implementation of such a unit follows the unit itself.

Keywords: English Language Learners, drama, language instruction

### A Dramatic Improvement to Language Learning

Given the ever-increasing population of English language learners (ELLs) in public schools today, teachers are often faced with the dilemma of how best to educate these students; researchers and practitioners alike are devoting more time and effort to determining the best practices for these students. Indeed, in many schools a significant portion of the population comes from this category. In the area of language instruction, concern for ELLs becomes a vital piece of the educational puzzle as it is necessary for students to learn English before they can meaningfully participate in content courses. As a result, language teachers must continue to seek out new methods and approaches that prove to be effective. (It is important to note that language instruction, as it is referred to here, involves the four related skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking.)

One method that has already shown great promise, but has received little attention, is the use of drama in the classroom. Drama instruction has been shown to improve students' abilities in all four language domains (Podlozny, 2000), it can foster community and cultural understanding, and it also increases students' self-confidence overall (Wolf, 2005). Given the consistently positive findings of the preliminary research done into the use of drama instruction in the classroom, a legitimate argument can already be made in favor of such techniques.

Incorporating the arts into the everyday classroom has been a matter of some interest for a while; likewise, how best to educate English language learners (ELLs) continues to be an ever-increasingly important prospect in the 21st century. On bringing the two together specifically, though, little research has been done. In response to this gap, what follows is a small sampling of the research into drama in the classroom, with a particular look at how the use of drama benefits students, and how well drama may be able to serve the ELL population.

Each piece consulted held relevant information regarding the benefits of using drama in the classroom, especially with students of low SES or ELLs (Chizhik, 2009; Dodson, 2002; Gaudart, 1990; Heath, 1993; Podlozny, 2000). While drama can be beneficial to all students, the results are significant as the research often found the use of drama to be more effective with ELLs or similar populations. The studies examined a variety of populations from around the world. Given similarities in the findings, the results are considered useful across populations. The following are patterns noted across the research considered here.

Along with connections made to the type of population, drama was also found to aide in transferring skills across methods; for example, playwriting leads to increased scores on standardized writing tests (Chizhik, 2009; Podlozny, 2000). Transfer is an important consideration in an age when every method a teacher uses will be questioned for its validity in the classroom. Drama activities may be fun and engaging for students, but teachers, administrators, and parents alike need to see results with regard to language ability. Thus, methods that indicate transferrable results, could lead to a more willing acceptance of the techniques because they are reliable and recreateable for the teacher and hopefully relevant to the everyday life of the student.

Another issue that received significant attention is the actual set-up of the classroom. The importance of a student-centered environment in which the teacher is not the sole owner of knowledge was stressed, and in fact, the students' own perspectives are used to aide learning. Using students own knowledge can help contribute to an increase in self-efficacy because it validates the knowledge they already have as a useful starting point from which they are able to base future learning. Within this aspect of drama instruction, one researcher encouraged that student comfort should be considered, and as a result, the "performance" aspect of drama should

be minimalized within the classroom (Gaudart, 1990). On the other hand, four of the studies identified actually used a final, staged performance to conclude instruction, and they all occurred within a class or organization that was centered around dramatic activities for the sake of language learning, as well as the students' own experiences (Chizhik, 2009; Dodson, 2002; Heath, 1993; Murillo, 2007). (Also relevant to this section was Wolf, 2005.) The researchers found that when students had a connection to and a sense of ownership in every step of the process, self-efficacy increased and thus, so did language ability.

Tied to student comfort and the notion of student-centered learning is another positive aspect of drama instruction in the classroom. Several researchers cite the importance of drama's ability to bring to light perspectives that might otherwise not be seen. An awareness of hidden perspectives and those viewpoints which we might otherwise not consider can create a very enriching learning environment for all students and offer a wealth of linguistic opportunities (Chizhik, 2009; Dodson, 2002; Gaudart, 1990; Heath, 1993; Wolf, 2005).

Finally, but perhaps most significantly, research into drama instruction has been shown to have positive outcomes with regard to increases in language ability (Chizhik, 2009; Dodson, 2002; Gaudart, 1990; Heath, 1993; Murillo, 2007; Podlozny, 2000), self-efficacy (Chizhik, 2009; Dodson, 2002; Heath, 1993; Murillo, 2007; Wolf, 2005), and problem-solving ability (Chizhik, 2009; Wolf, 2005). Students must continually show improvement for a method to be deemed valuable, and results of the studies consulted unanimously convey the great potential of drama in the language classroom.

