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## **Dramatic Differences: The Power of Playbuilding for Young English Language Learners**

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### **Abstract**

Through a combination of anecdotal stories, the findings of a qualitative evaluative study and overview of experiential activities, this article outlines how a group of 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade English Language Learners benefitted from a drama-based project focused on building student confidence, collaborative and communicative skills and facility with drama processes to engage interest and stimulate a sense of investment with the ELL participants. A portion of the article focuses on one participant who experienced a particularly intriguing journey that stimulated both discoveries and questions about the drama program.

### **Introduction**

*Edi confidently strides to center stage and speaks the first words of the play, "Oh, it's so hot out here, I wonder what time it is already? Oh! Is that a big fat juicy pig I see over there? It's a coconut! I could eat that any time, any day. Brothers, I need help right now!" The young actor takes his time, fills the stage with a palpable presence and projects his voice. He is enjoying himself. The audience, over five hundred other English language learners like Edi, attend quietly, laugh appropriately, and cheer him on.*

Compelling evidence consistently points to the relevancy of educational drama for English language learners. Much like school itself, drama facilitates a rehearsal for life by offering a space in which children might safely test skills, ideas, identities, and language. Drama's framework of behaving "as if" opens up the classroom for exploration of imaginary circumstances that have very real implications for real life (Heathcote, Johnson, & O'Neill, 1991). Through mimesis, children practice what they will become in the world, and in an ELL setting this is especially relevant to explorations of culture, identity, and communication. In addition, there is a distinct and unique sociocultural relationship between dramatic expression and the acquisition of language since drama draws focus to the pronunciation and delivery of language, motivates speech, necessitates peer to peer interactions, creates real situations language application, heightens language retention through risk-taking, and creates community (Brouillette, 2012; Burke & O'Sullivan, 2002; Haught, 2005; Kelin, 2009; Louis, 2002; McAfferty, 2008).

Honolulu Theatre for Youth's (HTY) "In Our Own Words" (IOOW) project engaged elementary students with mixed English language proficiencies in a process called *playbuilding*

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to: (a) increase student facility with communication skills; (b) develop students' capacity for cooperative learning and risk-taking; (c) increase students' understanding of theatre as an effective medium for communicating ideas; and (d) develop students' ability to dramatize stories. Playbuilding combines listening, speaking, reading, and writing to promote language literacy in a natural way, focused on a communicative interaction between players. During any playbuilding process, actors in a dramatic scenario pursue an objective and by doing so become intent on communicating while becoming less self-conscious about making mistakes; they focus on the challenges presented to them rather than themselves (Kao & O'Neill, 1998). This creates a focus on meaning (Gregg, 1990) over focus on form (Krashen, 1982); language becomes incidental as the speaker engages in interesting and relevant tasks such as dramatic improvisations, rehearsals and performances (Liu, 2002). Boudreault (2010) contends such drama activities provide context through which students find meaning in language, develop fluency, access contextualized and interactive usage of pronunciation, prosodic features (such as rhythm and intonation), and acquire vocabulary and structure. Negotiations occurring naturally through playbuilding fall within the definition of task-based instruction, which has been researched and advanced as an effective approach to second language acquisition (Skehan, 2003). This article is part of an ongoing conversation about the outcomes of the IOOW project between the program facilitator, Daniel, and the program evaluator, Jamie, incorporating both the internal reflections of a teacher's perspective and the peripheral observations of a researcher.

### The Project

"In Our Own Words" occurred at Kina'ole Elementary School in West Hawai'i, the geographic area locally known as the Kona side of the Big Island of Hawai'i. At the time of the study, the school was serving over 1000 students, 50% receiving free and reduced cost lunches, and 10% with limited English proficiency. Daniel, the program facilitator, designed and implemented the program building on more than 20 years field experience in arts education and professional theatre. Eighteen 4th and 5th graders, pulled out from their regular classes, met nearly daily during school hours for a total of 25 one-hour sessions. Spread over three months, February to May, the sessions were held during two three-week segments, with a three week break in between. Over this time, students analyzed and deconstructed a story then reconstructed it into play form. Four groups consisting of four to five students worked through improvisation, devising action and dialogue to capture the basic events of the plot, inferring detailed interactions between the characters, interpreting the traits and emotions of the characters, and communicating the moods and morals of the tale. Finally, these young actors shared their work with peers, family and a large audience of other ELL students at the annual West Hawai'i ELL Speech Festival. This cycle repeated a second year, giving the same participants the opportunity to continue developing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to drama and self-expressing using English.

