Using Drama and Movement to Enhance English Language Learners' Literacy Development

Sue A. Rieg, Ed.D., Associate Professor

Email: srieg@iup.edu

Telephone: (724) 349-8203

Kelli R. Paquette, Ed.D., Associate Professor

Email: kpaquett@iup.edu

Telephone: (724) 465-5202

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

College of Education and Educational Technology

Department of Professional Studies in Education

570 South 11th Street, 323 Davis Hall

Indiana, PA 15705

Telefax: (724) 357-2961

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> I believe in action and activity. The brain learns best and retains most when the organism is actively involved in exploring physical sites and materials and asking questions to which it actually craves answers. Merely passive experiences tend to attenuate and have little lasting impact. (Gardner, 1999, p. 82)

When drama and movement are integrated within the daily curriculum, engaging and numerous learning experiences transpire for early childhood learners (Chauhan, 2004; Royka, 2002). Besides being "fun" for most children, kinesthetic activities can help young learners, especially English language learners, develop decoding skills, fluency, vocabulary, syntactic knowledge, discourse knowledge, and metacognitive thinking (Sun, 2003). Teaching language skills through drama and movement gives children a context for listening and meaningful language production, provides opportunities for reading and writing development (Chauhan, 2004), and involves children in reading and writing as a holistic and meaningful communication process (McNamee, McLane, Cooper, & Kerwin, 1985). In addition to the development of gross and fine motor coordination skills, creative expression and thinking, social interaction, problem solving, cooperative play, rhythm, and rhyming skills can be enhanced.

Young children are often more receptive to any kind of drama activity since they are closer to the exploration stage of development (Royka, 2002) thus, early childhood teachers often use games, play, and drama activities in their daily classroom instruction.

Integrating drama and movement techniques into the early childhood classroom can be especially effective in the development of language proficiency for English language learners (ELLs). These kinesthetic, authentic experiences use language in an interactive context (O'Malley & Pierce,1996). Using the Total Physical Response (TPR) and the Language Experience Approach (LEA) are two techniques to facilitate learning through drama and movement and can be integrated across the curriculum.

Drama and Literacy in the Classroom

Dramatic Literature-Based Experiences and English Language Learners:

Facilitating dramatic literature-based experiences to support English Language Learners (ELLs) is vital. Peregoy and Boyle (2008) suggested that acting out stories and events is a highly motivating approach for students to process and to share information. Wright and her colleagues (2007) agreed and added that dramatizing stories is not only motivational but allows students to think in more sophisticated ways. Other benefits of story dramatization include introducing children to the process of writing, allowing for creative expression of ideas and feelings, providing opportunities to develop social skills, and allowing young children to work through ideas and experiences (Cooper, 1993; Paley 1990).

Opportunities for ELLs to develop reading fluency and a better understanding of syntactic knowledge through the reading and writing of stories are provided with the implementation of dramatic experiences in the early childhood classroom. Tompkins (2009) stated, "Listening is a key to language development because children learn English as they listen to the teacher and classmates talk and read aloud" (p. 223).

Additional benefits of using drama include increased motivation, reduced anxiety,

and enhanced language acquisition for ELLs (Richard-Amato, 1988). Some young learners, especially those in the Silent Stage of English language learning, may not be comfortable with drama and movement. Royka (2002) cautioned teachers of ELLs that students' comfort levels can depend on families' cultural values, the ability of the children, and varying social factors. Thus, it is important for teachers to provide a relaxing, non-threatening atmosphere when using this type of instruction. Giving sideline coaching support or providing puppets or masks may assist students in becoming more comfortable as they engage in learning experiences which include drama and movement (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2006). Since the benefits of dramatic literature-based experiences are significant, teachers are encouraged to provide appropriate support and guidance for these types of learning opportunities for ELLs.

Formal and Informal Drama. Drama can be informal or formal. Informal drama is where children create their own drama using props. Another variety of informal drama is dramatic story reenactments where children use puppets or act out stories they recreate (Sun, 2003). A third form of informal drama suggested by Peregoy and Boyle (2008) is to make props available for acting out stories that are read in the classroom. Kirmani (2007) acknowledged the importance of stocking dramatic play areas with clothing from other cultures like *saris* from India, *kimonos* from Asia, and *ponchos* from South America so children can try on the different pieces and the teacher can explain why, when, and where the articles of clothing are worn.

