Language at the Core: Developing Meaningful Connections between the Arts and Classroom Instruction

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What is the nature of teaching and learning in dance and theater, and in what ways do they influence second language acquisition in emergent bilingual students? To research this question, the authors have collaborated since 2005 in practitioner inquiry with artists and ESL and classroom teachers in DELLTA (Developing English Language Literacy through the Arts). In addition to practitioner findings, an overall analysis of data collected from over 200 observations by independent evaluators showed that student achievement in DELLTA was strongest in seven variables: motivation, perseverance/task persistence, ability to focus, ownership of learning, spatial awareness, self-confidence, and collaborative learning skills (Horowitz, 2008). The current inquiry focuses on the Common Core and the kinds of language practices students need to learn to work and think like artists. The authors conclude that opportunities for creative and authentic use of language in and through the arts, in conjunction with nonverbal expression, help language learners communicate beyond their proficiency level (NDEO, 2013). Throughout the art-making process, students learn to transform their bodies, minds, and use of language.
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What language does the community speak? And, how do we speak to each other across communities when we both have complex, nuanced work going on?

—Lois Hetland[1]

Developing a Model

Most educators think of "arts integration" as learning content for subjects other than the art form: How can we use the visual arts to illustrate the social studies curriculum? How can we use theater to help students better understand a text they are reading in the ELA classes? How can we use dance to illuminate a concept in science or a math problem? While worthy endeavors, the arts' purpose is not to learn in and about the arts, and they do not necessarily consider the arts as independent disciplines.

ArtsConnection is a nonprofit organization in New York City formed with the aim of making the arts an essential part of education through connecting artists with children, families, and schools in creative partnerships for teaching and learning. The questions ArtsConnection has focused on throughout our collaborations with teachers and schools in the last decade are more fundamental than the questions posed above. The DELLTA project (Developing English Language Literacy through the Arts) began in 2005

[1]Lois Hetland, Harvard Project Zero, speaking at "Thinking Like an Artist: Creativity and Problem Solving in the Classroom," June 3, 2010, Guggenheim Museum, New York City.

through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (US ED) and grew out of earlier inquiries.[2] In DELLTA, our inquiry question is: *What is the nature of teaching and learning in dance and theater, and in what ways do they influence second language acquisition (SLA) in emergent bilinguals (EBs)?*[3] Making connections to theater may seem obvious because it is a highly verbal art form. On the other hand, dance seems like an odd match at first blush: how might an art form that is essentially expressed non-verbally help EBs with SLA? As we worked through our inquiry over the first years of our collaboration (2005–2010),[4] we found that when students engage in authentic arts-learning experiences in dance and theater, it is significant for EBs because it offers opportunities to combine cognitive, kinesthetic, and affective experiences. The results of our practitioner inquiry led us to the following conclusions. We found that learning in the arts:

1. *Is inquiry-based*. The artistic process is one of exploration and making choices that requires using imagination and higher order thinking skills (NCCAS, 2013). Such learning opportunities are not always offered to EBs in more traditional classrooms, where they typically learn to respond to the curriculum in the "expected" way, striving for the "correct" use of language rather than generating their own purpose for language use.
2. *Is experiential and kinesthetic*. Students learn to communicate through body, facial, and vocal expression, and can express more complex ideas and understanding than their limited English capacities allow. Cognition begins in the body; vocabulary and knowledge build from the immediacy of experience (Sylwester, 1995). Dancers speak about "muscle memory" and trusting the way their bodies know how and what to do to express a thought or feeling. When working through a challenge, it is often impossible for them to "think" without moving. The child who can't sit still in a traditional classroom is often the one who excels in the dance studio.
3. *Lowers the affective filter* (Krashen, 2003). In the arts classroom, students engage in the creative process and develop a personal stake in the outcome, which helps them take greater risks. Because working in these art forms is intrinsically collaborative and does not privilege language over other ways of knowing, it can take pressure off the individual, which decreases anxiety and levels the field of participation.
4. *Provides opportunities for authentic use of English*. In these art forms, language and action closely correspond, which helps students acquire vocabulary in an integrated way (Blaydes-Madigan, 2009). Language use becomes increasingly nuanced as students participate in self-generated conversations that are not facilitated by an adult and hold personal meaning for students collaborating in the creation of a work of art (Little, 2003; Horowitz, 2010).