The program's participants came from varying first language backgrounds: Sāmoan, Spanish, Ilocano, Kosraean, and Marshallese, Vietnamese, Tongan, and Yapese. Daniel had facilitated drama programs in Chuk, the Marshall Islands, Kosrae, and Sāmoa, and although he was not fluent in these languages, he incorporated words and phrases of the students' first languages within his instruction to model risk-taking with language. In addition, the stories of

IOOW came from some of the same cultures as the students themselves; the first year they told a story from the Marshall Islands about modes of behavior in small island communities, and the second year a Sāmoan tale focused on family values.

After spending three to four days developing comfort with each other and getting comfortable expressing themselves through drama, the students read their story aloud together, from large text posted on the wall. Each student then received ‘blank book’ versions of the text: large print copies with blank space for them to illustrate the story. Finally, the posted text was divided amongst the groups to guide them as they devised dramatic scenes based on those assigned sections. From that point on, the ‘script’ of the play was improvised and never written down in full, although occasionally groups made notes of particular lines of dialogue or extended exchanges between characters.

Simultaneous to reading and rereading the text each session, the individual groups employed a series of drama strategies to develop the action sequences for their scenes. First, each group created three tableaux outlining the beginning, middle, and end of their scene. They created and revised each tableau, incorporating specific criteria to clarify character intention, conflict and discover moments suggested by, but not overtly described in, the text. Second, they connected the tableaux with pantomimed action, revisiting the criteria and expanding the timeframe of their scene with each revision, until they no longer followed the text slavishly, but interpolated ideas of their own inspired by the text and their own discoveries. Only then did the students begin to add dialogue. A purposeful choice, waiting to add dialogue only after the students created extended action sequences allowed them to develop both comfort with and understanding of their interpretations of the text. In addition, for these language learners, focus on physical expression first encouraged much greater detailed character interaction than if they had started with the dialogue. Finally, and possibly most importantly, by this stage in the process the students were nearly begging to add dialogue. They were motivated to express their understanding of the story and characters verbally, which encouraged greater ownership of the developing script. Throughout this playbuilding process, the groups regularly reflected on their choices and creations and occasionally commented on and suggested changes for their peers as they shared their developing work with each other.

Upon completing their scenes, each group received a map of the stage space and together fit their scene’s action to the stage, negotiating the use of space, how to best play to the audience and to maximize projection of their voices. All of the groups then fit their scenes together so that the entire play could flow seamlessly from group to group. The last rehearsals also included staging a whole class entrance, a class opening which included a narrated introduction devised by self-selected students and a closing, complete with bows. During these final rehearsals, each student self-evaluated their daily practice using a combination of a simple checklist and writing three goals they set for their next rehearsal.

### **Evaluation Method**

Jamie, the evaluator, approached the study with a subjective point of view drawing on the ethnography of communication tradition primarily concerned with political and social contexts of language within communities and narrative description (Davis, 1995). As a drama educator

herself, Jamie adopted the stance of connoisseurship, merging the worlds of art and education by redefining the art critic as an education evaluator dependent on descriptive detail and interpretation to make judgments about the merit of the phenomenon and to communicate both information and feeling about it (Eisner, 1991). The qualitative nature of the study focused upon the way the participants of the program experienced it: how they felt about the instructional activities, how they understood the concepts involved, and how they perceived changes in themselves. Except for the authors', all names are pseudonyms.