In conclusion, across the research, drama appears to have a positive relationship with many desirable outcomes within the language classroom. It also shows great potential to be especially effective in working with ELLs and can increase self-efficacy and outright language

ability in English Language Learners. Considering the credibility of the research cited here, the findings are assumed to be valid. Concerning overall generalizability and external validity, all articles/chapters examined as part of this study hold potential usefulness for all teachers, and ELL teachers in particular. While much more research into the topic of drama and ELL instruction should be conducted, a solid foundation exists and already, teachers should have enough input to successfully exercise these techniques in their own classrooms.

### Literature Review

Chizhik (2009) is an empirical study which examined the use of “an integrated playwriting program within an urban, low-socioeconomic status [SES] middle school” (p. 387) where 40% of the student population was ELLs (p. 395). The study found the program to be successful at increasing students’ confidence with regard to writing. It also aided students in transferring learned writing skills “as measured by a districtwide writing sample” (p. 387). The students were also motivated by the outcome of their final product “as student worked toward developing and writing their own plays that [would] later be performed by professional actors in front of parents and students” (p. 387).

Two local playwrights worked with 199 eighth-grade students (across eight classes) once a week (two hours) for nine weeks (p. 395). Students were allowed to choose the subjects of their plays, thus the program “reflects the authentic cultural practices that exist beyond school borders” (p. 389); students learn from each other, as much as they learn from the teacher. Chizik (2009) goes on to stress the importance of student comfort. “Teachers must establish a classroom environment where students can share their writing and thoughts with little or no anxiety” (p. 391). Learning may be halted for a student who is wholly concerned with facing ridicule for his or her language ability by peers and/or the teacher. Giving students guidance, choice, and ultimately responsibility allows them to not only become more comfortable with the curriculum, but to feel more confident in their own abilities. “Analyses revealed significant improvement in writing self-efficacy of program participants as compared with the self-efficacy comparison group” (p. 401). This increase in self-efficacy, as well as students’ emotional investment in the project, are cited as major contributors to the improvement in writing skills noted by the researcher. “In fact, findings from this research support the notion that a play-



writing residency program improves students' writing skills [and confidence] to a greater extent than traditional language arts instruction, as measured by a standardized writing assessment" (p. 405).

Another benefit of the program is that "problem-solving skills are employed as students struggle to mold their ideas into the structural requirements of the play" (p. 389). Not only do these skills serve students as they complete the requirements of the class, but Chizhik (2009) explains further drama's benefits to problem-solving abilities: "...the sophistication associated with solving literacy problems... promotes the ability to transfer foundational literacy skills to multiple settings, including standardized assessments" (p. 393). Chiznik notes the importance of these findings: "The ultimate implication of this research, therefore, is the development of an empirical base for the argument that art education programs, like playwriting, can improve urban, low-SES students' basic academic skills that can transfer to multiple contexts, including standardized tests" (p. 407).

Dodson (2002) cites the importance of drama as a tool for learners to experience purposeful language activities. She also notes the increase in self-efficacy possible through the use of classroom drama, and the potential for growth in cultural understanding and appreciation through the unique elements each learner brings to the table. In describing the study she says, "The overall goal of the class was to introduce these advanced language learners to elements of the theater and elicit as much spoken and written language from them as possible" (p. 163). The program "offered the students as many choices as possible and provided them with new experiences that they might not have sought out on their own" (p. 163).

Activities in the study incorporated all four language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) as much as possible and included attending plays and writing critically; reading

plays and discussing them; participation in drama activities such as improvisation; and the class performance of a student-created work. “The students were proud of their final project and their overall performance in the drama class: They had demonstrated that they could understand and use English in a variety of communicative ways” (p. 175). The class also incorporated a history and background of theater in the United States, as well as a technological component which required students to be part of a reflective community online (p. 164-74).

When it was all over, students had the opportunity to provide feedback. “Using a five-point Likert scale, the students responded to the statements with agreement or disagreement. Representative statements include ‘I made progress in my study of English’ (average of 4.3 out of 5 possible points) and ‘Overall, how would you rate this course?’ (4.7 out of 5)” (p. 176). The researcher contributes several factors to the course’s success. The content engaged students; the material gave them meaningful opportunities to practice English, as well as nonverbal communications and “social niceties... The students also grew more appreciative of each other’s cultures and more cognizant of American culture” (p. 176). Dodson (2002) concludes the analysis by stating, “Overall, then, I would say that my objectives for this course were met—even exceeded—and I will continue to incorporate drama and other communicative activities as I teach other language classes” (p. 176).

Gaudart’s (1990) study was begun in 1978 in Malaysia and involved “more than 300 secondary and tertiary teachers” (p. 232). Some teachers conducted a single observation and others conducted observations over several years. “The results of the research are based on observations by the researcher as well as self-reports by teacher and pupils” (p. 232).

