Principled practice for drama and theater arts with multilingual learners

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ABSTRACT
All disciplines have particular ways of knowing, common practices, and means of using language that mediate and potentially support engagement with the discipline. For multilingual learners, language demands of a discipline can be a closed door or a facilitated entryway. Drama and theater arts, the focus of our article, are often marginalized in curricula across the grades and therefore receive less attention to relevant disciplinary activities and language demands. In response to this pattern, our paper has several aims. We highlight ways language demands are embedded in drama and theater arts curricula and activities. Second, we describe and analyze ways instruction can attend to these demands and support multilingual learners’ engagements with them. Third, we distill a set of principles that can guide teachers, guest artists, and teacher educators in their work on drama and theater arts with multilingual student populations. To accomplish these aims, we draw upon our own and others’ teaching and research to frame instructional practices that support multilingual students’ engagements with drama and theater activities. Engagements we describe span early childhood through high school years. Tapping our own work in several US states (Illinois, North Carolina, California), as well as in Argentina and the UK, we present data and themes from a high school study featuring drama and theater arts practices used with multilingual learners. We examine how principles from our framework are illustrated in data of the study. We also identify challenges and critical adaptations that may be needed to realize the potential of drama in work with multilingual students. Principles we identify may aid teachers, guest artists, and teacher educators in shaping drama and theater arts activities that spotlight language demands of the discipline(s) of drama and theater and provide supportive and meaningful instruction.

Drama and theater arts provide rich opportunities to engage students across the grades in imaginative play, creative improvisation, role-playing, perspective-taking, and problem-solving. Such activities take many forms in schools (e.g., storytelling, spontaneous oral readings, dramatic improvisations, scripted group, and solo performance of literature) (Athanases, 2008), which some scholars distinguish as drama with a focus on process, versus theater focused on performance (e.g., McGovern, 2017). However, as Dawson and Lee (2018) argue, this is not a fixed dichotomy. Given especially an international readership and countless terms used for performative activities, we focus

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less on distinctions and, at times, use the terms interchangeably as we seek to illuminate possibilities for educators interested in engaging multilingual learners in drama and theater arts.

In US schools, the site of most of our work, drama and theater activities for younger students typically are embedded within multiple subjects – during reading and literacy time, or creative and performing arts time, often as an add-on (Tigert & Leider, 2022). At the secondary level, drama activity may be embedded within core courses as drama-based pedagogy (Dawson & Lee, 2018), to move disembodied, static coursework into something more embodied, esthetic, and humanizing. Drama and theater activity also occurs in high school as coursework though such classes are not widespread. A study of a nationally representative sample of 940 US high schools found just 48% of high schools offered any course in theater (Elpus, 2020).

Beyond where or how often theater activity is available to students, we need to understand experiences of teaching and learning such activities with multilingual students so that learners may gain maximum engagement with and learning from such experiences. By multilingual learners, we mean students in US K-12 schools who speak home languages other than English. In the US, where we conduct most of our work, there are about 12.2 million multilingual students, almost 23% of the entire primary and secondary student population (US Census Bureau, 2021). As schools increasingly enroll multilingual learners, we need to understand more about the linguistic demands of theater activity, as well as the instructional practices that scaffold drama-based experiences and learning for multilingual students. All school subjects have expectations about how to use language to understand and learn in the discipline (Schleppegrell, 2004).

In what follows, we tap our own teaching, research, and partnerships in several US states (Illinois, North Carolina, California), and in Argentina and the UK. We have used and taught drama across grades (in-and-beyond core curricula), from early childhood through teacher education. We are also multilingual speakers (between us, of varying levels of proficiency in English, Spanish, French, Greek). Drawing upon our diverse experiences using drama in classrooms and our own and others’ published research on affordances of drama, we provide a set of principles that frame instructional practices that support multilingual students’ engagements with drama and theater activities. We then present themes from a classroom study that illustrates disciplinary practices of theater and drama, aligned with the principles. We also highlight ways language demands are embedded in such activities and ways educators can design creative and learning-rich opportunities for multilingual learners through engagements with drama.

