

# Play and Bricolage in Adult Second Language Classrooms

Amanda Snell

University of Arizona

Teachers working with adult immigrants and refugees who have beginner-level proficiency in English face a tension: Learners need to acquire basic English skills (often referred to as *survival English*), but survival materials often ignore the rich experiences and knowledge that students possess but cannot easily communicate in their second (or additional) language. This article argues that text-based language play and bricolage, or the construction of something new from available resources, allow adult learners with beginning English proficiency to display their multiple forms of knowledge while also practicing basic English. In this paper, I present texts created by learners in a beginning-level community-based English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom to show how learners engage in critical thinking and demonstrate symbolic competence—the ability to play with linguistic codes and meanings—through playful bricolage. The findings suggest that instruction which moves beyond a purely *survival* focus benefits beginning-level adult learners.

Community-based language classrooms for adult immigrant and refugee learners are characterized by a unique urgency. Adults who attend classes report that they *need* English to work, help their children at school, go to the doctor, and accomplish basic everyday chores. The teachers working with them feel this urgency as well. However, the wealth of experiences adults bring to their second language classes may be smothered if instruction focuses solely on basic, instrumental themes at the expense of creativity and play. In this paper, I argue that *language play*, or creative language use for lighthearted or non-instrumental purposes, allows adult English learners in community-based classrooms to develop and display their *symbolic competence* and multilingual expertise (Kramsch, 2006). I use symbolic competence throughout this paper to refer to the “ability to play with various linguistic codes and with the various spatial and temporal resonances of these codes” (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008, p. 664).

Specifically, this paper proposes that adult second language learners can display these capacities when teachers bring opportunities for playful *bricolage* into the classroom. Bricolage is defined in basic terms as “constructing something out of available resources” through substitution, improvisation, or invention (Reynolds, 1999, p. 10; see also Kincheloe, 2001, 2005; Lévi-Strauss, 1962). I begin by reviewing literature on play theory, bricolage, and symbolic competence and then apply these concepts to an analysis of data collected in a community-based beginning-level English class that I taught from January to May 2016. Based on this analysis, I make considerations as to how bricolage-based activities might be incorporated into community-based adult second language classrooms in order to create a space for play. Finally, I will discuss how these playful activities based

in bricolage facilitate symbolic competence. Throughout this paper, I focus on the following questions:

1. How do adults engage in playful bricolage in community-based English language classrooms?
2. What are the affordances of text-based language play in beginning-level, community-based language classrooms for adults?
3. How does this language play support or conflict with the teaching of survival English skills?

### **Background: Survival English as a Dominant Pedagogical Paradigm in Community-based Adult Education Contexts**

Community-based second language classrooms for immigrant and refugee adults often feature a *survival English as a Second Language (ESL)* curriculum (Auerbach & Burgess, 1985) designed to be “situationally oriented around daily living tasks” (p. 477). These survival tasks are instrumental and include themes such as going to the doctor, getting a job, going shopping, or communicating with their children’s schools in their new countries of residence.<sup>1</sup>

Though a survival ESL curriculum could address some of learners’ needs, it is problematic in a number of ways. Auerbach and Burgess (1985) argue that survival ESL materials are well-intentioned but feature a “hidden curriculum” which “unwittingly present[s] an idealized view of reality, a patronizing attitude towards students, a one-sided approach toward culture, and a model of language acquisition which is only superficially communicative” (p. 490), while socializing students into subservient roles. The *Basic Oxford Picture Dictionary* (2003) chapter on occupations, for example, features predominantly low-wage, low-education jobs, including “sewing machine operator,” “janitor,” and “painter” (pp. 88–89). In the following pages, entitled, “At Work,” (pp. 88–89), students are given a list of verbs that they would do “at work”: fix, cut, sell, build, take care of, drive, deliver, and collect.