A more formal approach to drama involves students in improvisations based on situations for which they create dialogue. O'Malley and Pierce (1996) encouraged teachers to use situations or scenarios that relate to students' everyday lives for use with

improvisations. Regardless the specific type, informal or formal, Peregoy and Boyle (2008) stated, "Drama activities provide students with a variety of contextualized and scaffolded activities that gradually involve more participation and more oral language proficiency; they are also non-threatening and a lot of fun" (p. 128).

Vocabulary: Promoting vocabulary development is an important aspect of dramatic experiences. To reinforce and extend literature comprehension, teachers can read and write stories that contain new vocabulary words and have students act out the meanings of the words (Sun, 2003). Alber and Foil (2003) recommended creating a memorable event for children when introducing new vocabulary. Effective teachers provide engaging opportunities for children to physically move as they think about and comprehend new terminology.

Poetry: Dramatizing poetry is another effective method for teaching ELLs; however, selecting the right poem is essential. Poems that present mini-dramas or express strong emotions, attitudes, feelings, or opinions work best (Tomlinson, 1986). One poem that appeals to children is *The Crocodile's Toothache*, by Shel Silverstein (1974). This poem is a humorous dialogue between a crocodile and his dentist. The following steps are suggested for poetry enactment:

1. Begin by reading the poem aloud, modeling pronunciation and dramatic intonation and stress.
2. Clarify difficult or unusual words.
3. Invite students to read the poem chorally.
4. In pairs or small groups, allow students to prepare a dramatic rendition of the poem to be presented to the class (Peregoy & Boyle, 2008, p. 129).

When students read chorally, they may choose to brainstorm different ways to act our or pantomime the actions in the reading. Books and poems that lend themselves to repeatable patterns and concrete actions, such as *There was an old lady who swallowed a fly* (Taback, 1997), are most appropriate for less proficient students. As students develop proficiency, they can be challenged with more difficult books.

***Readers Theater**:* Readers Theater is another instructional technique suggested by Kerry-Moran (2006) to nurture emergent readers; this approach could most certainly also support the ELL students. Kerry-Moran defined Readers Theater as "a staged reading of a play or dramatic piece of work designed to entertain, inform, or influence" (p. 317). Beginning English learners can read and dramatize a script from a story they have already read. Short selections with several characters are appropriate at the beginning level. Stories should have a simple structure with a clear beginning, middle, and end. *Cinderella* is a good example of a story appropriate for beginning level ELLs. Intermediate readers can create their own scripts to read and dramatize (Peregoy & Boyle, 2008). Kerry-Moran gave the following suggestions for implementing Readers Theater:

1. Choose Developmentally Appropriate Texts
2. Use Visual and Aural Aids
3. Determine the Dramatic Experience Level of the Children
4. Model Expressive Reading
5. Make Practice a Priority
6. Involve Families
7. Perform for an Audience

8. Be Persistence (pp. 320-322).

Writing*:* Drama activities can also be used to enhance creative thinking and writing skills. After a teacher reads a story aloud, children can dictate a story retelling, and then act it out during group time (Peregoy & Boyle, 2008). Wright and her colleagues (2007) recommended having a storytelling center in the classroom where children have the opportunities to tell stories that later will be dramatized by the class. Children dictate stories to a transcriber who does not influence or censor the content. The transcriber may use general prompts but only if children seem stuck. The authors recommended three kinds of prompts: 1) Opening Prompts are given such as "Would you like to tell me a story so we can act it out later?" 2) Continuation Prompts occur by rereading the last few sentences to the child then asking, "What happened next?" 3) Closing Prompts could include "Let me read it back to you to make sure it is right." Or "Thank you for telling me that story." (pp. 364-365). ELLs may need more frequent prompts than children who are native English speakers.

