

Collaborative Approaches to Multilingualism, Drama, and Identity in Teacher Education

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In this article, we chronicle the development and implementation of a multilingual drama workshop for teacher candidates within the framework of a course titled “Supporting English Language Learners,” as part of the Master of Teaching Program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. This course takes a decidedly critical approach to language learning, largely challenging the prioritization of dominant colonial languages and encouraging pedagogical strategies embedded in multilingualism and translanguaging. Course instructors also emphasize the importance of identity affirmation through activities, assignments, and modes of communication that celebrate the linguistic, cultural, and individual backgrounds of the students. In 2023, a mandate to address drama curriculum expectations in the Junior/Intermediate (J/I) sections of the course opened an opportunity to explore drama as a pedagogy to enhance multilingualism and celebrate diverse identities in the classroom. A collaboration between four instructors, including one drama specialist, culminated in an initial workshop focusing on identity texts, drama, and multilingualism. Participants created multilingual identity poems and animated them through a series of dramatic exercises led by the specialist. Teacher candidates in all three classes responded positively to the initiative, and several created their own multilingual/drama activities for use in their future classrooms.

Dans cet article, nous décrivons l’élaboration et la mise en œuvre d’un atelier de théâtre multilingue pour les futurs enseignants dans le cadre d’un cours intitulé « Soutenir les apprenants de l’anglais », qui fait partie du programme de la maîtrise en enseignement de l’Institut d’études pédagogiques de l’Ontario. Ce cours adopte une approche résolument critique de l’apprentissage des langues, remettant en grande partie en question la priorité accordée aux langues coloniales dominantes et encourageant les stratégies pédagogiques ancrées dans le multilinguisme et la pédagogie translinguistique. Les enseignants du cours soulignent également l’importance de l’affirmation de l’identité par le biais d’activités, de travaux et de modes de communication qui célèbrent les origines linguistiques, culturelles et individuelles des étudiants. En 2023, un mandat visant à répondre aux attentes du programme de théâtre dans les cycles moyen-intermédiaire a fourni une occasion pour explorer le théâtre en tant que pédagogie pour

renforcer le multilinguisme et célébrer les diverses identités dans la salle de classe. Une collaboration entre quatre enseignants, dont une personne spécialiste du théâtre, a mené à un atelier initial axé sur les textes identitaires, le théâtre et le multilinguisme. Les participants ont créé des poèmes identitaires multilingues et les ont animés par le biais d'une série d'exercices dramatiques dirigés par le spécialiste. Les futurs enseignants des trois classes ont réagi positivement à cette initiative et plusieurs d'entre eux ont créé leurs propres activités multilingues/théâtrales qu'ils utiliseront dans leurs futures classes.

Keywords: drama, identity texts, multilingualism, teacher collaboration, teacher education, translanguaging

In this article, we chronicle the development and implementation of a drama workshop for teacher candidates in a course about supporting multilingual learners in the Junior/Intermediate (J/I) classroom. The workshop arose from a mandate to incorporate drama expectations from the *Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1-8, The Arts* (OMOE, 2009) in the J/I teacher panel of the Master of Teaching (MT) program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). The course, titled “Supporting English Language Learners,” takes a decidedly critical approach to language learning and the role of dominant languages in the classroom, largely challenging what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) calls “abyssal thinking” and, as articulated by García et al. (2021), challenging the prioritization of dominant colonial languages. Strategies to support multilingualism and translanguaging, both as a tool for accessing academic content and as a valuable cognitive strategy, are embedded in the course. Moreover, course instructors emphasize the importance of identity affirmation through activities, assignments, and communication modes that celebrate students’ linguistic, cultural, and individual backgrounds (Cummins et al., 2015; M. Lau, 2018; Rajendram et al., 2022). We four educators—three course instructors and one drama specialist—welcomed the opportunity to explore drama as a tool to enhance multilingualism and model engaging strategies that teacher candidates could use during their practicum in J/I classrooms. We also saw potential to collaboratively develop new ways of responding to teacher candidates’ personal, cultural, and linguistic identities, thereby enhancing their understanding of the power of multilingualism and drama.

Background and Rationale

“Supporting English Language Learners” has been a mandatory course in the MT program since the two-year program was introduced in 2016. The course was developed and implemented in response to a 2015 provincial policy directive requiring teacher education programs to address the teaching of linguistically diverse classrooms, regardless of age, grade, or subject being taught. Over the past decade, a team of course instructors has worked collaboratively, meeting quarterly and sharing syllabi, resources, and assignments.