This list of verbs is limited largely to subservient roles, excluding verbs of higher thinking and activities that students are engaged in or would like to engage in, such as advocating, giving advice, helping others, solving problems, or engaging in social/human rights issues. Auerbach and Burgess (1985) point out that such a curriculum “shape[s] students’ roles outside the classroom” (p. 476). In addition, by focusing on these themes, “students are taught the language associated with being on the bottom of the power hierarchy” (p. 484). Although it is true that many adult immigrants and refugees work low-wage jobs when they move to the United States, the textbook fails to consider the reasons why this is the case. For instance, many learners are trained professionals, but do not have degrees that transfer to the United States. Others have had limited or no access to formal education. Pedagogically, the above materials limit students to asking and answering questions about the things on the page that they can do or actually do. By highlighting only verbs associated with low-wage jobs, language

<sup>1</sup> Survival English themes are sometimes taught through a communicative approach in which learners are asked to practice language use in context (see Hymes, 1966; Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1997, Savignon, 2007).

textbooks deny students the language to discuss their present capacities and past experiences as well as future dreams and goals.

Thus, though a focus on survival English is motivated by a perceived urgency on the part of learners and teachers alike, it does not address all of the learners' urgent needs, and it may even oppress their voices, dreams, and agency. Freire (1981) distinguishes between problem *solving* and problem *posing* approaches to education. Auerbach and Burgess (1985) liken problem *solving* to "educational welfare" (p. 490), in the sense that teachers anticipate what learners' problems are and how to solve them. In a problem *posing* approach, on the other hand, teachers invite students to "enter into the process of thinking critically about their reality" with the purpose of "involv[ing] them in searching for and creating their own alternatives" (p. 491). Exposure only to vocabulary associated with low-wage jobs "leaves little room for students to generate their own meanings" and engage in critical thinking (p. 476). In addition, this curriculum fails to capitalize on students' wealth of knowledge, multilingual identities, and unique experiences.

Another problematic aspect of the survival ESL approach is that it presumes that successful communication is in the hands of the students. However, as Kramsch and Whiteside (2008) point out, speakers do not all have "equal speaking rights and opportunities" (p. 646) in a given interaction. Speakers rarely share equal power with their interlocutors, and adult students in particular may lack the *institutional legitimacy* (Kramsch, 2016) which gives them the authority to speak in certain contexts. Typical theme-based survival texts fail to recognize the potential imbalance of power between interlocutors.

### **Conceptual Framework: Symbolic Competence, Language Play, and Bricolage in Adult Second Language Classrooms**

Even without institutional legitimacy, speakers can draw upon their linguistic resources to successfully navigate interactions. Kramsch and Whiteside (2008) observe that multilingual speakers "seem to display a particularly acute ability to play with various linguistic codes" (p. 664). That is, even students with very limited proficiency in a language will develop symbolic competence, or the ability to play with language in order to communicate effectively and accomplish complex goals. Kramsch and Whiteside (2008) define symbolic competence as the "ability to shape the multilingual game in which one invests" (p. 667). This game could be likened to Wittgenstein's (1953/2010) language-game, which includes both "language *and* the actions into which it is woven" (p. 5, emphasis added). He uses the term to highlight "the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (p. 11, emphasis in original); likewise, many adult second language learners express that their quality of life outside the language classroom hinges upon their use of language.

Symbolic competence is an important goal for the community-based second language classroom for multiple reasons. First, adult language learners often already lead multilingual lives in which they are draw upon symbolic competence to meet their goals outside the classroom. As a result, the construct of symbolic competence considers what students are already doing, rather than focusing on what they cannot do. Next, adult immigrant and refugee language learners are often engaged in a multilingual reality which, because of historical, economic, or

social circumstances, they didn't fully choose for themselves. Symbolic competence acknowledges their successes and capacity to shape their own positioning in that reality. The second language classroom is a place in which students may be given opportunities to display and develop their symbolic competence. Kramsch (2008) suggests that symbolic competence can even be developed institutionally (pp. 404-405). Play could be one way to accomplish this goal.