Gaudart (1990) stresses the importance of focusing on the process rather than an end performance as in the traditional theatrical style in order to make drama accessible to as many

learners as possible. Drama allows for the decentralization of the classroom because students play such a critical role in executing the activities proposed by this research. “This has also meant that the role of the teacher has changed. The class is more of a learner-centered environment than a teacher-centered one. “The teacher is merely the facilitator” (p. 245). This directly links to an aspect of this method that has gathered teacher concern; “Their main complaint has been that the teacher ‘loses control’ of the class, not only what is learnt and the order that it should be learnt, but also over class discipline” (p. 245). The author suggests this is a matter of making teachers comfortable with the activities, and thus giving them greater control.

Gaudart (1990) categorizes participating teachers by experience from “teacher trainees with minimal classroom experience” to “tertiary level teachers” (p. 232). She then reported on their success with the drama techniques. Not surprisingly, working secondary teachers with pre-service exposure to the techniques and tertiary teachers both had the most success using the drama techniques in their classrooms. Teacher trainees with minimal to more than five years of teaching experience reported more difficulty incorporating (and sometimes even lack of willingness to try) the drama techniques in their classrooms.

The following drama activities (“related to the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing”) were taught to teachers to be used as part of the study: language games, mime, role play, and simulation. The overall results of the use of drama showed that all techniques were successful at improving language abilities in almost all levels and types of students. Willingness to participate in activities was also seen across all but one of the categories of students. “In sum, therefore, one could say that drama activities were less successful with upper secondary school low level learners than with other learners” (p. 244).

In conclusion, Gaudart (1990) says, “The results of the research, therefore, have as their main limitation the fact that only teachers who are convinced about the techniques continue to be involved in the research and they also happen to be those who, as student teachers, had done well in their course” (p. 246). She states the problem lies with the teachers’ acceptance of the techniques and not with the techniques themselves. She believes that no acceptance of drama techniques is related to preconceived notions of drama involving performances. “For greater acceptability, therefore, the performance aspects will need to be deemphasized as much as possible in teacher education” (p. 247).

Heath’s (1993) article is an ethnographic look at the benefits of using drama in the inner city; many students are ELLs. Heath is concerned that often students do not see themselves or their surroundings represented in their schoolwork, nor are they likely to encounter authentic opportunities to interact. She argues that drama offers the perfect springboard for students to not only validate their experiences, but they also learn a great deal about language along the way.

Heath’s (1993) study explores the divide between the types of language instruction that students typically receive in the classroom and the experiences they get through participating in drama in youth organizations. “A team of ethnographers, including 20 junior ethnographers from the neighborhoods, studied the language uses in activities of approximately 60 organizations... in three major metropolitan areas of the U.S.” (p. 180). Often, students were asked to create their own scripts from personal or cultural experiences. The researchers found that students who were not successful in the regular school setting could excel in the youth organization setting. “In other words, once these actors became their own authors, they seemed to tap in performance a deep range of linguistic competence that they otherwise did not display” (p. 181).

As a result, Heath (1993) advocates for a transfer of the techniques used by the youth organizations to the classroom. Students should be consulted to find the most effective groups, and then leaders from these groups can be tapped for resources and ideas (p. 184). Also, in a world of limited resources, quality materials can be lacking. Heath's answer is the “excellent funds of knowledge about an array of languages and cultures [that] exist among students” (p. 185). Connecting students' lives to the curriculum also helps engage as well as “provide a strong link to other students” (p. 185). Finally, Heath encourages schools to “imitate neighborhood organizations and think of the power of drama and of fuller uses of role playing for bringing out performance that reflects the fullest possible range of linguistic competence of students” (p. 185). In other words, students have many opportunities to interact with members of the community in a productive setting; art galleries, museums, or historic districts can offer students a variety of opportunities to role play, and thus, grow linguistically. Heath also suggests that students should role play their own parent-teacher conferences as another way of enabling students and teaching self-assessment (p. 186).

Heath (1993) goes on to discuss the wealth of opportunities that drama provides for students to practice language through someone else's voice, which may, as Heath notes, bring an otherwise shy ELL into a meaningful language experience (p. 187). Through play, students are encouraged to be someone outside of themselves, allowing them to take risks with language. Additionally, in the process of drama, students are called upon to not only be self-reflective, but to also teach, mentor, plan, and assist peers and younger students. These experiences create even more opportunities for new interactions between students and helps solidify what they already know.

In closing, Heath (1993) reminds us that “as teachers... often what we see in the classroom is not truth and that the routines there cannot approach fully those necessary for the drama of language learning that students must face in real life” (p. 191). A much better approach would be to recruit the students' lives, experiences, languages, and environments as learning tools through the power of drama.