According to an overall analysis of data collected from over 200 observations by independent evaluators, student achievement in DELLTA was strongest in seven variables: motivation, perseverance/task persistence, ability to focus, ownership of learning, spatial awareness, self-confidence, and collaborative learning skills (Horowitz, 2008). These findings are consistent with independent assessments by ELA and classroom teachers, who assessed each student on variables essential to SLA; the

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[2]The contents of this article were developed under grants from the U.S. Department of Education. The contents, however, do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and endorsement by the federal government should not be assumed.

[3]We have chosen the term "emerging bilingual" to describe the students we have been working with for two reasons. First, it reflects the most current terminology being used in the field, and then it reflects the belief that these learners are en route to becoming fully competent bilingual individuals in society.

[4]Our initial work was supported by two grants from the Arts in Education Model Development and Dissemination Program at the U.S. Department of Education, 2005 and 2006. We engaged with over 50 ESL and classroom teachers, 12 ArtsConnection artists, and six staff members in a process of collaborative action research through which we reached these conclusions.

results indicate that students in DELLTA demonstrated *increased motivation* (73% of students); *self-confidence* (75%); *ability to persevere and stay on task* (76%); *ability to focus* (77%); *collaborative learning skills* (71%). The cumulative DELLTA research strongly suggests that these are intermediate variables that are the mechanism for connecting dance and theater learning to acquisition and application of English language skills.[5]

Learning to Work and Think Like Artists

Many educators are currently looking at how the arts help students build the Common Core capacities of the literate individual and align with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (Coleman, 2012; College Board, 2013; Robelen, 2012). Those efforts are mainly focused on helping students learn to "read" works of art as another form of text. While learning to decode a work of art has many parallels with learning to understand a written text, what are the parallels with the CCSS when students are *learning to work and think like artists* by engaging in the process of making art? And, what might that look like in the classroom?

Our colleagues Jessica Nicoll and Barry Oreck (2013) describe behaving like artists as "learning to pose meaningful questions, discover interests and pursue provocative problems, and work collaboratively in the unknown territory of artistic creation. Goals and learning objectives become fluid and developmental rather than fixed, predetermined and outcome oriented" (p. 94). While not all of ArtsConnection's artists would offer such a rich definition, 60 of our artists recently participated in a values clarification exercise in September 2013 as part of our annual institute aimed at helping them articulate their teaching practice. When asked, "Why do you make art?" and "Why do you teach your art form to students in the NYC public schools?" many of the same ideas emerged from them: discovery; connection; take imaginative risks; give voice to aesthetic ideas; envision other possibilities; persevere; collaborate; create.

In our current projects,[6] we are working with 89 upper elementary classroom and ESL teachers in 15 New York City public schools to probe more deeply into the language practices embedded in teaching and learning in dance and theater. Educators participate in up to 50 hours per year of professional development for three years in a variety of settings: classrooms, small groups within schools, and day-long workshops for cross-school groups. The purpose of this work is to build the capacity of educators to collaborate across disciplines and build interdisciplinary units of study focused on NYC Blueprints in the Arts and the CCSS standards in ELA.

At the end of the first year of our projects, we asked the educators—including the dance and theater artists with whom teachers collaborate in the classroom—to help us understand what kind of learning they were seeing among their EB students. Specifically, we asked them, "*What kinds of language do students need to learn to work and think like artists?*" Their responses brought us to four essentials. Students need to use language to:

1. Understand *the structures, principles, concepts, and vocabulary of the art form,* and understand *criteria* used to assess work within the art form in order to improve their work, i.e., language to help them work like artists. Much of this language crosses disciplines. (See Mapping the Common Core below.)

[5]For a review of the report to the U.S. Department of Education on the development of the DELLTA program, see the report from National Dance Education Organization, pp. 28–34.

