

Intercultural Learning at the Intersection of Multiliteracies and Theater

by Alec Lapidus and Marilia Martins

The premise that learners are literate in more than one way is grounded in the idea of literacy beyond reading and writing. Accepting the idea that language is not merely a written code, culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners should be exposed to various types of literacy other than solely verbal in order to have their second language acquisition (SLA) process facilitated. The idea that humans are multiliterate—literate in more than one way (The New London Group, 1996)—is a relatively new phenomenon that has seemed to be effective in a Maine locale, where the population of ELLs—mostly refugees and asylum seekers—has practically doubled in the past decades, putting Maine in a different reality compared to other states in the United States. By approaching multiliteracies (visual, kinesthetic, spatial, musical, emotional, and cultural) in their classrooms, educators can explore alternatives to traditional teaching that can lead to a potential enhancement of ELLs' literacy in their L2.

In the fields of TESOL and applied linguistics, we find practical research on applying the concepts of multiliteracies along with theater techniques to empower students' learning of both linguistic and cultural capital. Because language is a sociocultural phenomenon (Vygotsky, 2008a, 2008b) and learning can be fun and interactive, our research project analyzes how the Play Me a Story program explores intercultural learning through drama techniques. Play Me a Story is a theater-based teaching program run by the Portland Stage Company, a theater/non-profit in Portland, Maine. Under the spectrum of intercultural learning, we investigate how multiliteracies and theater strategies applied in the program have helped CLD students become more proficient in their L2.

The Play Me a Story program is a project featuring actors who read and perform children's picture book scripts to bring the stories to life. In the first session of the program, professional actors perform the stories in a readers' theater fashion as images of the books are projected on the screen behind them. As the actors give life to the stories, they add sounds and body gestures that are both enjoyable and at the same time empower the audience to have a better grasp of what is happening in the narrative; children are thus exposed to all sorts of linguistic structures while absorbing cultural aspects embedded within the narration. These stories allow children to learn while enjoying passages, recognizing themselves in the plot and being surrounded by the enchantment theater can create. While immersed in the atmosphere of play with no outside pressure from parents or teachers, learners' affective filters are lowered (Krashen, 1985), and they are enabled not only to inductively internalize vocabulary and grammar structures more naturally but also to gain cultural capital as they see it being used organically. This authentic use of language within a meaningful context, embedded in cultural issues and explored through a humorous approach, frees up learners' cognitive space—leading to a substantial enhancement of their SLA process, which may be more effective than a traditional class.

In the second session of the Play Me a Story program, students are divided into small groups, usually according to age or grade level, to attend workshops in which they are told to try to be actors themselves. The student-actor becomes a guide who explores students' creativity as they use their bodies, voices, and imagination to perform the activities assigned. Workshops are full of activities related to the stories and/or poems presented in the first session. Children are asked to recreate parts of the stories, perform poems, write down or talk about their favorite passages, draw, color, or even sing. In this way, learners can express themselves—verbally and/or physically—and produce language through a variety of ways while having fun and learning language and cultural aspects. Students are empowered to contribute to the learning process instead of being seen as merely recipients of knowledge, or “empty vessels to be filled” (Freire, 1993) to the extent which their personal linguacultures (Risager, 2008) acquire the dimension of L2 verbal and cultural literacies and they feel comfortable in sharing their own stories and background. During the two sessions of the program, all kinds of literacy are explored.

Practical Application

The struggle of teachers in trying to teach content to ELLs through a language their students are not yet proficient in is a current concern in U.S. public schools as the number of learners who do not speak English as their L1 increases at a dramatic pace. The role of the teacher in helping students to adapt to a new cultural milieu, learn a second language, and learn academic content all at once has become a battle for teachers and a heavy burden for their students. Teachers can explore those drama techniques to widen their repertoire of pedagogies and so support all types of learners while making classes more lively and interactive as alternatives to memorization, drilling, and standardized testing activities. Adopting theater techniques and multiliteracies to support ELLs through this hard process of learning language and cultural capital has become a valuable addition to facilitating ELLs' literacy development in their L2.

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