As part of a program review in 2022–23, the leadership team of the MT program made a commitment to enhance the J/I stream with a focus on arts integration and discipline-specific instruction in drama and dance. This decision was grounded in the understanding that learning in, through, and about the arts is important to the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development of learners (Felleman-Fattal, 2017; Halverson & Sawyer, 2022; Nova Scotia Department of Education, n.d.). The instructional team of the “Supporting English Language Learners” course welcomed the opportunity to

introduce J/I teacher candidates to drama as a pedagogy embracing linguistic diversity across the curriculum and supporting language learning in content areas.

To facilitate this intervention, three course instructors partnered with a drama specialist, who is a co-instructor in the MT program. Moments into our first planning meeting, we were readily identifying multiple points of connection. While multilingualism, multimodal expression, and the creation of identity texts are included in the “Supporting English Language Learners” course syllabus, the drama toolbox provided more possibilities to engage teacher candidates with their full communicative repertoires and work collaboratively with their texts. We determined that a workshop in each J/I cohort would be an effective way to explore the links between multilingualism, drama, and teacher identity.

Multilingualism, Translanguaging, and Identity

Multilingual learners, referred to as English language learners (ELLs) in Ontario Ministry of Education documents (e.g., OMOE, 2007) bring with them prior knowledge and experiences that enrich the classroom environment. An asset-based approach to supporting these learners involves integrating pedagogical practices that challenge monolingualism and encourage learners to access prior knowledge in home languages while acquiring English and learning content in English-medium classrooms. Translanguaging pedagogy challenges previous practices that marginalized language practices, thereby dismantling socially constructed linguistic categories (García et al., 2021; Wei & García, 2021; Vogel & García, 2017). Translanguaging theory acknowledges that students possess one rich linguistic repertoire from which they select features to use in social interactions and to create meaning (Vogel & García, 2017). In pedagogical practices, translanguaging encourages multilingual students to leverage all languages they know as a resource to facilitate new learning, rather than considering the use of non-dominant languages as a hindrance or problem (Thomas et al., 2022). In addition, translanguaging has been posited as a decolonizing project in that it challenges the existence of named languages as complete entities and creates spaces for social justice and transformative education (S. Lau & Van Viegen 2020; Wei & García, 2022).

Translanguaging spaces are created in classrooms that embrace collaborative structures, multilingual/multimodal instructional methods, and multilingualism (Garcia & Kleyn, 2016; Li & Luo, 2017). Several resources, such as the “Translanguaging in Curriculum and Instruction” guide for educators (Hesson et al., 2014), which offer strategies to incorporate translanguaging in the classroom and employ an asset-based approach to supporting multilingual learners are introduced to teacher candidates in the course (Cummins et al., 2015; M. Lau, 2018; Rajendram et al., 2022). Often, these activities focus on students’ identities, experiences, and perspectives. A range of activities encourages students to investigate their identities by creating artifacts and engaging in the production of multimodal texts, incorporating poetry, visual texts, digital storytelling, and photovoice (Cummins et al., 2015; M. Lau, 2018; Rajendram et al., 2022). Through these activities, teachers act as co-learners, guiding while also learning from students about their experiences, cultures, and knowledge. Implementing multimodal identity activities ensures that multilingual students engage in meaningful experiences rather than focusing on routine tasks, especially while learning a new language. Furthermore, the use of identity-focused activities “repudiates the devaluation of identity that often occurs among English language learners” (Cummins et al., 2015, p. 577). By way of illustrating the impact of these texts, the teacher candidates are asked to create their own identity texts and share them with the instructors.

Drama in Education

Drama in education has been conceptualized in multiple ways by scholars, policymakers, and practitioners. In Ontario, drama is a discrete strand of the curriculum with its own set of content standards

and defined processes (OMOE, 2009, 2010). In practice, drama is often used as a methodology for curriculum integration (Booth, 2005; Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; Sanchez et al., 2023; Swartz, 2014). In arts-infused classrooms, drama might be employed, for example, to bring historical figures to life; to convene a town hall to solve an imaginary social problem in a fictional community; to assemble a mantle of experts to invent new technology; to explore math concepts through creative movement; or to practice language fluency and prosody through Readers' Theatre.

