RESUMO

This paper describes and analyzes the use of Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed (TO) as a form of academic and social support used in a program for bilingual teachers. We use critical discourse analysis to understand how TO works to disrupt monologic relationships and reestablish dialog. Our analysis tracks one scene of oppression as described by a bilingual paraprofessional. Our findings suggest that an awareness of both the language tools that structure individual relationships and the larger forces shaping what different individuals can and cannot say potentially gives our participants the option to approach conflict in new ways—to take up confident, expansive roles and to project new futures for themselves and others.

Keywords: Theatre of the Oppressed - Teacher Education – Intervention.

For over a decade the recruitment of bilingual, Spanish-English adults into teacher education programs in the United States has been an unrealized goal. Although in 2000 Latinos were the largest minority group under the age of 18 (16%), there are relatively few Latino teachers in American K-12 classrooms (4%) and fewer still who are fluent in Spanish and English and able to communicate easily with Spanish-speaking parents and community members (SOUTO-MANNING, 2005). These statistics support the ever-present need to recruit increased numbers of bilingual adults into the teaching profession who can serve culturally and linguistically diverse student populations. However, given that nearly 30% of new teachers leave within the first two years of teaching (UDELHOFEN & LARSON, 2003), and that in diverse school districts “the exodus is even greater” (HALFORD, 1998), more attention must be given to the support and retention of bilingual adults in and beyond teacher education programs.

Recruited for their linguistic and/or cultural skills, bilingual teachers are more likely than monolingual teachers to work with communities that are racially, linguistically, and socioeconomically marginalized (Genzuk & Baca, 1998). Likewise, because of their own racial and linguistic markedness, bilingual teachers are more likely themselves to encounter a collision between their own experiences of oppression and recognition of their potentially oppressive status as teachers working within the monolingual structures of the U.S. school system (Macedo, Dendrinos, & Gounari, 2003).

1 Betsy Rymes, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Linguistics and Language Education at the University of Georgia. Her (brymes@uga.edu).
2 Mariana Souto-Manning, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Early Childhood and Language & Literacy Education at the University of South Carolina, Columbia. Her (mmanning@gwm.sc.edu).
3 Melisa Cahnmann, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Linguistics and Language Education at the University of Georgia. Her (cahnmann@uga.edu).
This describes and analyzes the use of Augusto Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed (TO) as a form of academic and social support used in a recruitment and support program for bilingual teachers in Georgia. We use critical discourse analysis to understand how TO approaches work to disrupt monologic relationships and reestablish dialogue for increased behavioral and attitudinal options at the moment of discrimination (SCHUTZMAN, 1994).

THEATER OF THE OPPRESSED IN THE TELL FOCUS GROUPS

The TELL (Teachers for English Language Learners) program is a recruitment and support initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Education to recruit 55 bilingual adults to enter the teaching profession and support them through the credentialing process. Support includes US$5,000.00 in financial support, academic and professional workshops and consultations, career placement, and classroom observations as well as social support in the form of social gatherings. In exchange for these various forms of support, TELL scholars are expected to complete a teaching credential, teach in a high need K-12 school in Georgia for three years following receipt of their credential, and attend semi-annual focus group meetings. At the time of this study, Spring 2005, the program had recruited 35 bilingual adults, 5 of whom had received their credential. 34 of these 35 TELL scholars had Spanish as a first, second or additional language.

Our aim in this study is to analyze the discourse that took place in focus group meetings to begin to answer questions about best practices for the recruitment and support of minority and nontraditional, bilingual pre- and in-service teachers. Initially, the required 90 minute focus group interviews were designed as part of our program evaluation to determine how well the program was meeting the financial, academic and social support needs of the TELL scholars. After analysis of transcripts from these early meetings in 2003-4 (CAHNMAN, RYMES, and SOUTO-MANNING, 2005), we were concerned that focus group meetings did not provide the kind of ideological support we felt these bilingual adults needed to develop critical language awareness. The TELL program was not designed merely to place 55 bilingual teachers in Georgia's schools, but also to nurture a cohort of bilingual teachers and leaders prepared to combat widespread deficit orientations that discriminate against bilingual populations. To foster discursive awareness and reflexive practices necessary to promote the maintenance and development of bilingual/ bicultural identity, we changed the format of our bi-annual focus group meetings from around-the-table group interviews to workshops using techniques from Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed methods. For readers who may not be familiar with Theater of the Oppressed (TO), we begin with a brief explanation, followed by a description of how we adapted TO methods for use in the TELL program.