[6]Our current work is supported by a three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Professional Development in Arts Education program, and grants from the Heckscher Foundation.

2. Brainstorm ideas and *make artistic choices,* incorporating both personal invention and desire along with their understanding of the structures and criteria demanded by the art form.
3. *Explain their choices* to others. Discuss ideas, negotiate, and compromise in collaboration with others. Work with others to experiment, adapt, and refine original choices. Give feedback to peers on their own artistic choices.
4. *Describe* what a work of art communicates to them.

As noted in the *Framework for English Language Proficiency Development Standards Corresponding to the CCSS and the Next-Generation Science Standards* (CCSSO, 2012), ". . . the sophisticated use of language required by the [CCSS] . . . entails a reconceptualization of the way English language learners (ELLs) 'apprentice' into . . . demanding disciplinary practices by simultaneously acquiring and developing language as well as acquiring disciplinary knowledge and skills." We have been operating under this exact premise throughout the development of DELLTA: the "apprenticeship" model (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is at the heart of teaching and learning in the arts**.** Research also shows that participation in theater and dance provides "fertile contexts for cognitive and linguistic development not available elsewhere" (Heath & Roach, 2001).

Collaborative Discussions

Collaboration is an essential element intrinsic to the performing arts, particularly dance and theater, as well as for the development of language. According to a socio-cultural perspective of SLA, meaning is negotiated by the learner through interaction. Learners create a collaborative dialogue and co-construct linguistic knowledge while involved in meaningful tasks (Swain & Lapkin, 2002). For this reason, we are focusing on CCSS S/L1—Collaborative Discussions. In addition, during the 2012–2013 school year, all teachers in New York City were required to construct and teach two units of study aligned with the CCSS. In Grades 3–5, at least one of these units needed to focus on one of four CCSS, including S/L1 (New York City Department of Education, 2012).

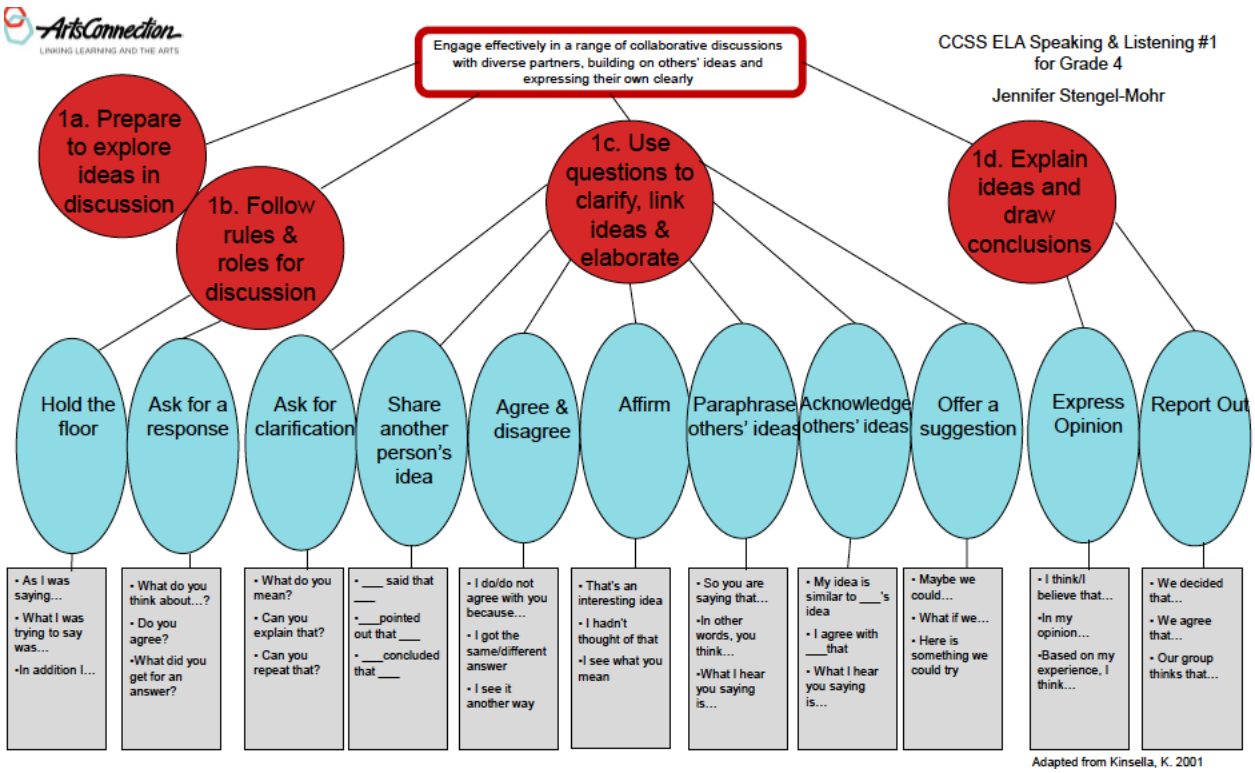
Most of the language that students are exposed to in the classroom is decontextualized: in order to comprehend it, the learner must rely on language alone (Walqui, 2002). When completing classroom tasks, teachers often explain difficult language by using more language; this forces EBs to rely only on linguistic input. Working collaboratively to create, however, provides a context for meaningful non-verbal language support. Collaborative spaces allow for rich, authentic, and contextualized language exchange; in addition, true language learning is evidenced when learners can create novel phrases and manipulations of the language. Education authority Ken Robinson (2011) defines creativity as the process of holding original ideas that have value. More often than not, this creativity is a result of the interaction of seeing things across disciplines. As a creative endeavor, the art-making process opens the door for novel language use at every turn. In this process, learners build on one another's language through collaborative experiences, creating the optimum language-learning environment by allowing for an exchange of both comprehensible input and output.