Crumpler and Schneider (2002) conducted a cross-study analysis of writing in a first grade classroom. The teacher and his first graders read *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1988) and the teacher placed the students in the roles of the wild things so they could view the story from the perspective of the characters. The teacher then asked them questions like how they survived on the island. These questions helped the students elaborate on their characters; some even created new characters. The next day the children "traveled" back to the island and described what they needed on their journey and what they saw when they returned. At the end of the lesson, the students were required to think about their journey to the island and to draw and write what they liked

and remembered about their experience. In addition to reading and writing focused learning experiences, teachers can use drama and movement to enhance literacy instruction in other content areas.

Drama and Movement across the Curriculum

Drama and movement can be implemented across the curriculum easily and effectively. Once teachers begin thinking about methods of integrating action in other content areas, the possibilities become endless.

Science*:* Learning in the outdoor environment is appealing to young learners and offers multiple learning opportunities. Introductions to stimulating environments such as oceans, swamps, and parks offer chances for observing and discussing science topics (Rillero, 2005). "Science experiences are a prime source of powerful new words because they use a common language to describe the world rather than a language that is specific to children's individual imaginations or home lives" (Rivkin, 2005, p. 41). Therefore, a framework for ELLs vocabulary development in many content areas can be established and constructed easily.

While studying trees, students' observation skills can be developed by studying living trees with magnifying glasses. Vocabulary terms such as leaves, stems, and veins can be actually seen and touched which will enable students to accurately comprehend the content information. As leaves fall to the ground, students can reenact the scene and develop vocabulary comprehension. Words, such as *rapidly*, *gingerly*, or *gently*, can be taught in a fun-filled, meaningful manner. A rainy or snowy day can provide quality experiences for young language learners. Rosenow (2008) recommended keeping slickers and boots in the classroom so children can splash in puddles, play in the rain, create snow

sculptures, and hunt for animal tracks. She also suggested taking children on "I Spy" walks in the neighborhood to examine natural wonders.

Math: Teaching math concepts can be taught kinesthetically. Students can collect measurement data by using their body lengths, feet, or hand spans to measure objects around the room. Rhythms and patterns can also be taught through activities involving movement. A patterning game, entitled Pass-Along-a-Pattern, encourages children to start a beat and pass it along to the next person who repeats it and passes it along to the next person, etc. Children can clap patterns of familiar songs or chants and ask their classmates to identify the songs or chants (Church, 2001). Songs like *Counting 1 to 20* by Jack Hartman, *Everything has a Shape* by Hap Palmer, and *Shapes All Around Us* by Music Movement & Magination are also available to help ELLs with basic math concepts (http://ww.songsforteaching.com/esleflesol.htm.). These songs incorporate music and movement with important math skills.

***Social Studies*:** When teaching social studies content, multiple opportunities prevail for integrating role-play and creative dramatic experiences. For example, when studying community helpers, children can dress and act out the duties of postal workers, police officers, and firemen. Real-life scenarios can be re-enacted as well so that children can dramatize creatively the responsibilities of community helpers. When teaching geographical concepts, such as navigational directions, students can play Simon Says and point or move to various locations, i.e., north, south, east, west as Simon commands. Four Corners is another game that can reinforce location or direction words. Landforms can be role-played. Students can move their bodies in accordance with the way in which water moves ponds, brooks, streams, lakes, and oceans. The amount of action will vary.

Students can also enact growth or erosion through physical movement. The idea of acting out the meanings of words is associated with the Total Physical Response (TPR) approach.

The Total Physical Response (TPR) Approach

TPR is an approach to teaching language that pairs actions with words to convey meaning, (Asher as cited in Peregoy and Boyle, 2008). The teacher begins with simple action words like "stand up," "sit down," or "wave good-bye" and demonstrates the meaning with gestures and dramatization. As students progress, teachers use more advanced commands such as "put your backpack on the table." Through these activities students are introduced to different parts of speech and the words are learned in meaningful context. Peregoy and Boyle (2008) stated, "Experience is the glue that makes learning stick, and TPR illustrates this concept very well" (p. 213). Students' vocabulary repertoire can also increase through the implementation of the TPR technique. The teacher can write and say the terminology on the board or on flashcards and the students can perform the actions (Diaz-Rico, 2008).