Playful approaches to language learning in community-based classrooms contrast in important ways from the survival English approaches often found in community-based classrooms. A variety of literature points to the importance of play for social as well as linguistic development (Bateson, 1972; Callois, 1961/2001; Cook, 1994; Vygotsky, 1933/1967). Waring (2013) argues for an "empirical appreciation for the license to play" (p. 207), defining "doing being playful" in adult second language classrooms as "stepping into an alternative world unfettered by the roles and the setting of the classroom and doing so lightheartedly" (p. 192). As Huizinga (2007) points out, the term "game" does not necessarily imply low-stakes; in fact, play and games "can be very serious indeed" (p. 5). Similarly, Derrida (1970/1993), suggests that it is possible that players in a game have a particular freedom because they acknowledge that the act is a game, yet they are invested in the game in serious ways. Waring (2013) asserts that play can offer a number of advantages to adult learners by lowering the affective filter, providing intrinsic motivation, helping vocabulary acquisition, and allowing learners to participate in varied ways (pp. 192-193). It also has the potential to level "the otherwise asymmetrical playing field" that adult students often experience inside and outside the classroom (p. 206), and allows students to "treat[] an otherwise non-negotiable classroom task as negotiable, and accordingly, render[] the otherwise asymmetrical relationships symmetrical" (p. 203).

Despite evidence in favor of play, it remains a low priority in language classrooms (Pomerantz & Bell, 2007). Waring (2013) notes that play is often considered "the 'fluff' of classroom discourse" (p. 192). Pomerantz and Bell (2007) note that second language acquisition research tends to "privilege utilitarian acts of language use, thus relegating play to the margins of acceptable classroom practice" (p. 557). Play may not only provide great learning affordances for students, but it could be a critical way in which they develop and display their symbolic competence.

Symbolic competence incorporates play in important ways. First, the participants in interactions are considered players. During play, players perform and create alternative realities in order to "reframe the balance of symbolic power" (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008, p. 666). Symbolic competence, importantly, "depends on the other players in the game," (p. 664). These players must be aware of each other and the context of the game, perform, and use the codes to create alternative realities. Finally, the construct of symbolic competence considers reality itself to be a "multilingual game" which players must invest in and shape (p. 667). They must be strategic about the types of language they use, with whom, and when. Like a game, they must be aware of the strategies their interlocutors are incorporating and how their interlocutors will interpret what they say.

Like Huizinga's (2007) game, the play involved in symbolic competence can have high stakes. Kramsch and Whiteside (2008) argue that "our symbolic survival is contingent on framing reality in the way required by the moment, and on being

able to enter the game with both full involvement and full detachment" (p. 668). In other words, it is important to use meaningful language effectively, but also to step outside of the language and reflect on it. Students in community-based classrooms are fully involved with managing language in many contexts outside the classroom. Their language use, in many cases, impacts whether they will get a job, receive treatment at a clinic, or develop relationships with their neighbors. All of these cases are high stakes and very emotional, especially when they feel that the success of their interactions hinges upon their ability to utter grammatically-correct, well-pronounced sentences. However, the language classroom is a place in which they can also enter the game with a sense of reflective detachment from the interactions themselves. If students have developed a trusting community with their peers, they are particularly able to practice high stakes interactions (e.g., hospital visits, court visits, parent-teacher meetings) in a low-stakes setting (e.g., in the classroom, among classmates), and have fun doing it. In the language classroom, students can play with language knowing that there are no consequences, but they do so with full recognition of the high stakes nature of these interactions elsewhere.

Bricolage, finally, is a type of playful language use which allows language users to display their symbolic competence. Kincheloe (2001) defines a bricoleur as someone "who makes use of the tools available to complete a task" (p. 680). The goal of bricolage is not only to create something new from existing materials, but also to solve problems in new ways. In this way, bricolage "exists out of respect for the complexity of the lived world" (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 324). Reynolds (1999) argues that "making do with what's available" results in higher level thinking, diverse thinking, and creative problem solving (p. 10). A bricoleur makes a "pieced-together set of representations that is fitted to the specifics of a complex situation" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 4). The concepts of language play and symbolic competence, as well as the way they come together in bricolage, are central to the design of this study and to the following analysis.