Lively pedagogical debates regarding drama process and product persist within drama in education communities. Several discourses have emerged regarding the value of drama: Does it exist in the curriculum as a strategy for developing skills and competencies required in the creative marketplace? Or does it exist to serve a social agenda (Gallagher, 2016)? Gallagher's (2018) conceptualization of drama as a relational space was foundational for our work together:

Drama is a space where caring for others and thinking of the world in more relational ways can be foregrounded as a condition of creating, learning, and being human. Further, initial reluctance and fears can be overcome and the important line between one person's concerns and another's can be realized. (p.18)

The conceptualization of drama as a space conjures a sense of possibility, openness, and relationality. In the drama space, the learners—teacher candidates and students in a classroom alike—journey together into realms that resonate with personal, social, and cultural relevance. Personal stories are shared, identities are revealed, and connections to world issues are made. Drama takes place, primarily, in uncharted territory, requiring students and teachers to navigate the terrain of multiple, complex, intersectional identities and languages that are temporarily and provisionally assembled in the space. What is created and shared in the drama space comes from the lived experiences, thoughts, and feelings of the participants in the room. The work is personal, and the community sharing is a celebration of multiple identities, multiple languages, and multiple modes of expression.

Drama and Multilingualism

The drama classroom can be a multilingual space in which teacher candidates and students in classrooms are liberated from word-to-word translation so that they can focus more broadly and deeply on communicating thoughts and feelings. García and Otheguy (2020) argue that translanguaging incorporates “an understanding of how different modes, including our bodies, our gestures, and our lives etc., add to the semiotic meaning-making repertoire that is involved in the act of communication” (p. 24). Emotional engagement has been found to unlock and expand language capacities (Galante, 2022), as has an embodied pedagogical approach (Campbell & Tigan, 2022). While these studies gesture toward a powerful connection between drama and multilingualism, Dutton and Rushton (2022) note that challenging the dominance of monolingualism can be met with resistance, initially, and may require a concerted effort. Therefore, this workshop was offered as an initial exploration of personal story, the feelings invoked by those stories, and an expansion of the meaning-making repertoire, within a multilingual context.

The Process: From the Personal to the Shared

Identity Poems

A two-hour block with each cohort of J/I teacher candidates was allocated for the introduction of some key drama concepts and strategies. The drama specialist was meeting the teacher candidates for the first time during this classroom workshop, which was a constraint to creating the kind of drama space that Gallagher (2018) describes. It was a daunting task, but it led to meaningful pedagogical conversations and collaboration. It involved a critical examination and distillation of what is core and fundamental to drama education and its connection to multilingualism. It also required careful consideration about how to encourage personal sharing and creative risk-taking. Agency in authorship, personal selection of form and modality, and choice of audience became guiding principles in our planning.

Our critical and creative wheels began to turn, revolving around the notion of drama as a powerful modality for exploring the self in relationship to others, using multiple languages and drama conventions for multimodal expression. We wanted the teacher candidates to experience the power of their own stories in their own words, to engage courageously and artistically using drama strategies to voice and share their personal stories in ways that were meaningful to them. Our collective goal was to invite the teacher candidates to deepen their understanding of their own positionality, social location, and intersectionality and to embrace a dynamic and expansive linguistic space. This would create the foundation for a courageous space, a “truth-telling space” (San Pedro, 2017), where teacher candidates and their future students begin to trust that their unique selves and their differences are respected. Actor, playwright, and dub poet D’bi Young Anitafrika believes that we are all storytellers and that we come to understand ourselves and the world through stories. In an interview with Tom Power on CBC Radio in 2016, she offered this provocation to listeners:

What stories are you going to tell? With every story, you and I are shaping the world....
Each and every single one of us have this unique imprint and that imprint has the potential
to impact the world in magnificent ways. (Power, 2016)

This is the inspiration behind the simple yet profound exercise of writing an “*I am from*” poem. The exercise provides a structure for crafting a personal identity text, in the form of a poetic monologue. The structure is based on the pattern of a poem entitled “Where I’m From” by George Ella Lyon (1999). Each of the four instructors had modelled the use of *I am from...* poems in previous years. In the “Supporting English Language Learners” course, instructors used the poem structure to demonstrate the importance of honouring personal, social, racial, and cultural identity in language learning. Within the Intermediate/Senior drama course, the instructor focussed on theatre skills and the dramatic power of personal monologue. Through our collaborative planning, we all expanded our pedagogical approaches to using the poem. Translanguaging supported the cultivation of a highly creative social space and the introduction of specific drama techniques. Equally important was the growing understanding of how to encourage and scaffold multilingual processes within a drama course. Thus, our collaborative learning allowed us to design a learning activity that fostered creativity within an expanded linguistic territory. With sensitivity to the emotional labour of telling a personal story, we offered a choice of prompts. Using the same poetry pattern, teacher candidates were invited to begin each line of their poem with one of *I am from...*, *I find joy...*, or *I am*.

