

“Where the Play Ends”: The Testing Regime and Constraints on Best Practices for ELLs

As a former high school teacher, I understand the negative washback of high-stakes tests. The drive to the test--the necessity of getting through it, of helping kids just pass certainly hijacked my best intentions as an ESL teacher. Now as a researcher, tasked with considering and proposing “best practices,” I often wonder what choice teachers really have left at this point? This presentation is part of a larger project investigating exactly that question.

I have come to believe, along with a growing number of scholars (see www.instituteofplay.org) that teaching with an eye to play, even at the secondary level, could prompt language learning, academic growth, community-building, and effectively could re-humanize education. However, do teachers see the inherent value in play and playful approaches to teaching and learning? Do they see its value enough to push against the power of the test (Reyes & Villarreal, 2016)? What do they imagine playful teaching look like? I took these questions and more to a few ESL teachers in order to help find out.

This poster presents one of my preliminary findings as a result of applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to the interview transcripts from this study in order to get a little close to the “hidden transcript” (Scott, 1990) which may reveal more than just ways that these teachers imagine playful instruction, but important may help us understand more about how teachers construct their cognition intertextually.

Listed here are some of the questions I asked of this data. As you scan the texts, perhaps you have some questions of your own. Send them my way!

- How do teachers construct meaning from the texts that they refer to (both directly and indirectly) in these three passages?
- Do certain linguistic forms indicate intertextual dialogue? Which ones and how?
- How does this dialogue affect decisions about what is “allowed” in practice?
- How does what is “allowed” converge or diverge from a teacher's' own beliefs?
- What gives the text its power? What can be done to provide agency to the teachers?

Fairclough (2003) reminds us that pushing back against texts that work to dehumanize is both possible and necessary when he writes that “the effectivity of such hegemonic [intertextual] meaning-making is not guaranteed of course – it takes place within a struggle over meaning, and depends for instance on how pervasively these meaning relations are repeated in various types of texts, and how successfully alternatives are excluded” (p. 101).