Murillo (2007) conducted a 12-class program at a private, catholic boys' school in Santiago Chile (grade level of students is not provided). He describes the class he will be teaching as “elective,” so the students participating have *chosen* to be there. He does note, though, that despite the success (“high marks”) of most of the 17 students in the class, several had “learning difficulties” or other disorders that made school difficult for them (p. 4-5). The students were comfortable with safe, mechanical methods of language instruction; however, this had not developed their communicative skills to the point where they could answer the basic questions Murillo asked during an evaluative interview. As a result, the researcher decided to deliver instruction from the opposite approach (p. 5).

The approach to language instruction that students had grown accustomed to (worksheets and copying) limited actual interaction and communication. Such situations, Murillo (2007) argues, do not allow “for real communication and language acquisition to take place” (p. 5). Students had a firm theoretical knowledge of the language (thus, the “high marks”) but their practical abilities were still lacking; they had no experience actually *applying* the language they were being given. Considering this, the following objectives were developed (p. 6):

- Primary Objective: “By the end of the project, students will be able to communicate ideas and emotions effectively.”
- Secondary Objectives: “Students will develop strategies to enhance their listening and

reading comprehension of texts, both written and aural.”; “To facilitate proceduralization of target structures taught in class by responding and adapting them in real time to a partner’s message.”

- Progress Indicators: “Students will effectively work in pairs or groups.”; “Students will start focusing more on fluency rather than accuracy” (p. 6).

Murillo (2007) continues to describe the process he went through to develop his unit by acknowledging his selection of the Communicative Language Teaching approach. This approach emphasizes authenticity – both in texts, as well as interactions between teachers, students, and the outside world – and students’ own experiences (p. 9). In considering an approach to teaching that would encompass all of these ideals, he realized that drama offered an excellent way to engage students in meaningful and interactive situations and activities. Some of the ways, identified by Murillo, that drama can benefit students are: by building confidence, through its adaptability, and its ability to help develop skills that can be used in other areas (p. 9-11).

Murillo’s (2007) unit plan consisted of three sections. The first was focused primarily on “communication, rather than formal academic content” in order to get students comfortable interacting with each other and displaying “empathy, respect... and creativity” (p. 11). In the second stage, the emphasis was put on “procedural and disciplinary aspects” (p. 11). Issues of reading comprehension, pronunciation, and vocabulary were addressed, as well as practice that was less structured than the students had been accustomed to. Finally, the third stage, or “production stage,” required students to incorporate all of the skills they had learned thus far to write, produce, and deliver a dramatization or play as a group (p. 11-12). The author includes a day-by-day description of the curriculum and instruction used in the class, as well as assessment procedures.

Upon reflection, Murillo (2007) found that his practices had led students to “feel involved and challenged.” He also found success with his goal to encourage students to “think critically and express their ideas and emotions efficiently” (p. 20). In this way, the experiment went beyond the mere teaching of language and extended to the students as human beings. Indeed, Murillo reports positive feedback from students who participated and other faculty members within the English department (p. 21). Overall, the results of the study indicated an increase in students’ “self confidence, ability to work in teams,” and had moved their theoretical knowledge to a communicative activity that could be used in practical situations (p. 2). The use of drama was found to be beneficial to students’ “cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective skills” (p. 2).

Podlozny’s (2000) meta-analysis begins with an examination of Kardash and Wright’s (1986) meta-analysis in which 16 studies were analyzed and a positive relationship was found to exist between the use of drama in the classroom and certain positive cognitive outcomes. The author also discusses Conard’s (1992) meta-analysis which examined 20 studies and also found the use of drama to have a number of beneficial outcomes within the classroom (p. 240).

Because much more research has been done in this area since these two meta-analyses, in an effort to update the findings, Podlozny (2000) conducted an extremely thorough meta-analysis of recent literature concerning the use of drama in the classroom. The author gives specific information regarding the search procedure and the relevant criteria for choosing from 265 potentially relevant articles on drama and some kind of academic ability (p. 242). She then goes on to describe the parameters, characteristics, and procedures for the study, including the variables studied. For the purposes of this text, this researcher was primarily concerned with



degree of transfer and type of population. “Studies were grouped according to outcome and were submitted to separate meta-analyses classified by outcome” (p. 245).

What do all of the meta-analyses have in common? Meta analyses one, three, five, and seven showed a significant degree of transfer from the dramatic activity to the tested material. Thus, a majority of the studies supported drama as a benefit to students across activities. With regard to type of population, meta-analyses two and three showed drama instruction to be particularly beneficial to low SES students and remedial readers. The other five meta-analyses showed drama instruction to be equally beneficial to average students, low SES students, ELLs, and remedial readers. Overall, Podlozny (2000) wraps up by stating:

Clearly, drama is an effective tool for increasing achievement in story writing, reading achievement, reading readiness, and writing. The weakest results were found for vocabulary... One of the most interesting results of these analyses is that drama not only helps children to master the texts they enact, but also often helps them to master new material not enacted... The field would also benefit from further, more careful analysis of the duration variable: how much drama, in what doses, is the most effective? (p. 268)

Because many aspects of the research (e.g., effect size) were heterogeneous, the researcher suggests in many instances, that more research should be conducted to eliminate other possible variables.