## Data Collection

### Methods

The data presented below were collected from January to April 2016 in a beginning-level community-based English Language Acquisition for Adults (ELAA) course at a public library in Tucson, Arizona<sup>2</sup>. The course met for two hours twice a week for a total of fifteen weeks. Students participated in sixty hours of instruction during this time. Eleven students agreed to participate in the study. All were from Spanish-speaking countries, including Mexico (7), Honduras (2), Colombia (1), and Bolivia (1). Students were all adults ranging in age from early twenties to late fifties, and they had been living in the United States for anywhere from a few weeks to more than twenty years. During the fifteen-week session,

<sup>2</sup> After securing IRB approval, I obtained consent from students by informing them that I wished to conduct research on their work. In each of the activities I describe below, I informed students that I would be using the work for my research, but that their participation was voluntary. They were given the option to not participate or to not include any particular piece of work in the study. All participating students consented to have their work included in the study. Names of specific people and places are pseudonyms.



I collected a variety of digital and handwritten texts and assignments students produced as part of the course. These texts included collages, digital role plays, stories, photographs, drawings, creative writing, and non-fiction texts. After each class session, I took fieldnotes about our class discussion. In addition, I collected documents related to the course, including the note from the substitute teacher, messages from students, and assignments and digital messages.

## Context

All students identified themselves as having beginning-level proficiency in English and voluntarily attended the 15-week session I taught. They had varying documentation statuses and levels of education. Some students had completed a college degree in their home countries while others had only attended a few years of elementary school. Many of them had children or grandchildren who were growing up bilingual. Their motivations for learning English varied and included securing employment, helping their children in school, and engaging or volunteering in the community.

The course was offered free-of-charge to students through a partnership between the Pima County Public Library and Literacy Connects, which trained 88 volunteers to provide free ESL classes to 1,657 adult English learners during the 2014-2015 academic year at churches, schools, and libraries throughout Tucson (Literacy Connects, 2016). Teachers at Literacy Connects locations were all volunteers. Literacy Connects provided twelve hours of initial training, asked tutors to apprentice more experienced teachers, and then paired up volunteers to team-teach. There was no set curriculum for the courses, but volunteer teachers were advised to focus on practical English, such as going to the doctor, writing a note to a child's school, or filling out a job application. Literacy Connects<sup>3</sup> offered tutors a library of textbooks from which they could draw materials. In addition, each classroom was stocked with a set of *Oxford Picture Dictionaries* or *Basic Oxford Picture Dictionaries*.

I was the teacher of the group of participants, although their attendance was voluntary and they did not receive a grade for participating in the course. Sometimes I collaborated with library staff to offer classes in the computer lab, but we otherwise met in a small classroom in the library, which had tables, chairs, and a white board. In addition to meeting for four hours weekly as a class, we established a Facebook Messenger group. The group, which one of the students in the class started, was first used as a place to share information about the course, but soon became an online community in which students shared pictures, stories, and greetings. Sometimes, they used the group to ask questions related to instruction, but other times, they used the group to wish each other good night or a good weekend. Students in the class quickly developed a strong sense of community with each other. They met outside of class, organized pitch-ins after class to celebrate birthdays or Valentine's Day, and informed each other about family or health issues that prevented them from attending class.

Two participants' biographies, which they volunteered to share with me and the class, illustrate the diversity of experiences and students in the program.

---

<sup>3</sup> Literacy Connects is funded through private grants and donations and does not accept government funding, allowing the organization to provide classes free-of-charge without requiring participants to provide official documentation or reveal their immigration status (Literacy Connects, 2016).