One instrumental figure of the program and the evaluation was Sally, the ELL resource teacher who coordinated a large program for all of Kina'ole Elementary School. She was purposefully selected to participate in the evaluation study based upon her participation in HTY's prior drama programming at the school and her expressed interest in drama as a catalyst for communication. Sally selected the 18 4th and 5th grade students she felt would particularly benefit from participating in IOOW and from that group, selected 6 students she felt would contribute meaningfully to the program evaluation. She purposefully selected the focus group participants based upon diversity of gender, ethnic background, and effective communication skills regardless of their limited English proficiency. One girl was from Mexico, one boy from the Philippines, one boy from Sāmoa, one girl from Kosrae, and two girls from the Marshall Islands. At the start of the program, these students demonstrated enthusiasm for the drama process and were eager to contribute and communicate, and were representative of the other young participants in terms of the knowledge, skills, or dispositions.

The evaluation utilized field observations, teacher interviews, student focus groups, and analyses of student performances and written work. Jamie visited the program nine times over two years, each time conducting ethnographic observations of the playbuilding sessions (a total of 18 hours) and facilitating 20-minute focus groups during lunchtime (a total of 3 hours). Sally also conducted focused observations on the 6 members of the focus group as they engaged in playbuilding, providing insight into the students' communication abilities based on her experience working with these children over many years and perspective as an ELL specialist. Jamie conducted two interviews each with Sally and Daniel, before and after the program, to gather insights about changes in student learning, performance, and dispositional changes of the young participants (a total of 4 hours).

Finally, Jamie attended the culminating Speech Festival both years, capturing the Kina'ole student performances on video for further analysis of both what the students were saying (the bits of planned and improvised dialogue) as well as how they were saying it (the delivery in terms of vocal and physical expression of meaning.) Following the Speech Festival, Jamie sat aside with each focus group participant for a brief 10-minute interview to ask them questions about their performances. See Table 1 for full detail with respect to the method, instruments, sample items, and collection intervals.

Table 1.

*Method, Instruments, Sample Items, and Collection Intervals*

<b>Method</b>	<b>Instrument</b>	<b>Sample Prompts</b>	<b>Interval</b>
Focus Group	Open-Ended Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the hardest thing about drama?</li> <li>• How does drama make you feel?</li> <li>• What have you learned about drama?</li> <li>• How do you think this program helps you communicate?</li> </ul>	Nine times, throughout program
Exit Mini-Interviews	Open-Ended Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did the performance go?</li> <li>• Was it better or worse than other times you practiced?</li> <li>• If you had to do it again, what would you do differently?</li> </ul>	Twice, post-performance
Focus Student Observations	Communication Observation Guide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-Confidence</li> <li>• Peer-to-peer interaction</li> <li>• Student-to-teacher interaction</li> <li>• Language acquisition</li> </ul>	Nine times, throughout program
ELL & Drama Teacher Interviews	Open-Ended Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you think the drama program interacts differently with students compared to other classes or school activities?</li> <li>• How do you think the program is doing in meeting its goals?</li> </ul>	Twice each, pre-and post program
Ethnographic Observations	Ethnographic Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What kind of opportunities do students have to express themselves in English?</li> <li>• How do the drama tasks promote sharing of language and ideas?</li> <li>• How do the drama tasks promote collaboration and social development?</li> <li>• Do students feel safe taking risks? Do they demonstrate confidence in their performances?</li> </ul>	Nine times, throughout program
Performance Video	Performance Criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what degree do students demonstrate skills related to body, voice, energy, and story?</li> <li>• How are students communicating?</li> </ul>	Twice, post-performance
Student Work	Descriptive Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How are students communicating?</li> <li>• What are students learning?</li> </ul>	Twice, post-program

With a grounded theory approach, Jamie identified anchor codes based on emerging patterns and grouped the content of the data in order to help explain it, then conferred with participants to test the veracity of these explanations. While the present discussion is limited to the influences of playbuilding on a single classroom community from one Hawai'i elementary school, it could inform similar programs that use drama as pedagogical practice with ELLs.