Our drama space became quiet and still as teacher candidates authored their own *I am from/I find joy/I am* poems/monologues with the invitation to use multiple languages. Many teacher candidates wrote in English only, but several used other languages, as did Lindsay, who wrote in Scottish Gaelic:

A bheil dealbhan sgaoilte agus cuimhneachain	In a wooden box in my basement
bho amannan a chaidh seachad	Are loose photos and memories from times past
Agus daoine nach eil ann tuilleadh	And people who are no longer
Tha mi bho na h-amannan sin	I am from these moments
Aosda ach cha dìochuimhneachadh	Aged but never forgotten
Ga mo cheangal riutha uile	Connecting me to them all

Our space then became very animated as teacher candidates took to their feet, walking and reading, exploring the rhythm, tonality, mood, and emotions of their poems. The next phase of our creative exploration involved sharing a few lines of their poems with a partner and then finding a way to combine their texts to create a new poem combining languages such as Mandarin, French, Korean, Arabic, and Urdu. The drama space was now a domain of co-creation that involved deep listening, reaching across differences, and making connections. This was a highly relational space. It was beginning to function as a multilingual, multimodal space—a “third space” (Rodricks, 2015)—wherein everyone would determine how much of themselves they wished to share and in what way. The collaborative meaning-making process is always a dynamic act of negotiation among the occupiers of the drama and linguistic space. The teacher provides structure and parameters, but agency to choose languages and drama forms rests with the creators.

Once the collaborative scripts were developed, teacher candidates began to breathe life into the text using a variety of choral speaking techniques that had been introduced at the beginning of the workshop. They now occupied a loud, messy space of engagement and meaning making. Beautiful words in multiple languages were whispered, shouted, echoed, and gestured, conjuring compelling images and evoking powerful emotions. Next, each pair shared their co-creation with another pair. They gave each other feedback, sharing what they noticed, what they appreciated, and what they wondered about. Following the partner share, a few groups offered to perform their poems for the entire class. The “imprint,” to use D’bi’s words (Power, 2016), was palpable, “magnificent” even. A sense of shared significance seemed to permeate the space. The experience transcended what Marcedo refers to as “literacy for domestication” (cited in Medina & Campano, 2006), the kind of restrictive language learning that relies on worksheets and drills. In this creative space, teacher candidates were free to create artful representations of themselves in relationship to one another and the world. Dorothy Heathcote (1991), considered internationally to be the pioneer of drama education, famously stated that an excellent teacher knows how to negotiate with significance. We think it is fair to say that some of these teacher candidates felt the significance of the moment and of their own voices shaped and crafted to leave an imprint on one another.

The Initial Response

To bring closure to the workshop, teacher candidates were invited to reflect on the connections to multilingual learning and to think about how they might use or adapt this activity for J/I students. They commented on the natural connection between the opportunity afforded by the dramatic exercises, the multiple languages, and their personal identities (Cummins et al., 2015; M. Lau, 2018). The reflections shared by the community of learners suggest that they were willing to wrestle with the tyranny of time and the social demands of artistic collaboration because the work was centred personally, socially, culturally, and linguistically in their own lived experiences. Generally, teacher candidates shared that they welcomed the opportunity to express themselves in several modes and were excited by the energy in the classroom. Perhaps the most poignant comment came from a teacher candidate who said, “I was the ELL who didn’t have any drama class before. I want to say thank you for creating such a safe and welcoming classroom for me.” Others made an explicit connection to the multilingualism theories we had been

discussing in class and communicated an emergent understanding of drama as an effective way to promote the multimodal dimension of translanguaging in their teaching.

Not surprisingly, given the limited time, there were questions and requests for more instructional support. Teacher candidates pondered the appropriate balance between English and home languages in the poem and whether there were translation tools that could be used to support translanguaging in this context. Similarly, they expressed concerns about time limits in their future role as classroom teachers. These reflections speak to the need for more work to be done. A door was opened, but more space was needed for greater exploration of the link between drama and multilingualism.

Final Steps: From Practice to Pedagogy

As a follow-up to this initial drama experience, teacher candidates from one section of the course were assigned the task of integrating two expectations from the drama strand of the *Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1–8, The Arts* (OMOE, 2009) into their final assignment—the development of a unit plan for a multilingual classroom. The unit plans were creative and engaging and explicitly used techniques from the drama workshop in their instructional design process, demonstrating integration of new knowledge and a willingness to engage with drama to create multilingual spaces in their classrooms. The activities were workshopped with other teacher candidates as part of the presentation of their unit plans.