PEDAGOGY & THEATER OF THE OPPRESSED

Much like Freire's (1970) critique of the banking model of education, Boal (1979) was critical of theater's tradition of constructing silent, passive audiences through unidirectional performances from stage to audience. Struggling against the Brazilian dictatorship in the sixties, Boal conceived of a new form of interactive theater, replacing the spectator with a spect-actor, one who is not merely a passive member of an
estranged audience but an interactive participant in a collective performance aimed at recognizing, analyzing, and overcoming social oppression (Burgoyne et. al., 2005). Forum Theater is one among many of Boal's TO methods "for exploring oppression on both analytic and sensory levels and for resolving oppressive conditions" (PLACIER, COCKRELL, COCKRELL, & SIMMONS, 2005). In our practice with Forum Theater, we asked each TELL scholar to think about their own experiences with oppression.

In small groups, TELL scholars shared their experiences with oppression and selected one story from which to improvise a skit in three scenes representing one protagonist (usually the TELL scholar) and his or her recurring oppressive situation with an antagonist. In only one case, a group of TELL scholars presented an oppressive situation that was not their own but one experienced by K-12 bilingual students. In this paper, we focus on the case of "Zarita" (all names are pseudonyms) and her oppressive situation as a paraprofessional with an antagonistic parent.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS & BOALIAN THEATRE

As Boal himself recommends, we want to move from confronting individual acts of oppression, in the particular, to recognizing more general, interactional characteristics and social forces that give rise to discrete situations of oppression. On the individual level, we want to forecast positive futures for our participants by giving them tools to reconfigure their own oppressive interactions.

Here we analyze precisely how, in one instance of Forum Theater, participants moved from monologue to dialogue by gradually orchestrating changes in stance and by expanding the relevant knowledge domain. That is, we analyze how, through gradually changing performances of an oppressive situation, Zarita, a bilingual paraprofessional, worked toward changes in her own stance and expanded what counts as knowledge relevant to her situation. Finally, we look at how institutional inequities affect this interaction—and how awareness of these entrenched inequities may afford the reshaping of future interactions.

In the focal example here, Zarita, a special education paraprofessional, described just such a conflict. The scene is a kindergarten classroom in a school located in a conservative suburban town on the periphery of a large Southern city. This town has been rapidly diversifying over the last ten years from predominately White to a suburb in which many newly-arrived Latino families have chosen to live. Zarita works in an elementary school in the town as a paraprofessional. As a Puerto Rican woman who speaks English and Spanish fluently, she is a necessity in this school, which has increasing numbers of English language learners. She has been hired, however, not specifically to support the bilingual needs at the school, but to work as a special education aide in a kindergarten classroom, assisting special education inclusion students.

In the scene under discussion, Zarita re-enacted a conflict over what a student, Derrick, had or had not said. Derrick is a student with Cerebral Palsy participating, with the help of Zarita, in a mainstream kindergarten class. Neither he nor his mother is Latino or Spanish-speaking. So, in their interactions, Zarita’s bilingualism is not framed as an
asset. Rather, as was illustrated as her story was played out, her accent in English became a liability. While describing this recurrent conflict, Zarita emphasized her perceptions that the student’s mother could not get beyond this Spanish accent to listen to what she was saying.

In the scene below, Derrick was in the process of learning how to go to the bathroom by himself, and as part of this process, Zarita explained, he needed to be able to articulate when he was finished. However, in the scene presented, Derrick’s mother and Zarita were embroiled in an escalating conflict as to whether or not he had verbally indicated that “he’s done.” In constructing this conflict, both Zarita (played by herself) and Derrick’s mother (as played by Catherine, another TELL teacher), displayed highly certain epistemic stances as marked in bold in the excerpt below (Derrick here was played by facilitator and co-author of this paper, Melisa):

**IS HE DONE #1**

Zarita (Parapro): Derrick, are you finished?
Melisa (Derrick): Mm.
Catherine (Mother): He says he's done.
Zarita (Parapro): What does that mean (. ) I mean (. ) when he says that.
Catherine (Mother): He says he's done. He said he's done.
Zarita (Parapro): No he didn't.
Catherine (Mother): Can't you see he said he's done.
Zarita (Parapro): No he didn't say I'm done.
Catherine (Mother): Yes he did. Can't you understand? He said I'm done.
Zarita (Parapro): No. He did not say I'm done. He just said Mmm.