Mapping the Common Core

Among the resources we developed to facilitate collaborations across our two communities are thinking maps, used by ESL and classroom teachers as well as teaching artists. These maps serve several purposes: first, they help artists and teachers map the purpose, essential elements, skills, and the language EBs need to participate in the discipline; second, they focus on linguistic objectives for teaching that enable EBs to actively participate in the activity; and finally, they demonstrate connections by helping uncover the concepts and language shared across disciplines.

In Map 1 (CCSS S/L1 ELA), we summarize the grade-specific standards for Grade 4 in the circles on the second level. The next level—the oblongs—lists the skills and linguistic functions students need in order to achieve those standards. Finally, the rectangles on the last level offer some language prompts to help

EBs actively participate in the activity, which develops the skill above it and helps them meet the grade-specific standard.



Adapted from Kinsella, K. 2001

As with all standards, this map of CCSS S/L 1 remains decontextualized until put into practice in the classroom. In a fourth-grade ESL content lesson on human impact on the environment, for example, the teacher might ask the students to read a brief article about this issue, directing the students to focus on some key concepts through guided questions. After a close reading, students need to discuss with their group their responses to questions about the impact humans have on their environment; they might also fill out a graphic organizer and create a poster showing how to minimize that impact. Each group is required to establish criteria for what should be in the poster and then share the final poster with the rest of the class.

