

English Language Acquisition through Dance and Theater:
Impact and Pathways

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Perspectives

While most instruction for engaging English language learners in public schools has emphasized the development of an individual's ability to understand and apply words and phrases, recent research has focused on use of language through authentic social interaction, in a context relevant to the user (Hawkins, 2004). However, the study of traditional subjects may not provide sufficient social interaction and community to build language skills in schools with large numbers of English language learners. In addition, affective variables may impede English language acquisition in certain school contexts. These "affective filters" such as motivation, confidence and anxiety have been shown to either promote or impede successful English language acquisition (Krashen, 2003). When a negative filter is raised, through low self-esteem or anxiety, it blocks "input" necessary for acquisition. On the other hand, high motivation and self-confidence are prerequisites for acquisition and successful application of a second language.

There is growing evidence that dance and theater instruction supports improvement in the affective variables identified by Krashen (Deasy, 2002). However, the provision of dance and theater alone is insufficient to promote successful English language acquisition. What matters is how they are taught, how well they are taught, by whom, and in what context.

This study investigated whether dance and theater instruction within a public school setting supported English language acquisition and application. The researchers' initial perspective was to recognize that there were qualities of learning inherent to dance and theater that also might facilitate learning in other areas. These artistic qualities were not simply instrumental to other learning. They were inherent to the artistic process while also serving as mediating factors that supported other dimensions of learning, such as English language acquisition.

Specifically, the study sought to answer these questions:

1. Do dance and theater instruction have an impact on English language acquisition?
2. If so, are there mediating variables, inherent to the art forms, which support English language acquisition through dance and theater?
3. What program characteristics are most likely to lead to positive effects on these mediating variables and English language acquisition?

Setting and Methods

The study was conducted over 10 years in public elementary and middle schools in New York City. Students were designated English language learners in grades 3 through 8 ($n = 897$). The students received up to 25 weeks of theater or dance instruction from visiting teaching artists through DELTA, a program of ArtsConnection, a New York City provider of arts education.

The teaching artists partnered with classroom and ESL teachers, who were expected to sustain instruction and coordinate the arts learning with ongoing language usage.

The instruction included extensive use of arts and non-arts vocabulary to describe the artistic and aesthetic processes and criteria. Students collaboratively developed their own artistic products and practiced peer reviews, assessing their own work and the work of their classmates using descriptive artistic language. The program increasingly emphasized digital learning, reflection and assessment through the use of video, iPads and student-constructed ePortfolios of their work in the arts.

Data collection included:

1. New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test (NYSESLAT), a measure designed to assess the English language proficiency of English language learners – administered each year
2. The Classroom Assessment of Learning and Teaching (CALT) observational assessment. During observations, researchers rated students on 20 dimensions of student learning and rated teachers and artists on 11 characteristics of effective teaching and partnership (Horowitz, 2008). The CALT strategy was employed in 204 classroom observations throughout the school year
3. Teacher assessment of each of their students (n = 291) on dimensions of cognitive, social and personal development, administered in spring 2009.
4. Teacher surveys, administered each year.

Results

NYSESLAT. An analysis was conducted comparing 2013-2014 NYSESLAT scores of DELTA students with non-participating students. The treatment group (n = 347) consisted of students who met these criteria: (1) DELTA students during the 2013-2014 school year, (2) available NYSESLAT scores for 2 consecutive years (2012-2013 and 2013-2014). The comparison group (n = 1988) was selected from a pool of students who met these criteria: (1) students within the same NYC network as treatment students during the 2013-2014 school year but who did not participate in DELTA, (2) available NYSESLAT scores for 2 consecutive years (2012-2013 and 2013-2014). The control and comparison groups were matched according to SES, as determined by free and reduced lunch. Some students who tested out through NYSESLAT were not included in the analysis, as their records were no longer in the network system.

Each student in the treatment and comparison groups was assigned a score indicating whether they had Progressed, Slipped, or Stalled on their NYSESLAT scores from 2012-2013 to 2013-2014. Results indicate that PD-DELTA students performed significantly better than the comparison group.

NYSESLAT Comparison: 2013-2014

	Progressed	Stalled	Slipped
PD-DELLTA Students	60.7%	36.6%	2.7%
Comparison Group	42.2%	49.7%	8.1%

These results were consistent with exploratory analyses from the previous two years.

NYSESLAT Comparison: 2011-2013

2011-2012	Progressed	Stalled	Slipped
PD-DELLTA Students	43.2%	48.7%	8.1%
Comparison Group	34.1%	47.3%	18.6%
2012-2013	Progressed	Stalled	Slipped
PD-DELLTA Students	42.9%	54.5%	2.6%
Comparison Group	31.6%	60.8%	7.6%

An additional analysis was conducted comparing progress on pre-test and post-test New York State English as a Second Language Test (NYSESLAT) scores of Digital DELLTA (a recent version of the DELLTA program emphasizing digital instruction and assessment) students with non-participating students. The treatment group consisted of students who met these criteria: (1) a Digital DELLTA student during the 2015-2016 or 2016-2017 school year, (2) available NYSESLAT scores for 2 consecutive years (2014-2015 and 2015-2016; or 2015-2016 and 2016-2017). The comparison group was selected from a pool of students who met these criteria: (1) students from the same schools and school years who did not participate in Digital DELLTA in either year, (2) available NYSESLAT scores for 2 consecutive years.

Each student in the treatment and comparison groups was assigned a score indicating their performance level (1 = Entering; 2 = Emerging; 3 = Transitioning; 4 = Expanding; 5 = Commanding). Mean scores were calculated for the treatment and control groups. Because there are 5 possible performance levels, mean scores could range from 1 to 5.