**Principled practice for theater arts with multilingual learners**

Principles that follow may assist teachers of younger children wanting to integrate drama activity in class or within arts-based programming. In US high schools, theater arts coursework – though not widespread – may benefit from deepened attention to linguistic demands of such activities and ways to scaffold multilingual learners’ experiences. Also, teacher education programs often seek greater attention to arts-based curricula and support for multilingual learners. Principles we identify may help provide direction. Our delineation of these five overlapping principles is not prescriptive. We sequence them from a foundational concern with community and safe space, through higher-level concerns of dramatic inquiry and reflection.

**Build a safe, collective, playful classroom culture for drama**

Through drama, multilingual learners can engage in language play, supported by the collective. A playful, safe classroom for drama/theater arts helps multilingual learners reduce anxiety (Piazzoli, 2011) and increase self-confidence (Balyasnikova, Higgins, & Hume, 2018). Collective play supports co-constructing of stories and grasping narrative as essential to human experience. Collective narratives aid memory, vocabulary expansion, and community-building, important for learners developing language skills (Banerjee, Alsalman, & Alqafari, 2016). Additionally, classroom
engagement with drama (and other arts) often spills out into spaces where learners interact with peers and where young learners playfully experiment with collective imagination (Thiel, 2015). For multilingual learners, out-of-the-classroom interactions can include the use of multiple languages (Wagner, 2021) in less structured/formal settings.

There is a symbiotic relationship between drama/theater arts and a safe community (Sanchez, Athanases, Cahalan, & Houk, 2022). Drama activities engage students in community, in turn supporting judgment-free performed actions where students’ developing language is displayed. Drama invites multilingual learners to assume different roles and use their linguistic repertoires (Ragnarsdóttir & Þorkelsdóttir, 2012), fostering linguistic inclusion and engagement. A judgment-free, “language tryout” space supports collective play, as with six early adolescent multilingual girls engaged in active listening through drama (Harman & Smagorinsky, 2014). Such performed interaction also leads learners to understand peers’ stories and histories, advancing teachers’ efforts to sustain students’ cultures in a classroom community (Ntelioglou, 2011). Drama also can improve teacher–student relationships. As teacher-in-role and modeling of drama activities occur, traditional teacher-student hierarchies are often re-envisioned (To, Chan, Lam, & Tsang, 2011).

Engage students in constructing and performing diverse stories worth enacting

Among the disciplinary elements of theater is the centrality of story. A child’s concept of story begins in early childhood, with challenging dimensions such as theme evolving across the years (Applebee, 1978). For drama to take hold, children need immersive experiences in imaginative play, supported by learning processes that make story elements come alive for learners and that match their prior knowledge and linguistic abilities (Hulse & Owens, 2019). In Sanchez et al. (2022), we documented how Nadia (a teacher working with multiple multilingual learners, ages 9–10) used Magic Canvas, a practice of Globe Education that fosters imagination to create story settings. Such make-believe drama practice taps children’s prior knowledge (Greenfader & Brouillette, 2017) and enables multilingual learners to participate in collective storytelling and co-constructing of meanings using home languages and a range of target language proficiencies.

Choral work in drama, like make-believe and storytelling, invites multilingual children to call out words and ideas for a group’s evolving narrative—a process associated with anxiety reduction during groupwork (Brouillette & Jennings, 2010). Children can experience the profoundly social nature of drama activity and co-making of a story (Galda & Pellegrini, 2008). For engagement with complex texts, early access to more complex language, supported by recall of enacted stories, aligns with Bruner’s (1960) spiral curriculum, with learners revisiting stories and themes for deepened understandings.