Children should be familiar with specific words that describe movements (Jensen, 2000). The TPR approach along with various musical selections can be employed easily to teach the following concepts:

Body Parts: Songs like *Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes* by The Learning Station, *Funny Face* by Alain Le Lait, *Work Out to the Letter Sounds* by Jack Hartman, and *Put Your Hands Up In the Air* and *Turn Around* by Hap Palmer all use movement and music to teach the parts of the body. *Itchy, Itchy (Parts of the Body)* by Music

Movement & Magination is another humorous, creative song to help children learn body parts.

Actions: Children can learn colors through actions by moving to the songs *Colors* by Hap Palmer and *Colors All Around* by Jack Hartman. Verbs can be learned with selections like *Everyday Present Tense Verbs* by Learning English through Song. Children can also learn position words through songs such as *Sit Down, Stand Up* by Alain Le Lait.

The songs mentioned above and more helpful songs to help English language learners can be found at the website http://www.songsforteaching.com/esleflesol.htm. The song lyrics and movement ideas are available at the site. In addition to the TPR approach, the Language Experience Approach (LEA) is effective for young learners.

Language Experience Approach

The Language Experience Approach (LEA) is an instructional technique which teachers can implement easily within daily classroom instruction. This teaching strategy requires the teacher to facilitate a common, shared experience for students. After the shared activity, students may read, write, talk or listen about the experience (Tompkins, 2009). A common experience provides a framework for reading, writing, or discussing purposes.

Content learned from field trips, guest speakers, and scientific experiments are engaging ways to involve students in the LEA. Teachers can work with local museums, businesses, parks, and universities to plan trips that enhance content knowledge and language development. Guest speakers also provide opportunities for quality LEA activities as guests can represent community helpers, artists, musicians, medical workers,

and other individuals who can share their knowledge and experiences with the young children. Science experiments are often clarified using the LEA. To develop scientific language students can be engaged in hands-on activities, discuss their experiences, and write about them as a class or in individual language journals.

Games provide students with shared learning opportunities while encouraging mobility. Examples of games include:

Musical Follow the Leader: Ask students to form a circle and encourage them to think of all the ways that they can move their bodies. Explain that they are going to play a follow-the-leader game and have them move to music echoing the leader's motions (*Early Childhood Today*, 2004).

We're Movement Machines: Gather children in a circle and introduce various toys or machines. After observing the toys or machines in action, ask students to imitate the toys and machines. Talk about how the machine would move if it were turned on, then turn it on and ask children to describe how it moves. Have them explain why they think it moves the way it does (*Early Childhood Today*, 2004).

Falling Rain Dance: Watch it rain and then ask children to imitate the movements. Play music and have children dance slowly and quickly, depending on the changing tempo of the song. Add scarves and watch a beautiful dancing performance (*Early Childhood Today*, 2003).

Strike up the Gadget Band: Display a variety of common kitchen objects, such as spoons, bottles, boxes, etc., and ask children to think of the sounds that each will make. Then, distribute gadgets and experiment with the sounds. When children vary the sounds and the volume of their gadget band, quite a musical rendition can be created (*Early*

Childhood Today, 2003). More games especially effective for use with ELLs can be found at the following websites:

- http://www.esl4kids.net/games.html
- http://www.eslkidstuff.com/gamesmenu.htm
- http://www.english-4kids.com/games.htm

These websites offer a variety of games for teaching early literacy skills as well as other content area concepts and basic life skills.

Conclusion

The brain learns best when it is dynamically involved in exploring, inquiring, and analyzing (Gardner, 1999). Using drama and movement facilitates the brain to learn and to retain information and it provides a stimulating environment for most young learners, particularly ELLs. Formal and informal drama experiences help children build important literacy skills such as reading, writing, listening, and language production. To successfully integrate drama and movement into daily classroom instruction, teachers often employ the Total Physical Response and Language Experience Approach techniques. These strategies enable classroom teachers to effectively employ kinesthetic experiences through all content areas and support learning as an active, physical process.

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