In a Grade 8 Geography unit plan titled “Global inequities: Economic development and quality of life,” a group of teacher candidates introduced a multilingual poem called “To Make Use of Water” by Safia Elhilo (2019) as an entry point to a discussion of interconnections between access to water, economic development, and quality of life. The poem is an excellent example of a multilingual text and raises critical questions about language, power, and identity. Following a discussion about some of the social-justice issues implied in the poem, groups of teacher candidates were asked to create a tableau for each stanza to share with the rest of the class. The instructional notes in the lesson plan incorporated several techniques from the workshop, including the use of non-verbal modes of communication such as gestures, facial expressions, and body stance.

Another group designed a Grade 6 Social Studies unit focusing on climate change. In their overview of the unit plan, the teacher candidates incorporated several languages, which reflected the linguistic repertoires of the group members. In a lesson intended to deepen understanding of the interconnectedness of our actions, students were asked to role-play various countries that have participated in international climate-change conferences. The lesson plan included a script in English for each country, but students were encouraged to dramatize and/or translate it into other languages and to enhance their reading of the lines with gestures and facial expressions. During the workshop in class, several groups included multiple languages as well as gesture and movement in their script reading, indicating new-found comfort with the integration of multilingualism and drama.

Discussion and Conclusion

Stemming from a commitment to incorporate drama curriculum expectations, multilingualism, and identity exploration in the J/I teacher panel of the MT program, the integration of the drama workshop into the “Supporting English Language Learners” course offered teacher candidates a most meaningful experience. Teacher candidates were introduced to the ways in which both drama and translanguaging draw upon the use of the body, gesture, movement, and voice to enrich the semiotic process of making and communicating meaning (García & Otheguy, 2020). Teacher candidates shared their individual identity poems and created new multilingual texts, which they brought to life using dramatic techniques. They encountered a space for learning, in which language was embodied, felt, experienced, and emoted

(Galante, 2022). They were able to see how drama techniques such as a change in tone, a variation in volume, the extension of an arm, a turn-away from the audience, or a change in facial expression can significantly inform or alter meaning, even, and perhaps especially, when multiple languages are used. While most of the teacher candidates in the workshop relied upon English, we believe that we have scratched the surface of the potential for this work and hope to further explore the interconnectedness between multilingualism and drama in the future. Perhaps, as Dutton and Rushton (2022) found, a widespread embrace of multilingualism will require a more sustained effort and more engagement with drama techniques.

A significant outcome of this initiative was our collective experience of the power of collaboration among colleagues who were motivated to learn from and with one another. The instructors of the “Supporting English Language Learners” course learned new techniques and approaches from drama that enhanced their previous experience with identity and translanguaging pedagogy. Similarly, the drama instructor deepened her understanding of the explicit links between drama and translanguaging and is better prepared to design drama instruction that embraces and celebrates multilingualism. Equally important was the collaboration among teacher candidates. Throughout the workshop, they engaged in group activities that encouraged them to experiment with multiple modes of communication through language. The classroom environment provided a supportive and enriching space where teacher candidates could learn from one another’s experiences, perspectives, and expertise. Later, they collaborated with each other to create a lesson plan for multilingual J/I classrooms that incorporated translanguaging pedagogy and drama.

The incorporation of drama in the multilingual classroom offers promising avenues for teacher candidates’ further exploration and development. The feedback from teacher candidates following the workshop was overwhelmingly positive, emphasizing the positive impact of drama on their understanding of the potential of multilingualism in the classroom. Further, the workshop provided teacher candidates with practical tools and strategies to apply drama and translanguaging in their future teaching practice. Future iterations of the course could delve deeper into the integration of drama techniques, multimodal expression, and multilingual pedagogies across the J/I curricula. The ongoing commitment to collaboration, the proactive approach to addressing language barriers, and the integration of drama expectations and multilingual pedagogies all offer future educators a pivotal role in creating inclusive and empowering learning environments for all students, particularly multilingual learners.

In conclusion, our collaborative effort exemplifies an innovative and effective approach to preparing teachers to work with multilingual learners. By creating their own multilingual identity texts and collaborating with their peers to perform new co-creations, teacher candidates transformed their own learning space. Building on this experience, they integrated drama into lessons and units appropriate for their future multilingual J/I classrooms.

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Appendix: Example of an "I am from" Poem by Kevin Mulligan

I can't help it
I get bored, and I-
Hey, what if I wrote a song, or drew a cartoon
or scribbled, or dreamed, or made a new recipe or-
Mmm, pasta. With some garlic toast on the side.

I am nature person
I am from T'kemplúps
I miss setétkwe
squeltús
"Mountains"
"Rivers"
flowing past forgotten children
I
am
quiet, sometimes. Other times, I'm not.
It depends.
I am
trying to think of another line,
but I keep getting distracted-
songs, cartoons,
recipes, scribbles,
dreams

What if
who I am
was OK
with
everyone

What if
I
am
accepted