One fifth grade participant, Edi, had a particularly intriguing journey that stimulated both discoveries and questions about the program. We tell parts of his story here to illustrate our

reflections on language development through drama. Edi attended Kina'ole Elementary School on the island of Hawai'i since kindergarten. His Sāmoan parents spoke English well and while Edi himself was not fluent in Sāmoan, his English was sometimes difficult to understand. He was particularly sensitive, reacted strongly to criticism, and was easily frustrated by challenges. Throughout playbuilding, Edi fluctuated between positivity and negativity, sometimes optimistic and other times utterly defeated, simultaneously enthusiastic and hesitant about the drama process. How would drama help him gain the skills he needed to find his voice in the social world of school?

### Confidence

When asked what they would change about the program in an exit reflection, one participant anonymously wrote, "I would change for making more dialogue. Not getting shy and erase all the dialogue I used." This child experienced how shyness, or lack of confidence, erases words. Even for those of us who are fluent in our native language, a stressful situation that imposes insecurity can choke the words out of our minds and mouths. Humanist thinkers agree, "healthy self-esteem is the essential yeast in the recipe of learning" (Ness, 1995, p. 7) and evidence suggests student engagement in the performing arts contributes to self-esteem through physical, psychological and social processes. Movement activities increase hormone production in the brain to create an overall sense of well being (Jensen, 2001), collaborative goals contribute to a child's sense of self (Sullivan, 2003), and self-expression through performances provides the opportunity to be "who you really are to yourself" (Stinson, 1997, p. 59). Playbuilding harnesses these processes to generate the stuff of confidence.

Although engaged by drama class, Edi found it difficult to step out of his comfort zone. He often claimed he did not know what to say or do and would point an accusing finger at his partners if he did not do well, the fear of making mistakes overwhelming him. A few days before the final performance in the first year of IOOW, Jamie asked a focus group how they felt about their drama work. Edi shrank, and then gave a one word response, "shy." Later during the performance, his nervousness became apparent as he whispered his way through his part.

At times over the course the IOOW project, Edi basically shut down; he would neither talk nor cooperate. He admitted, "It's hard. I feel like giving up." Once, Edi did not want to rehearse and was resisting the class' desire for another practice. When Edi's part came up he was unresponsive. The rehearsal stopped. Everyone waited. After about a minute, Daniel told Edi he had to decide what was important to him. Physically squirming, Edi looked around the stage and quietly spoke a few words of halting dialogue. He could not be heard and he avoided showing action or emotion, however, the moment was an important one for him because Edi chose to take the chance and try. By the end of the 20-minute rehearsal, he was contributing effectively.

In the second year of the program, Edi admittedly felt "nervous and excited, at the same time," but demonstrated a great deal more confidence in his classroom participation and his performance work. During a performance for family and friends, Edi surprised everyone by bursting out with newly improvised lines of dialogue laced with a strong emotional quality. His confidence became a self-generating energy as he performed. Afterward during a reflection, Edi

enthusiastically nodded his head in agreement when one of his peers said, “I used to be shy, but then when we’re real close to the Speech Festival, I feel so happy I don’t know why. It’s like I’m not really shy anymore.”

During the IOOW project, we attributed observed gains in student confidence such as Edi’s to a variety of factors, one of which was the empowerment that comes with investment and choice. The young actors made personal, creative choices based on specific prompts to discover dramatic and effective communication. The more students experienced the success of their choices, the greater their investment, and with that came greater sense of accomplishment. For example, small groups developed new dialogue and action for their scenes, informally performed for the class, and student audience members evaluated which choices seemed most effective or appropriate to the characters and story. After each revision, students celebrated strong choices and identified opportunities to take greater risks, then revised their scenes based upon the feedback. The young actors came to understand that many choices exist, some more effective than others, and the self-assurance they gained while making choices was their reward. The product was secondary to the fact that they had created, evaluated and adjusted their work according to their own desires.

