

Breaking the Cultural Hierarchy: Using Drama to Teach English in Samoa

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English is connected to teaching culture and ways of being and thinking. U.S. American ideals are interwoven into language itself. Based on Rivka Rocchio's experience teaching in local schools in Western Samoa with the Peace Corps, this article shares how using drama-based pedagogy offered chances to level teaching missteps and misunderstandings that had previously exacerbated the power structures involved with teaching English in a foreign country. The article ends with an example of a lesson that demonstrates pedagogy in action. By exploring a case study and the challenges of practicing culturally responsive pedagogies, Rocchio advocates for the power of drama to address sites of contact between cultures.

By the year 2020, almost one third of the school-age population in the United States will be non-White, while teachers are almost entirely educated from middle class White communities (Carignan, Sanders and Pourdavood, 2005). In order to navigate with nuance the sites of power, culture, and social mores, more teachers need to accept intercultural pedagogies, and teach with an awareness of the cultural realities of their students. After five years as a high school drama and English educator within the U.S. public school system, I joined the Peace Corps and was sent to Samoa for 27 months. As I learned to navigate my role as an English as a Second Language teacher in rural schools in Leulumoega, Samoa, I saw the necessity for reshaping my pedagogy using drama¹ with a focus on intercultural competence. The use of drama practices that center on physical embodiment, allow for the creation of scenic environments, and embrace risk-taking serve to navigate power imbalances between teachers and students, *and* the power dynamics of opposing cultures. Grounded in classroom observation and teaching reflection, this article articulates mislearnings from pre-service teacher training and provides a framework for the use of drama as an intercultural pedagogy for teaching English as a Second Language.

The experience of being unprepared to teach within culturally specific settings is common for pre-service teachers. Hollins and Guzman (2005) note that prospective teachers' negative attitudes and beliefs about different cultures led to an unwillingness to teach in schools that did not match their own cultural backgrounds. It takes a true cross-cultural experience, like teaching in a foreign country, to understand not only the theoretical framing of culture, but to also, as L.M. Walters et al (2009) posit, "recognize the importance of culture, its connection to the community and the relationships among language, culture and practice" (p. S152).

¹ A note on the term *drama*: For the purposes of this article, when I use the term *drama* I am speaking towards creative dramatics employed within an educational context. Creative drama, defined in 1977 by the Children's Theatre Association of America, "is an improvisational non-exhibitional, process-oriented form of drama, where participants are guided by a leader to imagine, enact, and reflect upon human experiences, real or imagined" (Davis and Behm). Within this definition, the drama pedagogy I describe utilizes the direct experience of learning through dramatic play.

It only took teaching a few lessons in Leulumoega² to recognize that my pre-service teaching training did little to prepare me to teach beyond a White, middle-class, monolingual environment.³ I was reproducing power and cultural systems that did not translate to the Samoan population with whom I was working. Even more than that, I was devaluing the cultural attitudes and beliefs of my new home. For example, some of the books I brought with me to teach vocabulary described culturally inappropriate concepts and terms. One book, which asked students to write about their summer vacation, described sunbathing on a beach, and visiting Disneyland. Samoans avoid the sun, often carrying umbrellas and blaming the sun for sickness or weakness. Obviously, Disneyland was a foreign concept, but the very idea of vacation, a time away from work in order to rest, is a Western concept. Teaching vacation as a concept reproduces a system of values that are not universal. Since there is no way to make education a one-size-fits-all process, I needed to adapt my methodologies to become more flexible to the target culture.

USING INTERCULTURALISM TO UNPACK MISLEARNINGS AND ASSUMPTIONS

As an English teacher in a community where English was not spoken, I wondered how I might teach the language without pushing the cultural values and ideas that are wrapped up therein. Interculturalism seeks to negotiate and honor the relationship created by the spaces between cultures, a space often dominated by troublesome power dynamics. Interculturalism scholar Knowles (2010) advises that to create interculturality, one must ask how to approach “from below” instead of reopening the inequities of cultural mix (p. 6). In her attempts to create a sociosemiotic mapping of culture and theatre, Pavis (1992) articulates the contact between target culture and source culture. Particularly important to note within a conversation around

² Leulumoega, in A'ana district, is a rural village on the northwest coast of the island of Upolu in Western Samoa.