Luisa was 46 years old when she was taking the course, and started attending English classes because she wanted to be more involved in community advocacy groups in Tucson. She attended school through third grade in Mexico, married at age thirteen, and raised four children before she attended her first English class. Then, while working as a janitor at a community college, she was a victim of labor abuse. As part of her retribution for the abuse, she received vouchers for continuing education classes. She enrolled in a Spanish General Education Development (GED) program, started attending ESL classes, and became certified as a community health worker. Her dream, she shared, was to advocate for children and families, counsel couples in distress, and advocate for victims of domestic violence. She was already highly involved in many community organizations, including organizations that advocate for undocumented immigrants and Mexican indigenous groups in Tucson. However, though she knew the Tucson community well, she felt her limited English proficiency was a barrier to advocating in all the ways she would like. She had recently taken a friend to a medical clinic for free healthcare, and they were turned away, she reported, “because of English.” In the class, Luisa frequently gave her classmates advice about where they could go for legal or medical services. She baked cakes occasionally for the class, and even organized a field trip to a restaurant in South Tucson.

Another student, Tyler, was born in California but moved to Mexico as a child before returning to the United States. Tyler was in his mid-twenties when he was taking the class and, due to a stroke he suffered as a teenager, had restricted fine motor skills. He first started attending the class on a day that I had a substitute teacher. The teacher wrote me a note after class and said that, “if Tyler continues to attend, he will have problems.” To the contrary, however, Tyler participated enthusiastically in classes. His classmates appreciated his sense of humor and regularly asked him about his life outside of school. One day, an older male classmate jokingly asked him why he didn’t know English if he had been born in the United States. Before Tyler could answer, the classmate said, “just kidding. I’ve been living in the United States over twenty years and I don’t know English, either.” Then they both laughed.

After that, Tyler shared a text on social media about his identity as an American who interacts with Spanish and English speakers but mainly speaks and identifies with the Spanish language. In the text, a character writes (in Spanish), “What is your name?” A second character responds, “Guess, it starts with E.” The first character provides a list of typical names that start with “E” in the Spanish language, such as Eduardo, Esteban, and Emilio. At the end, the first character reveals himself as “El Tyler,” or The Tyler, flouting the expectation that he will have a common Mexican name.<sup>4</sup> By sharing this, Tyler celebrates a part of his multilingual identity of which he is proud: the fact that he is a Spanish speaker who was born and grew up in the United States.

### Data Analysis

In the following pages, I describe how these students engaged in various forms of playful bricolage in order to display their symbolic competence. Taken together, the data are analyzed to explore (a) how adults engage in playful bricolage in

<sup>4</sup> This English translation is my own.

community-based second language classrooms, (b) the affordances of text-based language play in beginning-level, community-based language classrooms for adults, and (c) how this language play supports or conflicts with the teaching of survival English skills.

### Students as *Bricoleurs* Inside and Outside the Classroom

Outside of the classroom, students that participated in this study used social media and technology, particularly to stay in touch with family and friends who live in other areas and to connect with their children. When two members of the group were sick and could not come to class, students wrote messages on the board, took pictures of the messages and in front of the messages, and sent them to their classmates through the class Facebook messenger group. In doing so, students acted as bricoleurs, combining the media (photo, classroom whiteboard, Facebook message, get-well-soon card) through which they engaged with each other. In addition, as shown in Figure 1, students engaged in identity bricolage, combining their identities as students with their identities as friends and using the classroom space to create a get-well card.