Through her article, Wolf (2005) provides an overall look at some of the research done in this field. She offers a general perspective on the use of drama in the classroom. Her primary focus is on the decentralization of knowledge. This means that instruction is student-centered, cooperative learning activities are prevalent, and the teacher is not the sole proprietor of knowledge (p. 68). Wolf argues that students can bring their own knowledge into the classroom

and use it to create legitimate learning (p. 70). This feature also brings hidden perspectives into view. “Drama, perhaps more than any other art form, is about bringing new voices to an audience” (p. 69). In other words, drama encourages an understanding of multiple points of view (p. 70-71).

Wolf (2005) also speaks to the nature of dramatic activities. “Theater... is a discipline of both individual and collaborative responsibility” (p. 73). Students are not only responsible for their own part (character development, line memorization, etc.), but they must be reliant on the input of their peers as they interact through a scene or activity. “[Drama] offers teachers and students a venue for creative problem solving through healthy interdependence” (p. 73). According to Wolf (2005), drama also offers “the satisfaction of genuine achievement” (p. 74). Students have the potential to experience a production from beginning (playwriting) to end (a staged production), and every step in between. As a result, students are instilled with a sense of ownership for the project. “To create—and thus ‘own’—a [production] is a badge of independence that shows publicly the result of motivation, hard work, perseverance, self-reliance, and responsibility” (p. 75).

While research into the use of drama in the classroom has consistently shown a positive correlation to improved language ability, an examination of the literature regarding the use of drama with ELLs has shown a particular benefit to these students. Citing increased test scores through the transferability of skills learned, increased self-efficacy and problem solving abilities, recent studies have illustrated the benefits of using drama in the ELL classroom. Through further teacher education into the practice and use of these techniques, great potential for success exists within the language classroom.

## Creating Classroom Drama

### Objectives:

1. To exercise reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills through a variety of dramatic activities
2. To read, watch, and discuss plays from a playwright's perspective
3. To create a final production that showcases student-writing and other skills learned throughout the semester

### I. An Introduction to Theater

A. Students will view a pictorial history of theater (or similar performance genres depending on culture) from around the world. Brief (3-4 word) captions should be included at the bottom of each image. This could be accomplished relatively easily using a program such as Powerpoint and a projection screen, however; the images could also be transferred to an overhead (preferably in color).

B. Personal Writing Activity (PWA): Students will write a paragraph (5 sentences) about their experience with theater in their home countries. Begin by asking students what we mean by theater; what is drama? They should come up with a story told through some type of performance. The writing prompt and a list of questions should then be provided. For example: Were you aware of theater/drama happening in your country? Who attended? Who participated? What was your interaction (if any)? If you were not aware of theater in your country, what do you know about theater in other cultures?

### II. Attending a Play

A. Early in the semester, students should attend a dramatic function somewhere in the community. Community, church, as well as college/university productions provide excellent

opportunities for students to see theater in action and get a better understanding of the medium they are working with. Ideally, the teacher would acquire a script for the production the class will be attending. It is likely to need some modification to meet the appropriate language level of the students. A guided class reading and discussion will give students a background in the story that will make the “real thing” much easier to follow and thus, more rewarding. Students should also be made aware of the elements they will be asked to consider when they get back to the classroom.

B. Upon returning to class, students should be debriefed about general information regarding their experience. For example: What did you notice about the building/stage/etc.? How did the characters interact on stage? How did the audience interact with the play? How did the set/music/lights add to the experience? Could you hear everyone? These questions are by no means all that could be asked and they should be elaborated on, but the main goal at this point is simply to encourage students to begin thinking about the different components of theater. Particulars will be studied throughout the semester.

### III. Analyzing Texts

A. Whereas the goal with the last reading was to practice reading skills while simultaneously familiarizing students with the production they were to attend, this time students should gain a better understanding of story structure, character development, as well as more technical aspects of the theater such as stage directions. When choosing a play (or other text), one should consider the cultures of the students in the class; any material that may be offensive should be avoided. Also, the less complicated language there is, the better, as making any necessary modifications will be easier. *Harvey* by Mary Chase would be an excellent choice. In the play, a grown man's companion is an invisible, 6-foot rabbit named Harvey. The man often

finds himself outside of regular society as he goes through life with his best pal. Students will find this light-hearted play (which is full of regular, everyday words) entertaining, and thus enjoyable to learn from. Of course, a play with more serious conflict than that in *Harvey* would be fine too; the teacher must simply know his/her students and make the best possible choice based on their needs and interests.