Use multimodal, paralinguistic resources for engagement and meaning

Important for multilingual learners is multimodal instruction, including gestures, props, and puppets to enliven texts. These paralinguistic devices scaffold multilingual children’s engagements and learning through drama. Especially, younger multilingual learners benefit from drama activity that includes recognizable objects, ideas, and movements that illustrate what words represent (Brouillette, Greenfader, & Vanamburg, 2020). Collective work with props, aided by choral work, supports understanding, with such drama practices serving as linguistic scaffolds and learning tools. Puppetry, for example, supports character understanding in drama and can be coupled with visual “text” and print resources (Serafini, 2015). In one UK-based workshop, we observed, in partnership with Globe Education (Shakespeare’s Globe, London), how a guest-artist guided 19 three-year-old multilingual learners, mostly recent immigrants from African nations, through an immersive narrative experience with props, children’s original puppets, and call-and-response language enacting plot and character. The children were riveted by the activities.
We have observed and used embodied activity during warmups to support language play, expressivity, and understanding. One teacher of early adolescents – 55% of her class multilingual learners – described how *Hook, Probe, Deflect* (Banks, 2014) supported understanding of character relationships during drama (Jasper, Dvorak, Athanases, & Sanchez, 2021). She guided students to read lines in pairs, choosing one of the three gestures to perform “at” their partner, conveying what their character felt: “hook” with their arm to show desire for connection; “probe” or poke a finger to depict anger or accusation; or “deflect” by swishing them away with their hand, demonstrating desire for separation. One female student, whose home language was Spanish, reported being intimidated by the language of the scene she had to perform in English but that gestures unpacked meaning and helped deepen her grasp of emotions in the scene.

**Diversify language-specific supports**

A frequent criticism of language learning methods is the skill-and-drill approach. Drama practices enable multilingual learners to use language in context and with purpose (To et al., 2011), including facilitating social interaction with peers (Bournot-Trites, Belliveau, Spiliotopoulos, & Séror, 2007). Drama activity can attend to language within scripted text and that students produce as they create or respond to stories in expansive ways (Even, 2008).

In an Italian context, Dalziel and Piazzoli (2019) reported how young-adult learners of Italian, all recent refugees, engaged with drama to imagine ways to support a fictitious individual moving into the host country. Since they had also immigrated to Italy, participants were empowered to see themselves as “experts” in navigating a new place. Learners co-constructed responses to the task in the target language, tapping their wider linguistic repertoire, with facilitators providing language scaffolds. In a different study, drama and digital storytelling helped young learners collectively build a story about a refugee girl, intentionally translanguaging moments (using varieties of Cypriot Greek and Standard Modern Greek) in the narrative to convey meaning and context to their constructed story (Stavrou, Charalambous, & Macleroy, 2021). Through different language-specific supports, multilingual learners can create meaningful, personal stories through drama, less constrained by overly structured literacy and language learning practices.

**Couple enactments with inquiry and reflection**

Beyond playful language use and physicalization, drama activity benefits from requestive speech acts (Anderson & Loughlin, 2014) and dramatic inquiry (Edmiston, 2014) – asking clarifying questions and taking up students’ information to inquire into their experiences (Greenfader & Brouillette, 2017). Theater (or classroom drama activity) and theory (supported by inquiry and reflection) derive from the same Greek word, thea, or view; enactments foster embodied viewing through interaction, and inquiry fosters reflective viewing about those interactions (Aita, 2009). In earlier work, we reported the power of such questioning (Jasper et al., 2021). Questions, including *who am I, where am I, what do I want, how will I get it*, invite multilingual students to inquire into enactments, speaking about their performed selves or their constructed characters in a drama. Inquiry can also occur later in more expansive ways, inviting students to critically engage with questions pertaining to sociopolitical issues. These questions may arise from their own enacted moments or after watching trained actors perform plays especially written and performed for multilingual learners (Aita, 2009).