Results indicate that Digital DELLTA students made significantly better progress on the NYSESLAT than the comparison group. Digital DELLTA students on average increased by 1.37 levels. Comparison students increased by 1.02 levels.

NYSESLAT Comparison: 2014-2017

	Pre-Test NYSESLAT	Post-Test NYSESLAT
Digital DELLTA Students	2.39	3.76
Comparison Group	2.64	3.66

CALT. An observational assessment strategy, the Classroom Assessment of Learning and Teaching (CALT), was developed for evaluating ArtsConnection classes. During observations, researchers rated students on 20 dimensions of student learning and rated teachers and artists on 11 characteristics of effective teaching and partnership. The CALT strategy was employed in 204 classroom observations of the DELLTA program.

According to an overall analysis of CALT data, student achievement was strongest in these 7 areas:

1. Motivation
2. Perseverance/Task Persistence
3. Ability to Focus
4. Ownership of Learning
5. Spatial Awareness
6. Self-Confidence
7. Cooperative Learning Skills/Collaboration

Analysis indicates:

- Scores in each area increased during the artist residencies.
- Scores at the end of artist residencies were significantly higher than scores at the beginning of the residencies.
- Scores increased at both elementary and middle schools
- Scores increased in both dance and theater residencies.

	Beginning of Residency	End of Residency
Motivation	75.5%	83.0%
Perseverance/Task Persistence	63.8%	74.2%
Ability to Focus	61.3%	74.0%
Ownership of Learning	51.4%	61.9%
Spatial Awareness	50.0%	72.5%
Self-Confidence	51.8%	69.5%
Cooperative Learning Skills/Collaboration	62.0%	65.0%

According to a *t*-test there were significant increases in Motivation, Focus and Self-Confidence ($p < .05$). Overall combined scores significantly increased from 53.5% to 67.9% ($p < .01$). There were significant increases in overall scores in both elementary school and middle school residencies ($p < .01$).

	Beginning of Residency	End of Residency
Elementary School	51.1%	66.7%
Middle School	56.2%	69.7%

There were significant increases in overall scores in dance and theater residencies ($p < .01$).

	Beginning of Residency	End of Residency
Dance	58.7%	72.7%
Theater	52.5%	67.4%

DELLTA Student Assessment

Student assessment. DELLTA middle school teachers were asked to assess each of their students ($n = 291$) on dimensions of cognitive, social and personal development. Results indicated improvement through DELLTA in students' Motivation, Task Persistence, Focus, Self-Confidence and Risk-Taking, Cooperative Learning, Expression, Ownership of Learning and English Language Acquisition.

A secondary analysis compared the student assessment data with field researchers' assessment of teachers' ability to collaborate effectively with ArtsConnection artists and to benefit from ArtsConnection professional development. Analysis indicates that positive student outcomes were significantly associated with teachers' growth through professional development and collaboration with artists.

A series of stepwise multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine the best predictors of improved student outcomes. **Effective collaboration between teachers and artists** was the most overall salient predictor of improved student outcomes.

Specific regression analyses demonstrated:

- **DELLTA professional development and effective collaboration between teachers and artists** predicts improved student **motivation** ($r = .34$; $F = 16.44$; $p < .001$).
- **Effective collaboration between teachers and artists** predicts improved student **task persistence**. ($r = .29$; $F = 22.16$; $p < .001$).

- **Effective collaboration between teachers and artists** predicts improved student **focus** ($r = .30$; $F = 23.59$; $p < .001$).
- **Effective collaboration between teachers and artists** and **DELLTA professional development** predicts improved student **self-confidence and risk-taking** ($r = .29$; $F = 11.65$; $p < .001$).
- **Effective collaboration between teachers and artists** predicts improved student **cooperative learning** ($r = .38$; $F = 42.14$; $p < .001$).
- **Effective collaboration between teachers and artists** and **DELLTA professional development** predicts improved **expressive skills** ($r = .31$; $F = 13.12$; $p < .001$).
- **DELLTA professional development** and **effective collaboration between teachers and artists** and predicts improved student **ownership of learning** ($r = .40$; $F = 23.58$; $p < .001$).
- **DELLTA professional development** predicts improved **English language acquisition** ($r = .29$; $F = 22.19$; $p < .001$).

Conclusions and Significance

Analysis indicates that the dance and theater education within DELLTA programs support English language acquisition. This is likely due to the use of language in an authentic context that students value, in an environment that rewards self-expression, and in a context with comprehensive professional development, partnership and organizational support.

The NYSESLAT data indicate improved English Language acquisition among DELLTA students, as compared to control students in similar settings who did not participated in dance and theater. The student assessments provide additional evidence for program effects. The CALT observational analysis supplies a framework for understanding the potential pathways, or mediating variables, that support language acquisition.

According to the observation data, student development was strongest in these seven areas: (1) motivation, (2) perseverance/task persistence, (3) ability to focus, (4) ownership of learning, (5) spatial awareness, (6) self-confidence, (7) collaborative learning skills. Students made significant gains in each of these areas throughout the school year. Analysis suggests that these are intermediate variables that lower negative affective filters and serve as the mechanism for connecting dance and theater learning to acquisition and application of English language skills.

Most likely, the DELTA students acquired English skills through using language in an engaging, authentic context that they cared about. The students were committed to their artistic projects and employed English for a purpose that they were personally invested in. This sharply contrasted with other, non-arts, school tasks designed to support English language acquisition, such as rote drills and test preparation. Students are more likely acquire and apply English when they care about the content they are trying to express.

References

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