³ Roxanne Schroeder-Arce (2017) writes compellingly about the inability of white pre-service teachers to move beyond “an acknowledgement of privilege and ... toward racial justice” (p. 106). I fell into her designation of seeing race and ethnicity from a framework that whitewashed diverse perspectives in class by stopping at the recognition of the privilege of whiteness.

interculturalism and theatre is her hourglass model, which places source culture at one end and target culture at the other. Hourglasses only maintain movement by shifting from one end to the other. Between each cultural end lies the elements of theatre-making (preparatory work of actors, choice of theatrical form, perspective of the adaptors, etc) (Pavis, 1992, p. 4), and the shape begs for a disruption of the hierarchy. While applied specifically to theatre, the same theory pertains to the use of creative drama.

As an outsider in Samoan culture, I felt the hourglass pinch between my Western perspective and the Fa'asamoa, Samoan way of life. My culture, language and skin color were immediately obvious distinctions from the rest of the school's population, community, and teachers. As the dominant cultural ideologies that I felt had indoctrinated me during teaching preparation emerged as problematic towards teaching in a foreign country, I came to pursue how to teach without a complete understanding of the context and the environment of my students. In other words, I gathered data from my teaching observations, speaking with other Peace Corps Volunteers, and testing assumptions in the classroom around approaching the intersections of Samoan and U.S. American cultures in my classroom that rejected favoritism and promoted understanding.

In unpacking my assumptions, I found the following attitudes that needed shifting in order for me to develop a more responsible pedagogy:

1. The United States represents a First World country. Every other country falls in relationship to that framing.
2. Bilingualism meant biculturalism.
3. Cross cultural teaching is the goal. The key to success is in finding cultural commonalities.
4. Teacher-centered classrooms have little value.

By explaining my journey through these mislearnings, I will reveal a more communicative, clear, and intercultural pedagogical approach.

Assumption #1: USA First⁴

In addressing my assumptions, I started with the consideration of the terms First and Third World. Categorizing countries as First or Third World implies that one lies numerically above the other. This ranking, rebranded in terms like ‘distance to frontier’ and ‘developing economies’ by the economic frameworks of the IMF and World Bank, values Western and industrialized cultures as inherently better than the rest of the world. The equation of First World countries as better than Third World countries is false, but as a representative of a First World country, I found myself in an undeserved position of privilege. Recognizing what Villegas and Lucas (2002) term sociocultural consciousness (p. 21), the position of power afforded to me as a U.S. American, meant that many within Samoan culture saw me as having assets I did not necessarily possess, like wealth or connections. Although my position of power was overstated by many within the community, and often undeserved, I recognized that my beliefs were given more validity and credence.

There are many examples of my privilege and undeserved position of power or the unmerited assumption of my knowledge, but one of my favorite examples was a man who constantly asked me to get him a prosthetic leg. He had lost his leg from gout and assumed that “since I knew Obama, I could get him a fake leg.” He would introduce me to people as “the woman who would get him a new leg,” and always demanded I eat first, a sign of respect. Even after two years of insisting that I could not provide what he wanted, he continued to afford me respect and kindness.

Once I recognized that my sociocultural perspective as a “minority” white person in the Samoan village was given attention and privileges that would not otherwise be granted to a person of my gender or age, I sought to use the attention to advocate for those who are often powerless in Samoan culture: children. For example, I did this by advocating for classes to be held when teachers wanted to cancel and

⁴ Writing this in 2019, I feel compelled to make mention of Trump, who won the presidency by championing ideas around asserting the primacy of white America. His isolationist slogan “America First,” borrowed from various past politicians, accompanies a number of political policies meant to maintain (or assert) America as first, best, and remarkable. Rooting out the underpinning mentalities that created my initial perception that the USA was a First world country meant going back to the national and jingoistic framing of the U.S. as “the leader of the free world.”

dismiss, and by pushing for a rotating system of student helpers instead of what had been used previously—the lowest performing student (usually a student who couldn't afford school fees) being pulled out of classes to act as an errand-runner. Using a position of privilege to carry messages from the minority group is what Bartolomé (2002) calls “border-crossing,” a critical step towards balancing power (p. 179). While the structure or valuing of First and Third World rankings seems, in many ways unchangeable, by using my position of privilege to advocate for the voices within the cultural framework that most needed them, I try to equalize power dynamics.