Inquiry and reflection through drama invite students to critically analyze language practices. Cahnmann-Taylor and McGovern (2021) suggest that if educators do not engage multilingual learners critically with language, learners may mock individuals or groups while playfully engaging with language, such as “slanting” their eyes and speaking gibberish to depict a character of Asian descent. Such behaviors offer opportunity for teachers to address discrimination and inequities generated through language play and enactments, despite learners’ level of language development. Teachers can use drama as opportunities for learners to “rehearse,” “experiment,” and “explore
agentive means” to address instances of language/linguistic discrimination that they may be subject to (Cahnmann-Taylor & McGovern, 2021), akin to Boal’s (1998) Forum Theater where learners enact interventions to problem-solve scenarios. Learners can imagine situations where their linguistic abilities may be challenged or shunned due to non-native accents, skin color, and gender identity. Rehearsing and problematizing hypothetical interactions among peers, with teacher observation and support, may enable learners to gain comfort with their language proficiency. These types of interactions with drama and language present multilingual learners with opportunities to learn about diverse literature and cultures (Schewe, 2013) and to become more agentive in their navigation of a multilingual/multicultural space.

**Opportunities and challenges as multilingual learners engage with drama**

We draw upon studies and development projects where we explored drama in-and-beyond core curriculum sites, to support culturally diverse and multilingual learners’ engagements and learning. Data from one project enabled us to examine the principles in practice. That project featured a seven-week partnership, with the second author serving as a drama guest-artist (hereafter, Steven). The site was a high school English class, where the teacher and Steven partnered to document opportunities and challenges of using drama with multilingual learners. Project themes illustrate our principles and uncover challenges that warrant adaptations as others guide multilingual learners’ engagements with drama in-and-beyond core curricula.

**Study overview**

**Context and focus**

The small public high school, the context for this study, had an international studies focus with faculty who had taught on many continents. The teacher (student age 15–16) and Steven had established a partnership through a prior yearlong ethnography. The teacher (a Japanese immigrant) had deep commitments to diverse and multilingual youth in low-income urban communities. She hoped drama-based, cooperative active learning might engage and support students and foster community. Her students were racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse: Latinx (Mexican, Nicaraguan, Guatemalan), Asian (Chinese, Filipinx), African American, and White. The project featured performance to deepen engagement with a collection of works by authors of color. Learning goals included appreciation for and understanding of what drama yields, and using performers’ resources to develop solo performances using texts of students’ own choosing from a diverse collection provided. The collection, which Steven curated, had poems with first-person speakers, enabling students to develop and perform a speaker-as-character. Full-class activities occurred in English, with student-pair activities frequently involving students’ uses of other languages–mostly Spanish and Cantonese.

**Questions and data**

Steven served as a guest-artist twice weekly, over seven weeks. Two research questions guided the project: For multilingual learners, in what ways and to what degree did drama-based activities engage students and scaffold learning? In what ways did activities highlight problems to solve for future uses of drama practices in-and-beyond the core curriculum?

Project data included fieldnotes recorded by the teacher, transcripts of audiotaped full-group and student-pair discourse, observations of students’ performance rehearsals, and students’ notes and reflections on the performance process. Reflections centered on students’ chosen poem as they worked with multiple “performer’s resources,” including making plain sense of the poem, developing an imaginary autobiography for the poem’s speaker, and developing “verbs of action” to guide the performance. The teacher conducted post-session interviews with Steven on students’ learning and challenges. The two of us, the authors of this paper, reviewed data and conducted
analyses through lenses of experienced educators and multilingual speakers. We coded for patterns in students’ engagements and resistance to activities. We constructed cases of multilingual learners’ engagements, highlighted in what follows. Themes from our framework principles guided analyses.

**Principles in practice**

**Safe, collective space for drama and language play**

Sessions began with warmups to support language play. One day early in the project, 22 students stood in a circle. Steven launched enunciation play, inviting students to identify a word or phrase the group would voice, “maybe a word with lots of syllables, nothing offensive,” and coached students to “stretch it out with playful sounding of the word.” He modeled with “encyclopedia,” elongating and exaggerating sounds and intonation. A Black female student remarked: “This is going to be fun!” Students chose words that included antagonistic and supercalifragilisticexpialidocious; all engaged in the process.

