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## Empowering English-Language Learners through Acting, Translanguaging, and Collaborative Devising

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## Introduction

As I embarked on the journey of teaching Acting I in the College Now program to high school students pursuing college credit, an unexpected twist awaited me. The director of school-college partnerships revealed that my class would entirely consist of English-language learners (ELLs). This revelation led me into a mild panic as my syllabus was designed with the assumption that my students would be fluent in English. Moreover, this semester marked my maiden attempt at guiding an Acting I class through the collaborative process of devising a show. However, I quickly relished the challenge, as I realized devising a show could prove to be a tremendous opportunity for my ELL students, as they often face unique challenges in acquiring language skills. There exists a symbiotic relationship between acting and language learning, and the craft of acting can serve as a powerful tool for both educators and ELL students.

**Expressive language development** is a cornerstone of the benefits derived from acting. By providing a platform for students to freely express themselves, acting becomes a powerful tool for English Language Learners (ELL) to overcome language barriers. Through body language, facial expressions, and gestures, ELL students not only gain confidence but also engage in language experimentation within a supportive and non-judgmental environment. Moreover, as ELL students engage in acting exercises, improvisations, and role-playing scenarios, they are exposed to a diverse range of vocabulary in context. This contextual learning not only aids in the better retention of new words but also facilitates their application, as students experience firsthand how language is used in various situations. Additionally, acting serves as a catalyst for improved pronunciation and intonation. By encouraging students to focus on the nuances of speech and providing opportunities for mimicking characters and practicing dialogues, acting becomes a means for ELL students to refine their language skills, leading to clearer and more articulate communication. These techniques allow students to step into different linguistic contexts and reinforce language skills through practical application. This collaborative learning environment promotes a sense of community among ELL students, encouraging them to share ideas and collectively overcome language challenges. Peer support becomes integral to the language learning process, adding an additional layer of engagement and enrichment to the overall experience.

Creating a safe environment for multilingual language users requires the integration of diverse elements from students' personal history and experiences. This encompasses their attitudes, beliefs, and ideologies all woven into a unified and meaningful performance. Consequently, I incorporated translanguaging as a valuable component of my teaching pedagogy. This is, "...the act of utilizing the full linguistic repertoire of all students and teachers in order to interact socially, academically, and cognitively, which can lead to identity exploration and formation" (Doughtery, 2021, p. 21). Pedagogical translanguaging centers multilingualism and diverges from traditional perspectives that advocate for language separation. The emphasis on multilingualism acknowledges that multilingual individuals differ from monolinguals, recognizing that proficiency levels may vary across languages in their repertoire. This perspective challenges the validity of the monolingual native speaker model. The focus on multilingualism seeks to dissolve language boundaries, encouraging language users to maximize their multilingual abilities (Cenoz & Gorter, 2014).

Embracing translanguaging in the classroom proved to be a highly effective strategy for supporting the students in their linguistic development. They made phenomenal progress in their

English skills, and this inclusive approach allowed them to feel more comfortable and confident, facilitating a deeper understanding of the material and faster language acquisition. By allowing them to express themselves comfortably in their native language, it reduced anxiety and facilitated smoother comprehension and communication when transitioning to English. Additionally, drawing connections between their native language and English helped reinforce vocabulary and grammar concepts, which ultimately accelerated their language acquisition process. In addition, emphasizing pride in each student's heritage and encouraging the expression of their unique experiences as immigrants led to the creation of some exceptionally powerful writing. By validating their cultural identities and personal narratives, students felt empowered to share their stories authentically. This not only enriched their writing but also fostered a deeper sense of connection and understanding within the classroom community.

As we began our semester, the initial challenge we faced was navigating effective communication. A significant number of students spoke in such a low volume and rapid pace that understanding them, along with their fellow classmates, became a formidable task. Recognizing this barrier, I took the opportunity to emphasize the significance of slowing down and expressing themselves more audibly. This guidance became a recurrent theme throughout the initial weeks of the semester as we worked towards establishing a clear and comprehensible dialogue. Additionally, I emphasized the beauty of accents, assuring them that sharing their unique voices was essential for comprehension. When students couldn't recall a word in English, they would articulate it in their native language, and either I or their peers would offer the translation. I had them take their time with the warm-up, especially the tongue twisters. Surprisingly, the initial ensemble-building exercises, typically met with shyness among students at my college, were embraced with enthusiasm by this ELL class.