Assumption #2: Bilingualism / Biculturalism

Another of my incorrect generalizations was the belief that bilingualism was the same as biculturalism. In Leulumoega, there were a handful of students who were fluent in English. These students were great assets to me, often helping me translate complicated directions from English to Samoan. But through them, I was able to see that there were simply some concepts that did not translate. For example, while studying emotions, a fluent student named Siu was participating in a role-play that required him to apologize for breaking a picture frame. Siu smiled as he went through the scene. By the time he finished his apology, he was laughing. Perhaps he felt pride with his fluency and thus his emotional portrayal did not match the text. I asked him to try it again, but to use his body to show contrition. As he went through the dialogue again, I saw him assume a posture that I had often seen in Samoa when youth asked for forgiveness: a child furiously scratching the space behind the ear, avoiding eye contact, and bent at the knees. He was using Samoan body language and English words. Language has more behind it than word-to-word processing, and, even at its best, translation is an approximation.

When students learn another language, especially if they are learning it as a foreign language, at first they can only use it in the cultural context they are most familiar with. For example, Siu may never need to apologize with U.S. American body language and English language. Because of this, linguistic researchers Ronowicz and Yallop (1999) write, no one knows the “whole” of any language, they can only adapt it appropriately within their own culture (p. 4). It

becomes near impossible to separate language from culture, or vice versa. Even with fluent students, cross-cultural understanding cannot be assumed.

The idea of mistranslation seems particularly adept for the relationship between English and Samoan. Psychological anthropologist Mageo (2001) draws a distinction between *gagana* (language) and *nanu* (to speak a foreign language) points out that an alternative translation of the word *nanu* means “to mispronounce badly” (p. 69). The word itself is loaded, as if speaking a foreign language meant you were already culturally bound for failure. Not only did I experience this through observations of my students, but also through my own attempts to communicate. My Samoan mispronunciations converted to my frequent ridicule, the most embarrassing being when speaking to a high chief in the village and losing the definition between *come here* (*susū mai*) and *suck it* (*susu mai*). My privilege meant that these missteps were laughed off, not punished.

Assumption #3: Finding Commonalities

I first understood the limitations of finding commonalities as I came across concepts in Samoan culture that I couldn't translate to a U.S. American context. For example, there appear to be no Samoan words to adequately describe the Western concepts of inner self, personality, or character. The popular saying *teu le va*, “take care of the relationship” offers clues to the Samoan sense of identity found in dynamic with the community. Contrast this statement with the Greek dictum “know thyself,” these sayings suggest something of the difference between Western and Samoan traditions (Poasa, Mallinckrodt & Suzuki, 2001. p. 38). These concepts link to cultural values—the importance placed on individual over community—and are not simple matters of translating words.

Entering the Samoan culture meant that I had to adapt much of my individualistic identity and adjust to the cultural norms of Samoa, the *fa'asamoa*. *Fa'asamoa*, which translates to “the ways of Samoa,” is a way of being in the world which places a strong emphasis on external public features like status, role and relationships. This ties to concepts that are difficult for Westerners to understand, like the *Matai* (chief)

system, the importance of aiga (extended family), and the role of the church. It is a Samoan's duty to be in service to these three pillars of society throughout their life. These power systems are rooted in inherent ideas of culture and nationhood.

Perhaps because of this collectivist cultural attitude, power flows through villages and in classrooms in rigidly defined ways closely linked to ideas of nationhood. A 2000 study published in *The Counseling Psychologist* compared how students from Western Samoa, American Samoa and the United States responded to a number of scenarios involving blame and responsibility, and found that students responses were greatly linked to cultural beliefs and attributions. The study found that both Western and American Samoans were much more likely to rely on hierarchical systems of power to assign blame, which supports the conclusion that Samoan society is organized vertically, and hierarchically. Because of this, challenging power relationships within a classroom environment means questioning some of the founding principles of Samoan culture and ideas of nation.