B. Poetry and other short works can also be wonderful ways for teachers to guide students' thinking about a character's mood, motivation, location (setting), and much more. For example, William Carlos Williams' "Young Woman at a Window" offers the potential for such discussion. *She sits with/ tears on/ her cheek/ her cheek on/ her hand/ the child/ in her lap/ his nose/ pressed/ to the glass* For example, who is the woman? Why is she crying? What does the setting look like? Short pieces offer students a brief but in-depth look at a scene and can offer teachers greater flexibility with regard to lesson planning.

C. Another opportunity for students to interact with a story utilizes Tomie DePaola's *Pancakes for Breakfast*. This short book gives students a place to explore without having to write the story; it has no words, but presents a clear plot. Not only is this an opportunity for students to explore elements of fiction, but they can also learn about dialogue and creating a script. Through the main character's interaction with her animals and neighbors, there are plenty of opportunities for students to narrate the action, as well as provide thoughts and conversation that add to the story. If possible, students should try to act out the story for themselves.

D. Lessons in this section should help students understand the playwright's techniques well enough to imitate them. They will use these skills to write, produce, and direct their own short plays in the last section of this unit. This is also a good time to incorporate any other standards or school requirements that may be part of the mix due to the traditional nature of this

analysis process. Of course, every lesson should have an emphasis on one (or more) of the four language domains (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) and instruction should always be level-appropriate. Such analyses should take place (with waning frequency) for the rest of the semester.

#### IV. Dramatic Activities

A. Because of the potentially tedious nature of reading, writing, and analysis, lessons should be bookended with drama activities, and they should be utilized throughout the semester. Likewise, if the day-to-day is getting to be too much for them, schedule more activities. All activities should be designed to make students think, interact, and communicate with each other on a meaningful level. As is true anywhere in education, if the activity does not give students a legitimate, genuine experience it is not worth using. Through basic activities such as role play, improvisation, and language games students are not only practicing with the target language, but they are also building self-efficacy that they will need later to share a piece of themselves with an audience. Likewise, as students are slowly building trust, confidence, and skills, the teacher should be gradually ramping up the demands of the course. Finally, these activities offer an excellent place for general observation. Of course, assessment is taking place constantly, but the class is also giving clues as to who would work well together (considering personality and culture as well as ability) on the final project.

##### B. Possible Activities:

1. *Role Play* offers a wealth of possibilities to teachers and students alike. In fact, the semester should begin with an activity that allows students introduce themselves to and learn about their peers within the class. A comfortable, team-like environment will be very beneficial as students' engagement in the dramatic exercises increases. Another way to utilize role play is

to simply offer students situations. For example: A friend wants you to attend an event with them but you are afraid to go. What do you say to them? The other person then has to decide how they are going to continue to persuade you to go. Almost always, role play activities should involve all groups working at the same time to minimize performance anxiety. Under certain circumstances, with certain role play activities, though, the teacher may want to ask if any of the groups would like to come up and share with the class. Students often learn as much from each other as they do from the instructor and this should be played up during any dramatic activity.

2. *Card Game* provides students with an opportunity to improvise, as well as interact and communicate at a variety of levels. The teacher should separate a deck of cards so that he/she has all of the cards from one suit. If there are more students than that in the class, pull cards from the middle numbers (4-9) of other suits to ensure that every student will have a card. Instruct students not to look at the cards but rather to stick them – facing outward – to their foreheads. Each person then interacts with the others in the class as if they held the rank reflected on their card. So, the person with the Ace is the most important, then King, then Queen and so on, while the person with the 2 or 3 would be a servant in the court. This activity may require some background on the ranking of the cards/roles, because at the end of the 5-minute interaction time students should be prompted to line up in the order that they think they are in based on how everyone responded to and interacted with them. The people at the top and bottom will probably be clear on where they stand, though it may be more of a challenge in the middle. Once students are lined up they can look at their cards and see how well they did.

3. *The Commercial* involves improvisation but is a wonderful activity because of its low-stress nature. Students should be put into small groups and given some kind of object to sell (the more random, the better). Encourage them to come up with a new and unique use for

the item. They will then present their commercials to the class. Students are expected to discuss as a group how they want to present the item, though, the commercial should not be scripted. They should be given 10 minutes or so to prepare and then the presentations should only take a minute or so each. This activity encourages students to use language spontaneously, communicate effectively with their group members, and problem-solve a use and presentation method for the object.

4. *Parent-Teacher Conferences* (role-played and real) can be an excellent way for students to not only be self-reflective, but to put themselves outside of their own limits to take on the role of another. First, students should be given a form that will guide them through the assessment of their progress. (How is my reading? Writing? Speaking? Listening? - elaborate, of course.) They will then use this to help them talk about themselves in class *as the teacher*, and the teacher then role-plays the student. Not only does this put the student into another person's shoes and into another register, but it also helps to make him/her aware of his/her strengths and weaknesses. The self-assessment may also be useful when communicating with parents during the real thing (however it takes place).