**Multimodal, paralinguistic supports**

To support language and meaning links, Steven added gestures to the warmups repertoire, fostering a level playing field of nonsensical language unfamiliar to anyone in the group. Using Lewis Carroll’s "Jabberwocky" (Carroll, 1871), he guided choral imitation, coaching “do as I do, say as I say,” pausing after each line so students could imitate language: “Beware the Jabberwock, my son!/The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!/Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun/The frumious Bandersnatch!” Students called out Steven’s exaggerated sounds and imitated his grand and random gestures and foot-stomping accompanying some words. Such choral activity supports a sense of safety and confidence (Galante & Thompson, 2017).

**Diverse language supports**

Subtext was a key drama resource explored; in warmups and partnered work, students explored motivations beneath words. Steven guided full-group activity about ways a simple sentence contains multiple meanings dependent upon delivery. Using “I wonder when she’ll get here,” he coached students to speak the line with distinct meanings: eager anticipation, disdain, and nervousness about missing a train. Each student tried one subtext, at times coached by Steven to amplify subtext. These playful activities helped mitigate potential language performance anxiety (Edwards & Roger, 2015).

Student-pair workshops included initial soundings of poems. Several students noted that repeated soundings were necessary with complex language. Brannen, a Chinese American, explained how by reading to himself he could understand meaning, but by reading it aloud to his partner he could “emphasize the punctuation, the pauses … [and] feel that it’s not just text, and it’s like the subtexts.” Brennan highlights language activity he began to internalize for performance.

Using *Action of the Lines* (Long & HopKins, 1982), students generated active verbs to name the speaker’s action in a performed line. Fiama and Hernan, immigrants from Mexico and Nicaragua, respectively, both selected “the mother” by Gwendolyn Brooks, in which the speaker reflects on experience with abortion. Together they did line-by-line oral readings, speaking the language of discovery: “I thought it was,” “Oh—no wonder.” Partner activities provided support with subtexts, enriching play-with-language, helping multilingual learners express emerging understandings (Goldin-Meadow, 2009). Fiama prepared a detailed performance script, using verbs including imagines, regrets, blames, and rejects. She added notes to guide performance pacing (fast, slow, med). In this way, she unpacked meanings, generated language to support interpretation, and scripted her dramatic performance. She used this script as she rehearsed, in private tapings and with Hernan.
Co-constructing meaning to perform stories that matter
Opportunity to select and perform stories that matter supported drama engagement. Cultural identification ran through students’ reflections, supporting engagements with culture and language. Multilingual students paired with others of the same home language reported discoveries together in their shared home language and parsed word meanings at times through shared translations. For example, three female students, all fairly recent immigrants to the US from China and Hong Kong, huddled in a corner, speaking Cantonese, trying to understand Genny Lim’s poem “The Only Language She Knows,” which one student was preparing to rehearse. As with many poems in the curated collection, this poem included words transcribed into English. The poem’s speaker says her mother called her to “help put a mustard patch on her back”: “She speaks in thlee-yip/the only language she knows.” The spelling refers to a translation of the dialect name of a region of the Canton province where dialects bear diverse names and translated meanings. Along with the dialect name, students spoke several lines numerous times, reaching consensus on translation and meaning.