While a 2013 Samoan law banned corporal punishment from all schools, corporal punishment is still prevalent and pervasive in the school system. As an educator, I had a difficult time accepting teaching in an environment in which corporal punishment was a constant means of correcting student behaviors. The types of punishments I saw, like students being hit with switches, slapped, or having their ears twisted, created violent learning environments. Many of my students were traumatized, afraid to speak in the classroom for fear of being hit if they were wrong. This fear meant that there were few classroom opportunities for students to explore alternative exchanges of power with their teachers. While I knew that I was imposing my cultural attitudes in doing it, I made it very clear to my students that our classroom was a safe space in which they would never be physically punished. I chose to frame this non-violent stance as an opportunity to advocate for the safety of the children in my school, but I know that some teachers and some parents felt like I did not have a strict enough classroom and was teaching U.S. American values, not the fa'asamoa. In fact, some students struggled to control their behavior and focus, as they found my classroom a space in which they could act out without threat or act of violence.

There are significant limits to finding commonalities, or attempting

border-crossing as a “meet in the middle” pattern. I could not remove my U.S. American beliefs from some of my teaching pedagogy, ie in regards to corporal punishment, and I came to respect that my Samoan counterparts had their own immovable beliefs and values which fit their cultural context and I allowed for our differences. Perhaps at best, a conversation and small moments of traction and change can happen between powerbrokers at the places of immovability in ways that begin to change each culture.

Assumption #4: The Condemnation of Teacher-Centered Classrooms

Finding a respect for difference is not limited to culture, but also to teaching styles. Teacher-centered classrooms are vilified in the U.S., particularly with young students, but commonplace in Samoa. Teacher-centered classrooms have the danger of falling into the trap of what Friere (1972) calls a banking model of education, in which the typical teacher/student relationship follows a “subject/object” model, wherein the teacher has agency and knowledge, and students are “lifeless and petrified,” waiting to have knowledge bestowed upon them (p. 71). This banking model of education, in which “teachers know everything and students know nothing...the teachers talk and the students listen meekly, the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it,” runs counter to the equivocating power structure of a classroom in which drama is used (Freire, p. 71). Much of the teaching I observed while overseas involved Friere’s “banking education” as a popular method of teaching. Teachers often did little more than drill content through rote memorization and repetition.

Given the fa’asamoa power hierarchy which is in the fabric of all of Samoan culture, it makes sense that this top down approach functioned well with Samoan learners. While I knew I could not fully adopt this teaching practice, through observing my counterparts I came to respect that the vertically aligned power structure of Samoan culture was a primary influence on why that dynamic functioned. Not only that, there were benefits to teacher-centered moments in lessons, especially within a language-learning environment.

A PEDAGOGICAL SHIFT TOWARDS DRAMA

Because of the collision of my assumptions and the realities of teaching English language learners in non-English speaking contexts and my background in theatre and drama, I recognized the necessity of adopting a pedagogical approach and leaned heavily into creative dramatics. While the components of the pedagogy themselves are useful separately in considering ethical intercultural teaching practices, I will describe how each of these stances manifested together within the context of one English lesson taught in Samoa.

The tenets of an interculturally informed approach for language teaching are as follows:

1. The achievement of authentic communication is not limited to the ability to speak another language, as it must also include **non-verbal forms of communication** that can be culturally specific. One of the best ways of developing this ease with communication is **the incorporation of the physical body in classroom activities**. Physicality can be a way of engaging learners at their individual levels.
2. In exploring language within stimuli-rich environments, students can very tangibly understand **the multiplicity of paths that conversations can take**. These inevitably create situations where students feel a compulsion to learn more in order to express themselves fully. Students are not pressured to find the single correct answer or word, but **can use language to express the subtleties** and multiple “correct” answers that are present in communication.
3. Accuracy and pronunciation are secondary to learning language patterns, and **feeling comfortable taking risks and making mistakes**.⁵ While there needs to be a period of time for receiving language passively (listening and reading), early