This exchange (“No he didn’t,” “Yes he did”) represents clear conflict. Both participants were absolutely certain of their own version of the truth, and these versions were diametrically opposed. There was a back-and-forth, but no dialogue. From Derrick’s mother’s perspective (played by Catherine), “He says he's done.” From Zarita’s perspective he did not say any such thing. We characterize this dynamic then, by naming two mutually-supporting processes: (1) Enacting two diametrically Opposed Monologic Stances; and (2) Limiting What Counts as Knowledge. First, each speaker is monologically privileging her own perspective, as displayed by their relatively certain epistemic stances and marked by present tense, unmitigated factual statements (“Yes he did,” “No he didn’t”). Second, both speakers viewed the situation within one and only one limited knowledge domain. That is, no additional information was offered up to expand how either party was thinking about the situation or to change the direction of the discussion. This was a zero sum game, in which one and only one person could be “right” and each person was certain she was the one.

**MODIFICATIONS IN BOALIAN REENACTMENTS**

In the next step of the forum procedure, a new “spectactor” entered the scene as a protagonist—in this case replacing Zarita as the parapro—and acted out an alternative response to the conflict. In the example below, Catherine replaced Zarita and Juan took
up the role of the mother. In this performance, Catherine modified the parapro’s epistemic stance dramatically, while Juan, as the Mother, maintained absolute monologic certainty:

**IS HE DONE #2: CONFLICT AVOIDANCE**

Catherine (Parapro): Well, okay well we’ll wait until you’re done. You let me know when you’re done.

Juan (Mother): He’s done. (.) He’s done. Can’t you see that he’s done?

Catherine (Parapro): Oh no I didn’t- Well no I didn’t realize. Do you think he’s done? Do you think that means that he’s done?

Juan (Mother): Yeah he’s done.

Catherine (Parapro): Are you sure?

Juan (Mother): He’s done.

Catherine (Parapro): Oh okay well good then we’ll get up.

In this re-enactment, Catherine dramatically modified Zarita’s epistemic stance display, but did not change the knowledge domain under consideration. Rather than bold present tense statements of what Derrick had said, she downplayed her own perceptions (“I didn’t realize”) and questioned how the Mother knew Derrick was done—positioning the mother as the source of knowledge about Derrick (“Do you think he’s done?”). She potentially expanded the knowledge domain by questioning how the mother knows Derrick is done (“Do you think that means he’s done?”). However, because the mother did not provide additional information about the cues she was reading from Derrick, the knowledge domain remained limited.

While Catherine deferred to the mother and her knowledge, the mother used this deference as a platform to further assert her monologically certain stance, not to open up dialogue. Even her question “Are you sure?” which could be seen as undermining the Mother’s authority, functions to give the mother a chance to reaffirm her stance. Yes! She is sure. “He’s done.” By changing the Parapros’ stance, Catherine may have avoided conflict, but did not promote dialogue. Now the processes enacted were as follows: (1) Enacting only ONE Monologic Stance by mitigating the Parapro’s; and (2) Limiting What Counts as Knowledge

Ultimately, this scene silenced the Parapro perspective, and was not satisfying to the group.

In scene 2, Catherine mitigated their epistemic stance, but without opening up the knowledge domain. Only one monologic stance was fully articulated (that of the Mother) and the knowledge domain remained limited to what the Mother counted as knowledge. Catherine was not able to coax the mother into taking up a new position relative to the Parapro’s knowledge about Derrick. The result was the unsatisfied sense of being “too soft,” having mitigated the Parapro’s knowledge in order to avoid conflict.

In the next scene, Zarita came back to play herself. Here, based on the options she had seen enacted by the group, she tried to mitigate knowledge claims, but in a very
different way—not her own claims but the Mother’s:

**IS HE DONE #3: PUNCTURING THE MOTHER’S KNOWLEDGE CLAIMS**

Zarita (Parapro): Your mommy’s here. Okay? (.) Derrick. Are you finished?
Melisa (Derrick): Mmm.
Catherine (Mother): He’s done. He says he’s done.
Zarita (Parapro): Does that mean he’s done?
Catherine (Mother): Yes that- that means he’s done. Yes.
Zarita (Parapro): [Are you sure?
Melisa (Derrick): [Mmmm
Catherine (Mother): I’m positive.
Zarita (Parapro): How do you know?
Catherine (Mother): Because he’s finished.
Zarita (Parapro): Oh that’s the- that’s the way he says that he’s done.
Catherine: [EXACTLY.]
Melisa (stepping out of Derrick character): [Stop. Stop.] Stop. ((to Zarita)) You take the Derrick place ((laughter))
Zarita (Parapro): I was trying to be nice!