Student reflection and inquiry in unpacking sociohistorical themes
Language-focused activities supported multilingual learners in class in unpacking sociohistorical themes. Lucas, a Mexican American, chose to rehearse his poem “Slaveship” by Lucille Clifton in two different emotional tones, highlighting subtext: one sad, another where the speaker is angry. To accomplish it, he stated, “It’s a slaveship, so it could be sad cuz they’re being taken from another country.” But he later added, “I changed my hypothesis … It could be mad because they’re mad cuz they’re being taken … he’s angry at God cuz He’s lettin’ people [enslave others, including the speaker].” Lucas added that, by rehearsing enactment of the poem multiple times, he “paid more attention to the words” so he could “put more meaning to it.” Rehearsal also helped him “identify what the words could mean.” As Lucas worked through line meanings and emotions for delivering language in Clifton’s poem, he explored layers of emotion for individuals enslaved. His rehearsals, language exploration, and reflections featured a text opening up ideas and feelings that matter for understandings of larger social and historical themes.

Challenges and possible innovations
Several problems and challenges emerged in project activities, pointing to needed adaptations for drama activity in beyond-the-core coursework and extracurricular activity. First, full-group warmups on subtext surfaced moments when multilingual learners demonstrated what Steven perceived as a need for multiple coached attempts, to amplify emotional subtext through very short lines of text. A subset of students, all African American, reported in interviews their histories of engagements in the school gospel choir, church choir, and other performative contexts. During subtext warmups, several excitedly volunteered to go first, and several others volunteered to do first readings of selected poems for the class. Steven and the collaborating teacher were in awe of this ease with performance. In contrast, several multilingual students spoke in hushed tones in the circle. It often took a second and third try at delivering a line, plus Steven’s coaching. Though he probed for amplification of emotion through the lines, Steven reported in reflections that such in-the-moment coaching may have added pressure and anxiety for students engaging in “public” display of language. This issue raises concerns about the need, especially in multilingual contexts, to consider the “public” nature of such coaching and delivery.

Second, as multilingual learners paired up to explore and prepare their performances, they complicated the performer’s resource of “initial sounding” of a poem/text. The activity grew from “single” to multiple initial and later soundings to engage with language complexity. Complexity included pronunciations of often-elevated poetic language, cultural references in the poems, and language variations. As Fiama and Hernan illustrated, their line-by-line oral readings in their paired work took the form of “repeated” instead of a single initial sounding. In drama/theater arts classes beyond-the-core, this drama resource needs extended opportunities for learners to “sound and feel”
language and for a safe space for multiple renderings of the language of a text that may grow into a script for performance.

A third related issue concerned multilingual students calling for a shrinking of the audience, with several expressing worry about “performing” to the full class. Illustrated by our reporting above, most learners engaged in some deep work on language and discoveries in drama workshops. However, as multilingual students planned full-class embodied poem readings, several requested that poem “performances” be completed in small paired and seated activities. Steven supported students’ self-advocacy, and the performance task was adapted for everyone. However, there was an additional tension: For several multilingual learners, the deep, thoughtful work with “performers’ resources” was documented in writing and shared in paired discussions but not embodied with accompanying gestures nor rendered visible for the wider group of peers. This theme raises questions about safe space and configuring of “performance” and audience in drama activities. Perhaps more collective support is needed for single-performer display. This need for collective support can be addressed through rotating performance spaces in a classroom for few listeners at a time or through use of digital tools to create opportunities for students’ prerecorded readings/performances in private spaces, then shared for viewing.

**Conclusion**

As we shape opportunities beyond the core—-in our case for drama/theater arts—-we need to examine disciplinary practices, language demands, and ways research-informed instruction can support engagement and learning-rich opportunities for multilingual learners. Drama frequently depends upon group activities that, for multilingual learners, may elevate anxiety about “performance” rather than invite and scaffold meaningful engagement and interaction. We presented themes from a study that worked to mitigate such anxiety-producing moments, highlighting how a set of principles can assist teachers, guest-artists, and teacher educators in shaping drama/theater arts activities that spotlight language demands of the discipline(s) and provide supportive and meaningful instruction. Nonetheless, students’ reports highlighted challenges and tensions that arose from principled practice, pushing for adaptations that warrant attention as educators strive to integrate drama in classrooms serving multilingual learners.

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