All the World’s a Stage: Teaching Language through the Arts
by Olivia Parker

Before I ever conducted research, I was a supporter of utilizing the arts in the classroom. I find that when I incorporate these elements into lessons, students’ comprehension and retention of content improve. After considering the research supporting the use of these elements with emergent bilingual (EB) students, I have compiled four authentic strategies, outlined below, that are classroom ready. I include a rationale and a methodology behind each strategy, as well as an explanation of how these can be implemented in an EB classroom.

**Opera and Theater**

Children’s opera and theater is the first strategy that can be employed for teaching EB students. “Children’s opera provides the interactional contexts that builds phonological awareness, necessary for the acquisition and pronunciation of speech” (Achkasova, 2013, p. 387). We know young children acquire language primarily through social settings, and theater promotes an environment that leads naturally to language. Brouillette (2012) suggests that theater provides a bridge between social and academic language; acting and using expression to emulate emotion organizes the psycholinguistic aspects of language acquisition processes, which engage both mind and body connections.

Opera can be an intimidating suggestion, but harnessing what opera is and creating workshops that reconfigure a whole production into micro lessons is an effective way to utilize opera/theater in the classroom. During these lessons, students use strategies needed for performing a large production: script practice, memorization, learning lyrics, focusing on emulating a mood or theme, extracting patterns and rhythms in songs. These theater skills can be worked into literacy-based centers, where students rotate through a routine of theater activities. Supplementing centers with a whole-group mini-lesson allows both direct instruction and the opportunity for EB students to explore independently and collectively.

**Drama and Playwriting**

Focusing specifically on drama lessons or playwriting designed to provide expansion of the number of vocabulary EB students learn and the depth with which the students understand each word is powerful. Achkasova (2013) suggests that playwriting in the classroom might look something like whole-group writing a script from a traditional story. Drama lessons where students are asked to act out scenes from stories “provide students with access to specialized vocabulary and complex, low-frequency words” (Brouillette, 2012, p. 4). As native English students and EBs work collaboratively, not only are they co-constructing creatively, but they are also navigating language and understanding.

**Choral Music**

Using choral music in the classroom can also scaffold student learning as EBs explore a new language. When children learn a new language, “they are internalizing the rhythm, the flow of the language” (Brouillette, 2012, p. 3). Brouillette and Smigel and McDonald (2012) describe music as having its own distinct rhythmic profile that when repeated can enhance student language acquisition. In singing, words are separated into syllables, helping EB students hear how words are formed and how they fit together to make phrases. In addition, according to Achkasova (2013), psycholinguists have found that one of the first features of speech to be
acquired is rhythm. Rhythm helps students develop an awareness of meaningful word combinations, “chops” of words, and mental images of pronunciation features (Achkasova, 2013). Teachers can write lyrics and place them in pocket charts or on a Smart board so that words can easily be manipulated.

**Dance and Choreography**

Dance, a kinesthetic learning modality, is another a form of literacy that is often overlooked. Dance activities have the ability to provide EB students with the opportunity to express words and new vocabulary using their entire bodies. Dance, like oral or written language, has a vocabulary and a grammar. The vocabulary of dance is the moves or gestures, and the grammar involves how the movements logically flow in a sequence (Brouillette, 2012). When children learn the vocabulary of dance, they are able to express oral or written literacy in a new way. “Expression in motion is a step toward expression in words” (Brouillette, 2012, p. 8).

To use dance in the classroom, students can work collaboratively to choreograph a dance that tells a familiar story or fairy tale. Students can analyze the structure of the story and find ways to represent the plot using movement; this encourages EBs to articulate language through interpretation. Students can express in-depth meaning that they may not otherwise be able to verbalize in the second language. The physicality of this activity will also help engage students and allow them to think conceptually and verbally while moving (Brouillette, 2012).

The research by Achkasova (2013), Brouillette (2012), and Smigel and McDonald (2012) suggests that the use of the arts in the English second language classroom is a powerful tool. Children’s opera/theater, drama lessons and playwriting, choral music, and dance and choreography are just a few specific strategies that can be implemented in the classroom to promote English language acquisition. For each strategy, there is strong evidence in research to suggest that the arts are not only motivating for students but also that the effects show retention of the targeted language is greater when the arts are included in EB instruction. As they say in theater, “All the world’s your stage!”—and with a world filled with multiple languages and expressions of those languages, it is my hope that educators will embrace the arts within the classroom and thereby create a healthy environment that promotes the dramatization, articulation, and acquisition of language for EB learners.

**References**


Olivia Parker has completed both her undergraduate and graduate work at SUNY Potsdam, receiving her B.A. in childhood/early childhood education and M.S.Ed. as a literacy specialist (birth–sixth grade). <parkeroa@potsdam.edu>