

# ENGAGING ESL STUDENTS

## Interactive Strategies for Classroom Teachers

By Kavita Rao

Two Marshallese high school students work diligently to write a script for a civics project about constitutional rights in the United States. The goal of the project is to provide an avenue for English as a second language (ESL) students to gain a deeper understanding of complex concepts they are studying in classes by exploring how these concepts are defined in their cultures and countries of origin. Using the Internet, digital cameras, and computers, the students create multimedia projects about the island they come from, pulling together historical information, civil rights, and personal experiences. They share their movies with their peers and submit the project to their social studies teacher for credit.

A group of elementary school students work together to act out a Pacific island legend. These students from Mexico, the Philippines, and Micronesia are part of a workshop for ESL students. The goal of the workshop is to develop critical language arts skills in a context that is fun and motivating for students of varying abilities. Through a process that scaffolds small drama strategies into a larger whole, the students learn how to use movement and action to depict scenes of a story. Working in groups, they devise ways to share concepts and put words to their actions, ultimately creating a play in which each student has a role. Without realizing it, these students develop vocabulary, comprehension, collaboration, and leadership skills in the process.

### An Illustrative Website for Teachers

Examples of the projects described above and related lesson plans can be found on a new Pacific Resources for Education and Learning (PREL) website titled, "Telling Stories: Drama and Multimedia Strategies for ESL Students." This website ([www.prel.org/eslstrategies](http://www.prel.org/eslstrategies)) is specifically geared toward classroom teachers who are looking for ways to learn from culturally and linguistically diverse students while engaging them in their learning. The website contains video samples and step-by-step instructions for teachers to implement the activities shown.

The projects featured on the website are part of an ongoing effort in the West Hawai'i Complex area of the Big Island. Since 1998, the West Hawai'i English for Second Language Learners (ESLL) program has partnered with several agencies to develop workshops for teachers, community members, and students, focusing primarily on ways to recognize and value students' cultural backgrounds. The site features work done by ESL students in elementary, middle, and high schools throughout West Hawai'i.

### Taking Culture into Consideration

The strategies and projects highlighted on the website have an important commonality. They highlight the cultural backgrounds of ESL children as strengths rather than deficits, thus enhancing students' motivation. ESL students often have a wealth of knowledge and experience they bring from their cultures, families, and communities. For example, most are fluent in their first language and many know traditions and stories that are unique to their cultures and can contribute to the collective wisdom of a classroom. However, these students may not get a chance to express this knowledge in their regular academic work.

The drama and multimedia activities are designed to motivate students by tapping into this cultural knowledge, thereby affirming "that they know a lot already." The goal is to facilitate deeper student engagement and ownership in learning. The activities incorporate creative ways for students to use their skills and knowledge and view themselves as successful learners.

### Meeting Standards and Learner Objectives . . .

Content and Performance Standards are at the foundation of the drama and multimedia strategies used. All activities align to the Hawai'i Language Arts standards and can be designed to incorporate other curriculum (or content area) standards, as appropriate.

### . . . with Drama

The drama activities align with language arts oral communication standards and Fine Arts Standards at all grade levels. The samples on the website show how a story from a student's culture can become a prompt for a group drama activity that lets each student find forms of expression to retell a story. Starting with nonverbal forms of expression, the activities allow students to explore how to use action and imagination to communicate. Then, they add words to their actions to begin creating dialogue. The activities are a fun, active, kinesthetic way for students to learn concepts and build language skills. The drama activities can also be designed to incorporate content from subject areas, such as science and social studies.

Students work in groups and learn how to share leadership roles and responsibilities. The creative nature of these activities provides a non-threatening and engaging way for students to shine. As the teacher on the website describes, students who do not generally speak up in class will do so when they're engaged in these types of activities.

## ... with Multimedia

The multimedia strategies address language (written and oral communication), as well as educational technology standards, and can easily incorporate other content standards.

Multimedia software refers to computer applications that allow students to combine several forms of media, such as digital pictures, audio, video, and text. Examples of multimedia software are iMovie (on the Mac), MovieMaker (on Windows), and PowerPoint (both Mac and Windows). These tools, used with specific educational objectives, become powerful means for students to express themselves in relevant and meaningful ways.

In the process of creating their multimedia projects, students are asked to think creatively and collaborate with their partner(s) to develop an idea or theme. It is up to the classroom teacher to develop the appropriate theme or context. These themes can be related to units being studied in different content areas, or be more general in nature, encouraging students to explore a certain concept or value.

The Telling Stories website illustrates how a variety of culturally relevant prompts can be incorporated into the theme of a project. In addition to learning the technology skills to make a project, the process of developing the project builds other skills. Students learn to take audience and voice into consideration, organize information, and collaborate. In addition, these computer-based projects provide a non-threatening way to practice written and oral language skills that can often be a challenge for ESL students.

The multimedia projects showcased on the website illustrate how these strategies and cultural prompts can be woven into a range of activities for K–12 ESL students.

## Using These Strategies in the Classroom

One of the primary goals of the website is to provide teachers with ideas and examples of what ESL students are able to achieve when the strategies are used and to describe how these strategies can be implemented. Teachers can find step-by-step directions, short illustrative videos, and downloadable lesson plans on the website.

The Honolulu Theatre for Youth and PREL can provide teacher professional development workshops on how to implement these strategies. Please see the website for contact information.

In addition to strategies and lesson plans, the website also provides informative links and books on Micronesia that can be used as resources to develop similar activities and prompts for ESL students from these islands.

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The website contains several illustrative videos and student projects, each providing a rich representation of the strategies discussed. Below are some of the types of videos you can find on the site.

## DRAMA STRATEGIES

### Warm Up: Sculpting



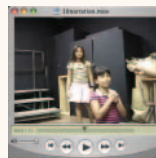
Students “shape” each other without words. Watch them have fun with this activity, which provides a fun context for the development of vocabulary and comprehension.

### Tableau:



Students work in groups to plan out their ‘frozen pictures.’ Watch them work in groups to discuss how to enact a scene and present it to the class.

### Narration:



Scaffolding on the tableau activity, students pick a representative to put words to actions.

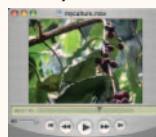
## MULTIMEDIA STRATEGIES

### Digital Book Projects:



Students use illustrations from colorful books as prompts for their own stories. Take a look at a book made in Hawaiian language and a book made with PowerPoint.

### What's My Story?:



Using family and community themes as the prompts, students make projects about themselves and their lives. The projects give students a chance to express their values and traditions.

### PSA:



Giving students a chance to discuss issues that are relevant to them, these projects are a powerful and creative means for expression. Students discuss themes like discrimination and acceptance.