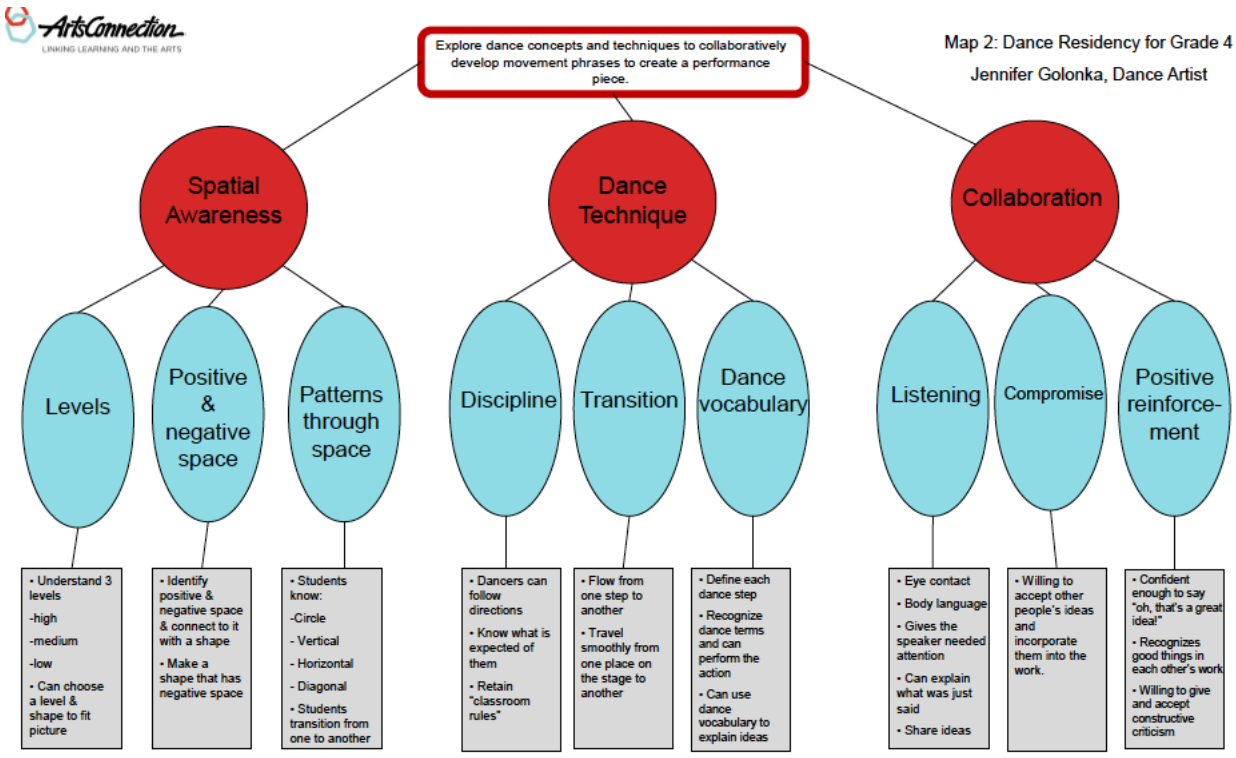
This sample lesson addresses many standards, including the CCSS S/L1 summarized in Map 1. In reading the text, students have achieved Standard 1a—i.e., they have prepared for the discussion reflected in the first circle in level two of the map. By discussing their responses to the focus question, students address Standard 1c (clarify, link, and elaborate on ideas), the third circle on the second level of the map. Finally, student collaboration on the creation of the poster along with sharing their posters addresses Standard 1d (explain ideas and draw conclusions)— the fourth circle. The entire task requires students to use language listed in Standard 1b—follow rules and roles for discussion—listed in the second circle. These are all essential skills students need to achieve the purpose stated in the Anchor Standard at the top of the map.

Not only does this map help teachers plan for effective language instruction, but it also provides a purpose for specific language use within the context of any given subject. For example—to offer a suggestion—language such as "maybe we could . . ." or "what if we . . ." is needed; this language is given in the vocabulary and tools boxes located at level 4 on the map. We often give students fragments of language to memorize but do not teach them the appropriate application of such terminology. When language is given in a context in which students can immediately try it out, there is greater retention than with memorization alone (Sternberg, 1995).

Mapping the Arts—Dance

In the dance world, there are many traditions. In modern dance, there are a number of approaches to teaching, each with its own set of assumptions. One approach begins from a place of analysis that attempts to standardize the description of movement so that it can be reproduced and understood; this approach lends itself comfortably to school settings familiar with standards and accountability. It begins from a set of elements (body, action, space, time, and energy) that are assumed to be "the foundational concepts and vocabulary for developing movement skills as well as understanding dance as an art form" (Minneapolis Public Schools, 2013). Dance thus becomes validated in the educational setting because "it has its own content, vocabulary, skills, and techniques, which must be understood and applied to be proficient in the art form."