In addition, Daniel facilitated the program based on his belief that language learning occurs best when speakers feel comfortable and confident enough to engage in conversation without being worried or concerned about making mistakes, without the fear of failure. He did not dwell on correcting the actors’ English, as long as it was understandable, preferring instead to encourage a spirit of experimentation. He created open-ended prompts and challenges, and celebrated mistakes as long as actors showed strong choices and initiatives. He rewarded the playful use of language, such as when one child created the line, “You’re pants are so blue-ish! Your hair is so black-ish!” Children worked through difficulties and overcame challenges when they were able to reinterpret “failure” as a necessary and useful part of their growth process.

Sally explained how these students were often reminded of their deficiencies and not recognized for their abilities, “Some of those older kids can read in their native language. But we don’t see their strengths a lot of times, we just see what they struggle with.” During the second year of the program, the young actors spoke with pride about the medals and trophies they received from the prior speech competition, and on the days of the Speech Festivals, students scrambled to locate their names on the programs as if they craved acknowledgment. Even the toughest girl who could have easily been pinned as the most confident in the entire program, admitted that “getting up in front of people” was the most difficult thing for her in drama, because of nervousness, shyness, and fear of “messing up.” The acknowledgement that came from their accomplishment, especially from the laughing and applauding of the appreciative audience, went even further to tell these students they had done something they could be proud of. Students were aware of their changes, as one focus group participant put it: “We learned things like not to be scared...I’m different because I’m not so shy anymore.”

### **The Negotiations of Collaboration**

Research supports the performance experience as a catalyst for collaboration and teamwork; unity develops among children who invest in the success of their group (Sullivan,

2003). Neelands (1984) suggests, “Drama is a collective activity; it involves people working together with a more-or-less single purpose... in drama we encourage a collective view, a conspectus, a commonality of expression” (p. 40). This commonality is the foundation upon which playbuilding occurs as participants “negotiate, try out ideas, analyze, evaluate, modify plans, and practice” (Tarlington & Michaels, 1995, p. 7). Playbuilding differs significantly from the traditional theatre production model in which the playwright crafts the language, the director casts the roles, and young actors are responsible for memorizing lines and executing direction because it is a fluid process that emphasizes the generation and expression of ideas as a community within an environment of social interaction. In a study on effective teaching approaches for ELL, Facella, Rampino & Shea (2005) cite partnering, role-playing, peer modeling and small group work as general strategies that help students reach levels of intermediate language fluency - all practices imbedded in the playbuilding process of IOOW.

Collaboration was, in many ways, the core of the IOOW project, and the task of co-creation stimulated a social environment in which students worked and talked together. IOOW broke away from ordinary school life where the individual must succeed, where a quiet child is a good child. Sally felt the drama collaborations offered participants opportunities to interact with English in ways that were totally unlike other parts of school:

Most of them don't practice much at all in English. You know, they go out to recess and they find their friends who speak their language and so they're not even practicing English on the playground, some of them.

One of the focus group participants made a comment about how there were no other Micronesian students in the drama class, so she was forced to speak in English: “It's kinda hard for me not to speak like Kosrae and stuff. What I was going to say a question, in of our language's words, I went “huh” and I stopped and I started English and stuff like that.” The collaborative drama environment brought together students who spoke many different languages, but forced them all to communicate in English.

The program began with many group-oriented activities that immediately engaged the students in interacting with each other verbally as well as physically. The young actors were constantly challenged to work in partners, small groups, and at times even the entire class. Sometimes they choose their own groups and the boys and girls would naturally separate with friends as fifth graders tend to do. Other times, groups were assigned, either randomly or with premeditation, and group work became much more of an uphill battle between conflicting desires and personalities. Early prompts were non-verbal such as a pantomime requiring students to pick up a piece of wood together, or pull a piece of rope together. In moments such as these, students depended on observing each other and a being able to offer and accept ideas physically in order to succeed. Such non-verbal challenges prepared them for the more complex group work of creating their scenes together; a multi-layered process involving casting, the creation of dialogue, the creation of physical action, and sequencing.