5. *Pictures* are another effective weapon in the dramatic arsenal. Students should be put into small groups and given a picture. Each image should have at least 3-4 people in some kind of situation. For example, the scene may be a grocery store and group members will each choose a different character. They will then have to decide who they are, what their role is, and how they are going to interact with the other people in the scene. If so desired, this would be another great opportunity for students to share with the class following sufficient preparation time. Similar to role play, the goal is for students to explore language through the experience of another, which is hopefully liberating to students who may otherwise struggle to communicate as



themselves.

#### V. Further Enrichment

A. Ideally, students would have another opportunity to attend a play before they put the final touches on their productions. This time, students should be prompted to watch for the same things as before, though in greater detail. How does the set contribute to the message of the play? How do characters convey moods? How does the dialogue tell the story? This is yet another opportunity for students to experience a production and transfer knowledge to their own works.

B. Another excellent way for students to hone not only their playwrighting skills, but also to improve general communication is to have a local author come and visit the class. This person can not only assist students with the writing process through his/her own advice, but students can also gain a wealth of knowledge by simply picking an expert's brain.

#### VI. The Final Production

A. PWA: A Time I felt... Students will be given a writing prompt: Write about a time (since you came to the U.S.) when you felt embarrassed, scared, happy, comfortable, hurt, angry, other \_\_\_\_\_. Describe, in as much detail as you can, what happened to make you feel that way and how you dealt with the situation. The more details provided at this stage will make writing easier later. Throughout the rest of the semester (until the final production) students should be given ample time to work on their scripts individually and then with their groups. Students should also be made aware early in the process that the vignettes will become a play to be performed for an audience (the school, parents, principal, etc. – it can be as large or small as desired).

B. Once students have had the opportunity to write a draft and even perhaps revise it, they

should be put into groups of 4-5 peers who they will work with through the rest of their time in the class. Building on reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills already learned, each student will write a short (5 minute) vignette conveying the situation they wrote about in the prompt above. If desired, students can be placed together based on shared topics, however; it is more likely that students who work well together will be combined. On the other hand, too much comfort should be avoided (for example, do not combine four students from the same country) and language ability should always be considered.

C. Students must stage each vignette, with the author as the main character. Give students the option to trade main roles with another student in their group if they are hesitant to play themselves. No one, though, should have more than one set of lines to learn. Other students in the group should play the other characters involved in their group members' segments. These characters may have a few lines but should not be the center of the action. The group is responsible for not only the staging but also the set (including props) and any background (music, lights) as well. Again, they should have ample time to work these out in class.

D. Once the groups feel comfortable with their vignettes, the class will come together to figure out how to make them into a cohesive whole. This problem-solving activity will require students to not only consider themselves and their group members, but the rest of the class as well. Along the way, potential for both creative and conflicted communication (and thus, learning) is great. Once the details have been worked out (organization, etc.), the final product should be ready to perform. At the end of the class, students should be debriefed about the whole process and their experience in it.

### Making It All Work

Implementation of a new program, or even just new ideas, can be a big task for any teacher, but especially for an ELL teacher whose work it is to prepare students for the rest of their classes. As a result, any proposed program must be carefully examined and certain frame factors should be considered. Posner (2004) offers seven frame factors that will be considered here: personal, temporal, cultural, organizational, physical, economic, and political-legal.

Personal factors are probably the first that should be considered when exploring the possibilities of a new program. Where are students at? What abilities do they already have/what do they already know? What are their interests? What about the concerns of their parents? For the sake of this example, students are intermediate, secondary learners. They have a foundation in the language – enough to communicate effectively when necessary. What they need is time to practice words and phrases and the unique situations that may arise in their lives. The curriculum proposed here could also be cut back and/or modified to accommodate lower-level learners.

What useable talents do teachers and administrators possess? This curriculum is most likely to find success with a teacher who is flexible, comfortable with classroom management, and has some experience with drama. Any teacher is likely to benefit from some kind of orientation with the techniques and methods used. Sometimes drama classrooms can appear “out of control” to the casual observer, but when a teacher is familiar with the activity – what is being learned, how it is being learned – they can be an excellent judge of nonsense versus legitimate learning. Likewise, preparation is likely to lead to less teacher-burnout. This is a demanding unit that will take a lot of preparation and this factor should be considered when implementing the curriculum. In a similar vein, administrators will need to understand the nature of dramatic

play and the skills being taught/learned in spite of any perceived chaos. Instruction will be much more effective if the teacher is free from the concern or judgment of others (until the end results are in).