Based on this approach, some of ArtsConnection's artists have experimented with developing their own DELLTA thinking maps. One artist's map is not identical to another's; instead, each map reflects the purpose of a particular artist and the specific context (neighborhood, school, class) in which they are working. In Map 2 (Dance Residency), dance artist Jennifer Golonka's purpose is for students to "explore dance concepts and techniques to collaboratively develop movement phrases to create a performance piece." The next level of the map shows three essential concepts of the art form that Golonka is focused on for this specific context. (She might make other choices in another context.) The third level represents the skills students need in order to master those essential concepts. Finally, the rectangles in the last level introduce some of the vocabulary and tools dancers use and students need in order to develop the specific skills that contribute to mastering dance concepts and achieving the broader purpose.



You can see a lesson in action at http://youtube/jAWPHLT-HBM. In this lesson, the fourth in a series of 15, students are learning to construct pathways in a dance phrase. Similar to a phrase in language, a dance phrase may express a thought, idea, or feeling through movement; one phrase may build from and connect to other phrases to construct a sequence to convey an idea, concept, or feeling that holds meaning for the student. In this lesson, students are learning to use patterns in space and connect their

movements into a dance phrase; in addition, they must change levels for each new pattern, and use both positive and negative space. This is reflected in the second level of the map under spatial awareness, which is essential in dance. Spatial awareness is further separated into three criteria students can use to show their understanding: use of levels, negative and positive space, and patterns in space. This dance lesson addresses all three criteria under the element of spatial awareness. During this lesson, students also need to collaborate with their group to create their dance phrase; this addresses the element of collaboration in the artist's map, appearing in the last circle on the second level. Both teachers and artists can use these maps to identify places in their respective curriculum to make connections between the art-making or language-development process, and the precise language needed to accomplish these tasks.

In order to learn to work and think like artists in all art forms, students need to know how to make artistic choices—e.g., they need to be able to use the tools of the art form in order to master the skills of the art form, and achieve an artistic purpose to explore or communicate an idea, concept, or feeling. In the case of dance, students learn to use their bodies to: (a) learn the skills of a dancer—e.g., moving in patterns through space in high, medium, and low levels; (b) address the essential concept of spatial awareness; and (c) develop movement phrases to create a performance piece. These choices are authentic to a dance-making process: they are skills dancers use and through which they apprentice into the discipline.

Our challenge: how do we make explicit the connections between learning to work and think like artists with the demands of the CCSS S/L1 Collaborative Discussions? In comparing the two maps, possible places where collaborative discussions help students achieve in both the classroom setting and in the art-making process become apparent.

- *Collaboration* offers the support needed to try out new language and new dance movements. It provides a context for the negotiation of meaning and builds confidence.
- In both language learning and artistic creation, the participant is constantly engaged in *meeting new challenges*. Giving students the tools in both thinking skills and language can help them be prepared for any experience; EBs in particular gain confidence because they can express their thinking with their bodies *and* their language. In addition, participation in the arts experience develops skills that researchers have identified as skills for the 21st century: communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2006).
- Students participating in an arts experience are asked *to work with multiple variables at the same time*. Referring to the dance lesson cited earlier, students had to simultaneously manipulate levels, shapes, individual movements, and a common pathway to create a dance phrase. This experience can help students build capacities for lessons in other academic subjects that also require working with multiple variables and problem solving; because it has been physicalized in dance, such experience can help make more abstract content accessible to EBs.
- There are parallels between the *teaching methods* for both language and artistic experiences. The teacher in both cases first shows, then explains and gives concrete models. Teachers also allow ample time for students to practice what they have learned and then create their own unique piece with the new information. This type of scaffolded teaching format greatly increases comprehension for EBs. Good instruction must be coupled with authentic use and practice to result in effective learning; participation in the arts provides such an opportunity.
- While the input learners receive is often random and loosely defined, the arts create an *authentic context for learning* that is both tangible and student-centered as they apprentice into the discipline. The rules of language are not the emphasis of the experience; instead, they develop from the student's desire to participate. When language learners have opportunities to experience this sort of agency and success, the affective filter is lowered (Krashen, 2003) and students make strides in language development.