Here, Zarita re-played herself. Now, like Catherine in the previous scene, she mitigated epistemic stance. However, rather than questioning her own knowledge and backing down before the mother, as Catherine did when she played the Parapro, Zarita more directly questioned the Mother’s knowledge. In this way, she slightly modifies the first of the two processes seen in scene 2: (1) Enacting only one Monologic Stance by mitigating not the Parapro’s, but the Mother’s claims; and (2) Limiting What Counts as Knowledge. Rather than hedging her own claims, she questioned the mother after each of her bald statements: When the mother said Derrick is done, Zarita questioned, “Does that mean he’s done?” When the mother claimed that yes, that means he is done, Zarita again threw some doubt on her knowledge, “Are you sure?” And again, when the mother said she was “positive,” Zarita asked, “How do you know?” Her Parapro version doesn’t back off her own claims with “maybe” and “well” the way that Catherine’s characterizations did.

To the end, Zarita questioned the mother’s knowledge claims. Even when she seemed to be accepting the mother at face value (“Oh, that’s the way he says he’s finished.”), her tone is challenging. She sounds like a parent who having asked multiple times for a child to clean his room, surveys the meager results and says, sarcastically, “Oh, that’s the way you straighten up?”). So, even as Zarita was trying to probe the Mother, she was not backing down from her own truth claims in the process. When the scene drew to a close, Zarita laughed and said, “I was trying to be nice!” But she simply could not be “nice” in the way Catherine displayed “nice,” by completely changing her stance toward the events. She could not give up what she knew to be true to avoid conflict with a parent she perceived as racist and undermining her authority.

She could not be someone she is not. And, taking a stance that she didn’t support would be doing just that. Stance is, arguably, a primary building block for identity in interaction (Ochs, 1996). The amount of certainty or emotion human beings display
compounds in every exchange, building a picture of, for example, someone who is “strong and silent” (through displays of certainty and lack of affect) or “ditzy” (through displays of mitigated certainty and heightened affect) or “trustworthy” (through displays of certainty, and moderate affect). Moreover, human beings are socialized into these compilations of stance (identities) over a lifetime of interactions in communities, families, and institutions with distinctive language habits. Taking up a different kind of stance, because it is so closely tied to identity, then, would be paramount to being someone different. Is there any alternative? This is precisely the project of Boalian Theater of the Oppressed—to extend the range of who individuals can enact in oppressive situations. By viewing different options, spectators recognize multiple patterns of language in use, and explore new versions of situations.

This is exemplified most distinctly in the next scene, when Melisa steps in to play a different version of the Parapro:

**IS HE DONE #4: KNOWLEDGE CLAIMS ARE ALL VALID BUT COME FROM DIFFERENT DOMAINS OF EXPERTISE.**

Melisa (Parapro): Oh are you finished?  
Zarita (Derrick): Mmm.  
Catherine (Mother): Oh he’s done. Go ahead and get him up. He’s done.  
Melisa (Parapro): You know that is so interesting. I- when he makes that movement he has- what I’m trying to (. ) teach him now is to articulate that he’s done (. ) to say ‘I’m done’ because it’s [very important-  
Catherine: [Yeah but he said he’s done. He said he’s done.  
Melisa: He said it physically I bet that’s how you’ve read [him]- you are his mother and you know him right?=  
Catherine: Yeah.  
Melisa: =He is done.  
Catherine: Exactly. I know my son. The boy’s done.

Here, Melisa changed how the parapro displayed epistemic stance, but without relinquishing her own knowledge completely. In the process, she illustrated a possibility of avoiding monologic and knowledge limiting processes, working toward dialogue and new forms of knowledge. In this way, Melisa dramatically modifies the two processes seen in the previous scenes: (1) Simultaneously Validating Two Opposed Sets of Claims; and (2) Opening Up What Counts as Knowledge. Rather than completely backing down from the Parapro’s truth claims, the Parapro (as played by Melisa) maintained them (“He said it physically”). However, she simultaneously validated the mother’s truth claims (“I bet that’s how you’ve read...”). She could do the seemingly impossible—acknowledge the validity of each player’s truth claims—by opening up the knowledge domain. Rather than Knowledge being a zero sum—a negative plus a positive, in which one person must be wrong for the other to be right, the Parapro here asserted that the Mother has “interesting” knowledge. But she simultaneously asserted that she, as a Parapro, has responsibilities to ensure that Derrick learn to articulate in a manner that more people can understand (“What I’m trying to teach him now is to articulate that he’s done”). In this scenario, both the Parapro and the Mother could be right, and each of them could have expertise.
This new way of approaching the situation involved, again, enacting very different stance toward what is true and who knows it, and what kind of knowledge gets brought into the situation. Melisa’s portrayal of the Parapro is not necessarily the “solution” to the problem, however. It is yet another way of approaching it, another step in the process of thinking through the multiple possible courses of action. The Mother might, even in the face of this different stance, continue to stubbornly insist the Parapro is wrong in every way.