Daniel built on the premise that the participating students should engage in several levels of language use, inclusive of both social and academic language. From the beginning, whenever the students reflected on their participation, learning or creative endeavors, Daniel fashioned ways for every student to contribute. This included techniques such as pair shares, small group

discussions and volunteering. Daniel also employed other means; 1) Choosing a random number (for example, '6') to answer a question and then waiting patiently until six students answered, 2) after a pair share or group discussion, Daniel would randomly choose who would report on the discussion, often targeting those who spoke least and allowing them to confer with their group if they did not immediately have an answer, 3) tracking answers and reminding those who had not yet shared of their need to participate, giving them the choice of when they wanted to answer a question while knowing they were required.

During the playbuilding process, students developed narrative passages and dramatic scenes from stories through collaborative planning, negotiated revision and improvisational experimentation. Groups were assigned a specific section from the story, members decided who would play which character within their section and then they negotiated the development of their scenes. Teams deconstructed the text, analyzed the characters, and rebuilt the story into dramatic form by slowly piecing together the intentions, actions and eventually the dialogue of the characters. Students enjoyed latitude for creative interpretations and relied on each other to stay true to the intent of the story and the characters. As collaborative creators, they did not simply write or memorize a series of lines, but prepared to listen to and build from the work of their fellow actors. Each idea influenced those of others through a process of negotiation with a common goal in mind. They worked together to plan and realize their scenes and then reflect upon changes and improvements. Part of those improvements included the style with which they delivered dialogue, incorporating peer feedback on presentational skills such as pronunciation, volume, and emphasis. Whole and small group planning increased in breadth and liveliness over the course of the program. Planning and brainstorming sessions increased in length and number of student contributions. At the beginning of the program, most students waited for direct questioning from the instructor and would hesitate before speaking just a few words. With time, student responses became more elaborate and detailed even if they stumbled on their words; an impediment a few noted kept them from talking most often.

Group members developed ways to challenge and support each other, learning early in the process that when their collaboration broke down, they would accomplish very little while the groups around them steadily progressed. In those moments, the groups needed to problem-solve, suggest ways to overcome their difficulties and make everyone in their group feel successful and included. One natural leader, a member of the focus group, said, "I'm letting everybody share their ideas and we're using their ideas... Try to make our group balanced and, just do the best we can." By making creative choices together, they gained communal ownership over their process and product.

Surprisingly, groups that spent more time arguing spent more time negotiating and were actually getting more practice speaking English. Edi's team did not work well together and seemed to be lacking leadership. Edi once acknowledged the difficulty they had communicating with each other: "Nobody ever listens to anybody else about the parts of the play." In a brainstorm on group improvements during the first year of IOOW, Edi's group cited the need to stop arguing: "We have to work on agreeing, on liking everything we come up with." Although his group struggled with cooperation, members spoke a great deal, tried multiple ways of doing things and were actually getting rich language practice. Quarrelling may not have contributed to

a harmonious work environment, but in this instance it did seem to fuel communication as well as creativity.

After noticing the negative dynamics in Edi's group, Daniel switched Edi to a new group with a strong leader who would encourage his participation and offer him the support he needed from a peer. The members proved to be patient with each other and silently supportive of Edi, working around his timid involvement. They took Edi's emotional swings in stride, responding with disappointment, but never holding it against him. One of Edi's group members reflected, "We have to try and help our partners and ignore them when they are doing something bad. And try to tell them, do not do it. So we can have a better group. And so we can get along more better."

The spirit of trust paid off when Edi chose to step up his contributions during latter rehearsals and in performance. Edi slowly opened up to more productive verbal interactions and developed skills as an "on-your-feet" collaborator. As the performance date approached, his dialogue grew in quality and quantity and the manifestation of this came in the actual performance when Edi ad-libbed new dialogue on the spot. By the end of the program, Edi's group members expressed their value for the collaborative work they had done. One shared her sense of interdependence with her team: "Because we have to work together, if we don't work together then we won't get anywhere... And we would get it wrong." Another eloquently explained, "You can hardly do one thing, only you. You need teamwork, yea?"