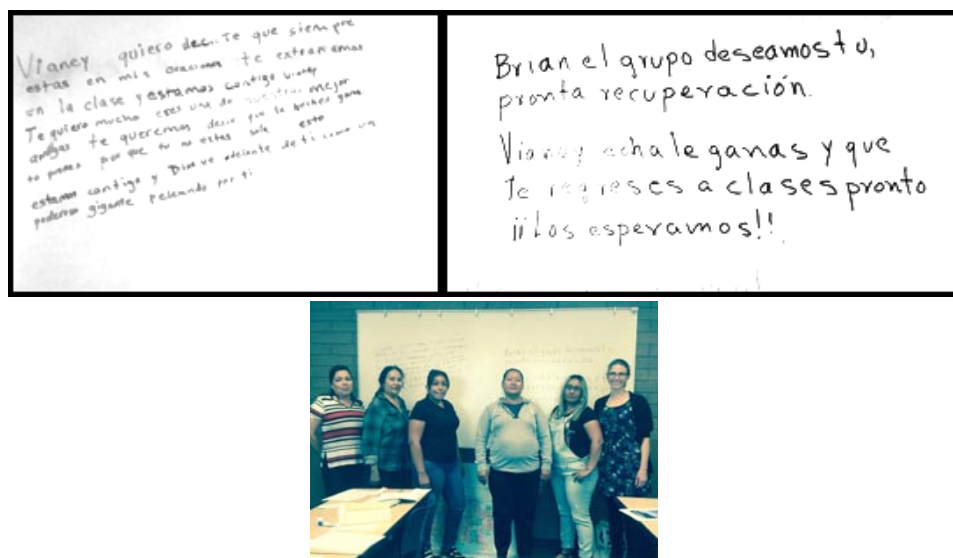


Figure 1. Get well soon.

They also engaged in digital bricolage by sending the picture to their classmates over Facebook. Like the native Mayan-speaking adults in Kramsch and Whiteside's (2008) study, who "moved discretely" in certain contexts outside the classroom, the students "be[came] lead actors" (p. 658) in one of their communities (i.e., English class) among people they trusted, acting simultaneously as students and friends to let their classmates know that they missed them and wished them the best both in their personal lives and in their studies. In the process, they also acknowledged their classmates' roles as students as well as friends, communicating that they missed their presence in the classroom space. These are all examples of students engaging in bricolage in the classroom.



Students also brought outside hobbies into the classroom. Many students garden, so when we talked about vegetables, I brought in some lettuce from a community garden I share with other graduate students. The students and I shared pictures of our own gardens over Facebook. Then students took the lettuce home and documented meals that they made for their families using produce from the garden. They shared their pictures and wrote a few sentences in the class Facebook Messenger group about the food that they cooked. In doing so, they performed digital and identity bricolage, bringing together their roles as students in the classroom, as adults responsible for providing food for their households, and as social media users who shared information about their lives with their friends. As the adults read each other's texts and admired each other's pictures, they were acknowledging their classmates' creativity and competence in their roles outside of the classroom, including their hobbies. In contrast to a survival-based activity, in which students may dialogue about cooking for instrumental purposes or focus on words they did not know about food or gardening, students used language and other texts, such as pictures, to share their unique and creative experiences with these activities.

During lessons, students also engaged in genre bricolage, incorporating multiple languages and genres that they knew. In one activity on the subject of time, we compared Spanish and English idioms related to time. Students each chose an idiom to represent visually (see Figure 2). This activity allowed them to creatively engage their linguistic as well as artistic imaginations to practice language. After each student had created a drawing to represent an idiom, I collected all of their work and photocopied the drawings so that each student could have a collection of the material they had created together. One affordance of this text-based language play was the meaningful audience of peers with whom students could share their work. They also got to take home the collection of texts to refer to or study later.

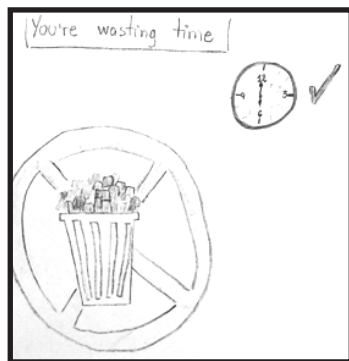


Figure 2. "You're wasting time."

This particular form of bricolage also served as a form of text-based language play. The creator of Figure 2 chose to represent the expression "wasting time" with a literal drawing of a waste basket. In Figure 3, the writer chose to represent the expression "better late than never" in Spanish only. Instead of taking on the role of student, she created the representation as a letter from the personification of time to the audience, writing

It's better late than never  
when you have a dream  
because to fight is worth the victory  
and fight until you can reach  
you can achieve anything with effort  
it's better late  
than never  
Sincerely, Time.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> This is the student's own translation of the original Spanish text.