In fact, when the scene was drawing to a close, Melisa asked the group whether her version of the Parapro seemed like a realistic solution. As if in response, Catherine jumped back into the stubborn Mother character and asserted her point of view. She refused to acknowledge the expertise of the Parapro. She was unwavering in her assertion that Derrick already knew how to say he is “done.”

**IS HE DONE #4, CONT’D: IS IT REAL?**

Melisa (herself): Okay. Is this real what I’m saying is to pull the expertise (.) in and say you know what? You are right, Mother, he is done and you know it. What I’m trying to teach him is how to say it=

Catherine (Mother): But he said it.

Melisa (Parapro): =to let everybody understand that.

Catherine (Mother): Can you not see it that my son said he’s done.

Melisa (Parapro): I wonder if he could say it again. Do you think he could say it again?

Zarita (Derrick): Mm. Mmmm.

Is it real? It certainly was real for Melisa to make attempts to claim expertise while simultaneously acknowledging the Mother’s expertise. But Catherine’s continued enactment of the Mother character suggests that, while the Parapro as protagonist may appear more empowered by voicing this new stance, and by opening the knowledge domain, the antagonist Mother may never change. So far then, changes to this scenario have revolved around modifying epistemic stances facing a consistently oppressive voice of the Mother. Nobody found a way to stop the Mother from insisting on her point of view. However, the collections of scenes began to make the entire group more familiar with this conflict, and the multiple possible actions that could be taken in the next confrontation. No one solution was portrayed as more legitimate than another.

**CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

We are suggesting that an awareness of both the language tools that structure our individual relationships, as well as an awareness of the larger forces shaping what different individuals can and can not say can help us begin to rehearse the revolution, and to ensure that these bilingual teachers find their voices. While we may not ultimately foment revolution, we do hope that these bilingual teachers will gain voice and interactional tools to ultimately move into more powerful positions themselves, rather than be discouraged by the lack of voice they can often experience in their current
positions as paraprofessionals, novice or uncertified teachers, or students in college
classrooms and testing environments pursuing their credential.

By disrupting habitual orders of discourse, Boalian Theater can potentially give our
participants the option to approach conflict in new ways—to take up confident,
expansive roles and to project new futures for themselves and others. From this place of
group strength, these novice minority teachers develop meta-awareness of the roles they
take up, see the humor in these roles, and the options for acting differently, should they
so choose. They see that their roles are produced by a system that often does not
distribute goods fairly, and that judges superficially. They see that often there is no easy
solution. Ambiguity, conflict, and dissent become familiar. This ability to talk through
conflict and dissent, according to Apple (2004), is the first step toward confronting
dominant and potentially oppressive ideologies, to understanding how each person is
potentially complicit in the reproduction of these ideologies, and to acting in new ways
that do not reproduce unfair and unequal systems.

Because the pre-service and in-service teachers involved in this study are all minorities
and/or non-traditional students, their perspectives are doubly in danger of being silenced
within the strong hierarchical and routinized culture within public schools in the United
States. This practical and analytical approach has proved effective for our group and,
no doubt, will be increasingly relevant in more professional development contexts, as
teachers in the schools become as diverse as the students they are teaching. Boalian
Theater of the Oppressed affords recognition that these teachers have recurring
situations day after day that potentially silence their perspective on events; a critical
discourse analysis of the talk involved raises an awareness of the interactive and
societal forces that condition certain habitual forms of conflict and paths to resolving
that conflict. This critical discourse study illuminates possibilities for how Theater of
the Oppressed can be used as an intervention in the preparation of minority and non-
traditional pre-service teachers and support during the first years of practice. Teacher
educators can use critical discourse awareness to analyze how conflict is perceived and
explore ways to preserve the dignity, equality, and knowledge domains of the
protagonists as well as the antagonists involved.

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discourse analysis to understand and facilitate identification processes of bilingual


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