Cultivating confidence played a pivotal role in encouraging students to project their voices. To achieve this, my initial lesson plans centered on ensemble building, coupled with heartfelt praise to acknowledge and celebrate moments of courage among the students. As we delved into the process of devising, we explored various themes, ultimately gravitating towards the concept of identity. Aligning with the pedagogical approach of translanguaging, we celebrated their cultures and customs, while navigating the first-generation identity. Legends, dances, and personal experiences as an immigrant became integral components of our collective narrative. The introduction of a Bangladeshi dance by one student added a captivating layer to our exploration and seamlessly became a highlight of our final show, with almost the entire class participating in the performance. Fostering a sense of pride in their identity and culture stood at the forefront of my teaching philosophy.

For our final performance, we chose poems that resonated with the theme of identity, such as *All-American Girl* by Julia Alvarez and *Stairs* by Sukanta Bhattacharya. My class consisted of Latine and Bangladeshi students. I encouraged the students to infuse translanguaging into their writing, resulting in the students crafting poignant scenes, drawing from their personal experiences and incorporating dialogue from their native language. This inclusion of their mother tongue sprinkled throughout the work not only added authenticity but also nurtured a sense of pride in their cultural origins. Their scenes touched on subjects ranging from child marriage to the struggle of embracing one's heritage in a culture that predominantly celebrates an American identity. Despite the conflicts depicted, a prevailing theme of love consistently shone through.

I was pleasantly astonished by the rapidity with which most of the class mastered their lines and wholeheartedly engaged with the material. Their commitment extended beyond just learning lines, as they readily adopted deep, abdominal breathing to navigate through moments of nervousness. Their consistent enthusiasm for the warm-up sessions further underscored their dedication to the process. Upon completion of scene work and run-throughs, I provided notes; they often asked for additional feedback.

The day of the show brought a mix of nerves and anticipation. After an extended warm-up and a run-through, we prepared for the final performance. The Black Box Theater was brimming with eager spectators, some even standing, while others, regrettably, had to leave due to the overwhelming turnout. The students, in their moment in the spotlight, delivered an outstanding performance.

A post-show Q&A session allowed the audience to delve into the students' experiences. Despite initial nervousness, the students articulated their journey with poise. What touched all of us deeply was the presence of the ELL students in the audience, visibly moved and motivated by witnessing their peers perform; some expressed their amazement at how much the students had progressed and accomplished over the course of just one semester.

Gisely Colon-Lopez, a teacher who had previously worked with my class during the summer, marveled at their transformation, emphasizing the significant improvement they had made. She shared with me in an email after the show:

This was the first time I was able to witness the power and success of integrating theater as a praxis for developing various linguistic, interpersonal, and leadership skills for students, particularly in an ESL setting. I had a unique perspective of working with this student group during the summer of 2023 when the students were enrolled in the Summer Intensive English Language Program, SIELP offering their first college credit course aimed at developing both college readiness and English language skills. During the performance I witnessed a tremendous growth in confidence and their oral English language. Students that may have been labeled as shy, and ones that I had a hard time hearing from a few feet away commanded the stage and theater with their voice, their confidence overflowing into the audience. As an audience member, I could sense each students' pride in sharing the stories from the stage and, as their former teacher, I recognized the progress with the English language and more importantly their confidence of being English language speakers. (G. Colón-López, personal communication, December 27, 2023)

A colleague of mine who is pursuing his EdD observed parts of our process and the final presentation for research purposes shared:

After interviewing four of the students and observing two sessions, I discovered that students had enjoyed the class and admitted improved their oral skills in English. For them, memorizing scripts and practicing their pronunciation made them feel less apprehensive at the time of performing because they knew their grammar was correct after revising their scripts, and they had rehearsed with their teacher extensively. There were opportunities for *translanguaging* in rehearsal. Students were using their multilingual capabilities in rehearsal to maximize communicative potential. I also noticed that Professor Yannacanedo employed a culturally responsive pedagogy by

acknowledging the students' cultural backgrounds and incorporating it into the work devised in class. A traditional dance from Bangladesh and bilingual scripts representing the students' home languages were showcased at the end of the semester allowing the students to feel proud of their heritage. (A. Morales, personal communication, January 2, 2024)

This generous feedback confirmed the value of using acting to accelerate the academic and personal journey of ELL learners. Additionally, after distributing end-of-semester questionnaires to the students, I discovered recurring themes of their experiences. The feedback highlighted a surge in confidence, refined pronunciation, enhanced respect from peers, and a newfound appreciation for discipline and abdominal breathing. Every student conveyed the substantial improvement in their English skills as a direct result of taking this class. The effectiveness of utilizing acting, translanguaging, and devising with ELLs was reaffirmed to me. Reflecting on this fulfilling experience, I felt an overwhelming sense of pride in the collective achievement. The transformative power of acting, coupled with the resilience of these ELL students, made this endeavor truly magical.

### References

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