Teaching for Autonomy

Another approach to teaching in the arts, however, begins from a place of discovery and creation within a specific context that takes as its starting point individuals and setting. In their thought-provoking exploration of teaching from an artistic point of view, Nicoll and Oreck (2013) articulate some of the challenges facing artists working in educational settings and educators who seek agency in their own teaching practices in order to support independent learners in their classrooms: "When students and teachers bring autonomy and artistry together, they create a productive environment in which individuals are active, curious, risk-taking, and reflective, regardless of specific content, task, or role" (p. 93). Creating the conditions for bringing "autonomy and artistry together" is complex and requires commitment and openness to unplanned possibilities on the part of educators and students.

The Ribbon Dance

In another unit of study focusing on dance and ESL that took place earlier in our partnership, we explored the concept of metaphor through a content-based thematic unit on the water cycle for fifth-grade students. Mei-Yin Ng, an ArtsConnection teaching artist, collaborated with one of us, ESL teacher Jennifer Stengel-Mohr. After many discussions on how we might connect dance and ESL content to create several lessons to help students better understand the concept of metaphor, Mei-Yin observed the ESL class being introduced to a unit on the water cycle through the book *Water Dance* by Thomas Locker. It was immediately clear to both of us that this unit would be the focus of our collaboration: each stanza of the poem conveys metaphor and imagery on one of the stages in the water cycle. The poem allowed students to visualize and therefore led to a more multifaceted comprehension of this scientific process than a textbook presentation or teacher instruction would provide.

The students looked closely at each stanza to pull out the vivid language Locker used, along with the key scientific words for the process of the water cycle. They then used this language input to create accomplished colored drawings of each stage of the water cycle, which helped them internalize their understanding of the process. In the ESL class, we continued to explore related science concepts about water in traditional and hands-on ways: we created charts, read books, and used models and diagrams to better capture the science foundations.

Meanwhile, Mei-Yin had been teaching students the steps of a traditional Chinese Ribbon Dance. The students learned that the ribbon was a prop used in dance to communicate additional meaning and could symbolize many different things, depending on how it was incorporated into the dance. Mei-Yin then told the students that the ribbon would represent water in their dance. She assisted the students in transferring their visualizations about the stages of the water cycle from the classroom into a physical dance. In order to do this, the students had to decide how they would create movements that corresponded to the visualizations they expressed earlier and consider how the ribbon would be manipulated to represent the water appropriately. The students used their knowledge of dance and their bodies to incorporate traditional ribbon-dance movements, along with new creative movements as metaphors representing stages of the water cycle.

Autonomy Achieved

By the end of this unit, there was no doubt that the students had achieved the objectives of the curriculum and that their learning process had been deep and meaningful to them. As evidenced by the final dance performance (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZP49KQ_BB4), students had internalized and owned both the language and the process of the water cycle. Something else amazing happened at this performance: the EBs had now become the model that other students looked up to. The audience, both students and teachers alike, were astonished at how articulate the performers were and how well planned the dance execution was. The class received cards from other classes and individuals thanking

them for their wonderful performance. Not only did this experience have a great impact on the EBs, it also helped change the culture of the school and the impression that it had made on the EBs. This experience reminded us all that sometimes teachers need to step back and allow students to use language independently, in an authentic context, in order to own the language and learning experience.

Conclusion

Our inquiry has shown us that strong, meaningful connections can be found in collaborative work among artists and ESL and classroom teachers. Deep discussion around these ideas has opened possibilities for each of these professionals to contribute within their own field, as well as to work, communicate, and examine teaching practices across communities to enhance the learning experience for emerging bilinguals. Students gain confidence and skills that facilitate language acquisition and have applications to other areas of learning. Opportunities for creative and authentic use of language in conjunction with nonverbal expression helps language learners communicate beyond their proficiency level (NDEO, 2013). While the arts have an intrinsic value of their own, when combined with a language focus the benefits for EB students is immeasurable. Throughout the art-making process, students learn to transform their bodies, minds, and use of language.

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