Considering temporal factors, some of the researchers implemented drama activities into their classrooms every day, some took place only two or three days a week and for a limited amount of time. Given the success of the more intensive programs, it is the opinion of this researcher that to provide students with the best possible experience, one should make drama a part of everyday life, and indeed, the center of the curriculum. On the heels of Dodson (2002), Heath (1993), and Murillo (2007), the program proposed here is intensive. It will focus on drama as the key language instruction delivery method for the duration of the semester. Students spend the majority of their time immersed in interactive language activities that will eventually lead them to write, produce, and perform their own plays, using their own realities.

Aside from the obvious language benefits hoped for, the unit also seeks to reflect the values, beliefs, and opinions of the students, the school, and the community. The cultural frame highlights the importance of facilitating a student-created production and is echoed by Chizhik, 2009; Dodson, 2002; Gaudart, 1990; Heath, 1993; and Murillo, 2007. They all value the unique perspectives offered by students through their culture, their community, or their families, and by making students' own experiences the center of the curriculum, students find out that they matter, their perspectives matter, and hopefully interest in learning is piqued. At the end of the production, audience members will be armed with better understanding through examination of a cross-section of life as an ELL in their community.

It is also important when considering cultural factors that the culture of the students is examined first. This will potentially give the teacher a preliminary insight into the world of the

students, as well as shed light on any challenges that may arise (e.g., partnering female students with male students).

Organizational factors will be important along with physical factors in a number of ways. First, administrators need to be on board with the program. They must support the work the teacher is doing and stand behind them. When proposing such a unit as this to an administrator, there are three important things to include. First, there is a significant amount of research that argues the positive effect the use of drama has in language instruction. Not only does it increase problem-solving and language ability, but it also improves self-efficacy, which further improves abilities; it is a vicious cycle we never want to end. Second, the unit will require relatively few resources. Certain texts may need to be purchased, but often only one as modifications are likely to be made anyway. The real resources are the students themselves. Third, very little will need to be changed within the school. Most activities will take place within the confines of the classroom and require little (attending the two plays will involve arrangement of transportation) until the final production. At that time, it may be desirable to hold the final performance on the school stage or in the cafeteria, for example.

Second, the classes need to be of an appropriate size to accommodate the needs of so many students. Ideally, classes would serve 20 or so students, allowing for smaller groups and greater attention from the teacher. With too many students, a teacher can be stretched thin and legitimate learning is not possible; with too few students, the kind of shared learning that comes out of dramatic activities could be lost. Larger classes will simply have larger groups. In this instance, it is especially important for the teacher to be aware of the more reserved students to make sure they do not get lost out in the ether. Students will also need a comfortable and spacious environment to practice their skills, and a regular-sized classroom is likely to be

adequate for the instructional portion of this program.

Third, teachers will need access to quality materials that aide students in their ultimate goal of reading, writing, speaking, and listening in English. In our digital age, a wealth of ideas is available for free online. Students will also need access to plays. The school's theater department or after school program could be a valuable resource when it comes to ideas for the classroom. Of course, the library is also an excellent resource to tap when looking for materials to use with students. Such resources could even replace the trip to the theater. Though not as enriching of an experience, watching a play on video will still give students more to consider than they had before. Finally, technology will always be a key resource issue. There is great potential for the use of an overhead projector throughout the semester, and a laptop with a projector connection would be helpful (though not necessary), especially at the beginning of the semester.

Though the economic frame factor is not only concerned with money, most parents, administrators, and even teachers will want to know: How much is it going to cost? Monetarily, the program may cost very little as teachers can adapt texts already in their classrooms or libraries. Potential costs involve texts that may be purchased and possibly admission into any plays attended by the class. Initially, though, teachers will pay with their time in preparing to work with students within this curriculum (e.g., training, preparation of materials, etc.) The overall return on the teacher's/school's investment will be seen in improved performance and test scores in other classes, not to mention, better rounded students.

Of course, the political/legal factors, as with any curriculum, mandate that specific standards apply. Teachers should consult their local/state standards to ensure they are addressed; the curriculum itself offers plenty of opportunities to find and mold activities to fit the relevant

standards. Aside from the accommodations for standards, teachers should have relative flexibility to create a curriculum that not only passes along important skills, but also acknowledges and validates the experiences of the young people who come into class every day.

### The Final Word

At the end of the day, it is the job of the educator to do what is best for the students. When considering language instruction for English Language Learners, drama has shown consistently that it can increase students' performance across activities. Given the great potential of drama to not only increase reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, but students' self-efficacy as well, the word must be spread to as many educators as possible. While the curriculum proposed here is intensive, any part of it can be incorporated into an already existing curriculum and shaped into a meaningful language experience that is accessible to almost anyone. With ELLs, that is the name of the game.

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