⁵ While this facet of the pedagogy appears to center on language acquisition over the application of drama, I am leaning on a broader understanding of the nature of drama, rooted in the teachings of Geraldine Siks. Siks insistence that drama’s incorporation within language arts learning acknowledged that the same drama-making skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) are at the root of “exploring language and gaining competence in oral comprehension, oral interpretation, and oral communication” (Rosenburg, 45). Because of this skill reciprocity, an emphasis on communication is not unique to language learning, but works as a tenet of a new dramatic pedagogy.

communicative production should be encouraged to promote **confidence**. This communicative approach can appropriate techniques from other methodologies (Total Physical Response, Audio-lingualism, Suggestopedia), but maintains the principle that **authentic and meaningful communication** should be the goal of all activities.

These pedagogical approaches in action can take a lot of paths, but in describing one lesson for Year 6 students which focused on community mapping, action verbs, and dialogue, and these principles come to focus. This lesson used what I knew of students' lives, and their community, to design instruction that moved from the familiar into spaces of learning—named by Villegas and Lucas (2002) as a key quality of building culturally responsible curriculum. After a class brainstorming session around important places in the village (plantation, market, church, school, home, etc.), students worked together to create a list of verbs that could happen in each place. In the first portion of the lesson, we designated sections of the classroom to represent specific locations, and students went to those spaces to perform embodied actions, creating a slide-show of tableau⁶ of what could happen there. Observing students verbally described what they saw, then wrote or drew pictures of the action. In small groups, students created short open-ended dialogues that could happen within each location. These two portions of the lesson combined the first two pedagogical tenets: culturally specific non-verbal communication and allowing for the multi-pronged directionality of authentic conversations. The lesson's final assessment asked students to both establish the community spaces inside the classroom, replete with props and realia and to move through their day in miniature.

In order to authentically assess each student, in the final assessment, I stepped in as teacher-in-role.⁷ I played shopkeeper and plantation worker in the mini-village. I asked questions like: What are you doing? What are you holding? These open-ended questions

⁶ Tableau, also called stage pictures, function to freeze actor bodies within a moment. This technique is useful in large group role-plays as they are silent ways of communicating story and information.

⁷ Teacher-in-role is a dramatic form popularized by Dorothy Heathcote. She believed that "leaders not always be themselves, but must assume attitudes or even full-fledged characters to direct the flow of the drama" (Rosenberg 37).

allowed for authentic communication in a co-created space. Wagner (2002) writes about drama's ability to construct a world, and create the pressure to communicate within that world, as being pivotal to student agency: "pressured to find answers on their own, they are actively learning" (p. 9). Within the context of the Samoan lesson, students determined their roles and were key creators in the action of the lesson. Because of this buy-in, students found the emotion at the heart of language communication, and were able to, as Wagner (2002) describes, "express themselves in a more mature manner and language than they could otherwise" (p. 10). They were free to speak without knowing the scripted answer.

CONCLUSION

Language is driven by the desire to communicate. Dramatic play creates spaces for authentic communication, although these are not neutral spaces. As Lazarus (2012) writes, "learning in theatre is best served when we foster in students a desire to inquire, experience, define, and reflect on the world fully and from multiple perspectives" (p. 223). Drama has the ability to equalize the power dynamic between students and teachers, and give agency to students. Drama is not *the answer*, but it is and can be part of the multi-pronged approach to inviting intercultural competency into all classrooms.

Not all teachers will have the desire or privilege to teach in Samoa or even to teach abroad, but the need for culturally responsive teaching is critical in every classroom. Using drama-based pedagogy allows for teachers to negotiate the dynamics of intercultural interaction with mindful attention toward points of cultural contact. The pedagogy outlined in this article is not only an effective way to teach English Language Learners but can instill a love of learning. Within this culturally-responsive pedagogy, I sought to work in ways that, as pedagogues Latta and Chan (2011) advocate, "validate students' cultural identit[ies] in classroom practices and instructional materials" (p. 29). In validating and legitimizing, I resist the temptation of telling my own story, or putting my cultural language in my students' mouths.

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