### **Repetition and Time**

While research supports naturally occurring language, it also supports repetition for language learners (Facella et al., 2005). Maxwell (1999) applies the phrase "pleasant repetition" to discuss language repetition that is both motivated and contextualized through drama activity. Likewise, Erdman (1991) suggests that rehearsing dramatic text enables students to assimilate vocabulary and grammar in a new language as they internalize it "in a way that seemed more like play than work" (p. 14). Routines of memorizing language structures through drama, even if children may not initially understand them, ultimately lead to connection with the underlying meaning (Burke and O'Sullivan, 2002).

One factor that may have contributed to student language development in IOOW was the repetition of playbuilding tasks as the young actors practiced many times over, each time repeating their scenes with a new slant or challenge. Daniel wondered if students would become bored regularly rehearsing their scenes. The repetition, however, provided the opportunity for a layered process as students: a) created characters; b) explored interactions between characters through physical action only; c) added narration to the action to help them contextualize and sequence scenes; and d) improvised character dialogue. The repetition allowed students to develop dialogue with flexibility; some jumped into dialogue creation early in the process, while others warmed up to it; some spoke many words, while others spoke few; some memorized their lines and delivered them the same way each time, while others improvised, adding or subtracting lines of dialogue each run. During one rehearsal, Edi held his voice back and silently pantomimed while his scene partners improvised with inconsistent fluency. After all the groups shared their scenes and evaluated them, they repeated. This time, Edi spoke up, providing witty

remarks utilizing sarcasm and exaggeration to add dimension to the scene. At the end of the class, students commented with enthusiasm about certain lines that arose and Edi eagerly asked, "Can we keep that?" The dialogue clearly energized and engaged him. The group revisions contributed to actor confidence, produced nuanced and engaging characters and scenes, and influenced overall fluency in communication as students dared to speak more with each repetition.

The length of the program also seemed to contribute to the quality of both student performances and language development. The extended time period of the project, unfolding over three months year after year, offered students the opportunity to explore language more deeply. In the first year of the program, Edi was concerned that he was not speaking enough. When asked to consider improvements for the play, he responded, "Use more words. Different words." One year later, Edi could not wait to add dialogue to his scenes, "I really want to go to the dialogue really fast." Later, he articulated an understanding of dialogue and its purpose, "making the story make sense," which is the same purpose of spoken language in daily life – to construct meaning. The two-year time period gave him the opportunity to focus on the form and function of spoken language in a very practical way.

During year two of the program, Edi demonstrated his love for dialogue development. Once the performances began he never stopped improvising and adding new words and ideas to his scenes. He needed the chance to take small steps, but eventually he found command of his words. Other students also articulated a sense of power and control after the second year of performance that they did not have after the first. One student said, "Last year I was shy, I was nervous. But then I felt like, pressure coming up to me and I just started being good in this year... I felt like I was really in power, like I was acting like there was nobody there." Another young actress expressed a similar sentiment about her second year performance: "I feel like we're better, like we're pros instead of regular. We feel like pros." Multiple years of experience allowed these young actors to gain a sense of control and professionalism, more so than a single year of engagement might have allowed.

## Conclusions

While instruction for young ELLs often focuses on content area understanding through reading and writing English, social facets of self-esteem development and working with others contribute to students' achievement in speaking, listening and self-expression. These are important, affective aspects of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972) immersing young learners in the pragmatic knowledge of social world where people engage meaningfully with each other, understanding themselves as capable individuals who value inter-personal interaction. It is, perhaps, by stepping into the shoes of others, and playing with peers in imaginary worlds that we may find our own voices (Qing, 2011; Ya, 2008). As this article points out, a drama-based project that makes effective use of student-centered decision-making processes, collaboration and repetition over time can significantly engage interest and stimulate communication for an ELL population. A drama process such as playbuilding gives learners the chance to contribute and create, reflect and revise, develop a desire to engage with others, and nurture a sense of accomplishment that will feed them both as an effective learners

and human beings. We contend that these psychosocial dimensions of learning implicitly contribute to the characteristics of an effective communicator, which is the ultimate goal for the ELL student.

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