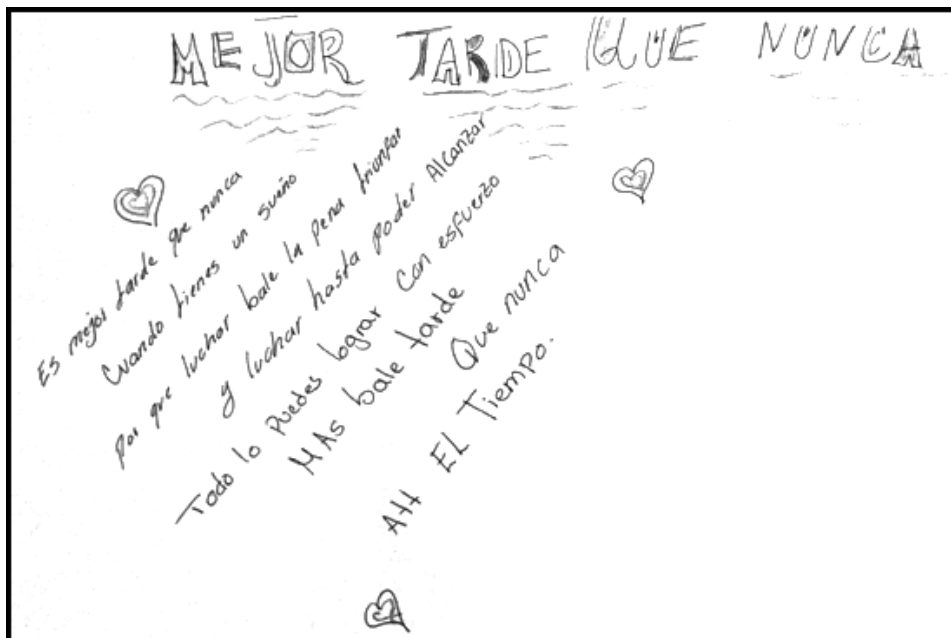


Figure 3. "Better late than never": A Letter from Time.

This creative positioning act, accompanied by drawings of hearts, frames the letter as an intimate message from Time itself. The writer plays with rhyming, incorporating rhymes of words that end in -ar. She also plays with line breaks at the end of the poem, separating "better late" from "than never," which she places on the right end of the page. In doing so, she incorporated poetry, including line-break enjambment, and her first language into a lesson on time idioms. This blending of important language themes and creative acts is one of the affordances of text-based language play in adult second language classrooms. Though this lesson incorporates a theme common in survival materials—time—the activity opened the space for students to engage creatively with the topic through a lesson which "include[d] a wider variety of language experiences, including playful ones" (Pomerantz & Bell, 2007, p. 576). In doing so, they framed themselves as creative producers of texts as well as reflective adults, not just beginning-level language learners. The language play supports the development of language learners need for daily life while allowing them to engage with the language actively, not just in order to survive.

### Poetic Bricolage as Pedagogy

Finally, my students and I engaged in a writing activity which exemplifies poetic and pedagogical bricolage. After overhearing a couple of students discuss how much they loved poetry, I decided to incorporate it into one of our lessons. We started by reading a bilingual poem together (see Figure 4). After reading the poem together, I asked each student to come up with additional lines to the poem. Students wrote their lines on the board and read them aloud to the class. I also asked each student to copy the stanzas they had written on a piece of paper. Figures 5 and 6 represent the stanzas that two students wrote.

Tú eres mi otro yo / You are my other me.  
 Si te hago daño a ti / If I do harm to you,  
 Me hago daño a mí mismo / I do harm to myself;  
 Si te amo y respeto / If I love and respect you,  
 Me amo y respeto yo / I love and respect myself

Figure 4. "In Lak'Ech" in Valdez & Martinez Pardes (2012, p. 19)

Some students (Figure 5) followed the structure of the original poem, writing cause and effect sentences in each language, such as "If I \_\_\_, I \_\_\_." Other students (Figure 6) created their own forms, drawing upon their knowledge of other conventions of the genre of poetry by incorporating elements such as rhyme. I did not ask students to write a specific number of lines, but the activity accommodated students who had varying proficiency levels or paces. Some students wrote several lines, while others wrote one or two. Most of the students wrote their original lines in Spanish, and we worked in groups or as a class to translate the lines into English.

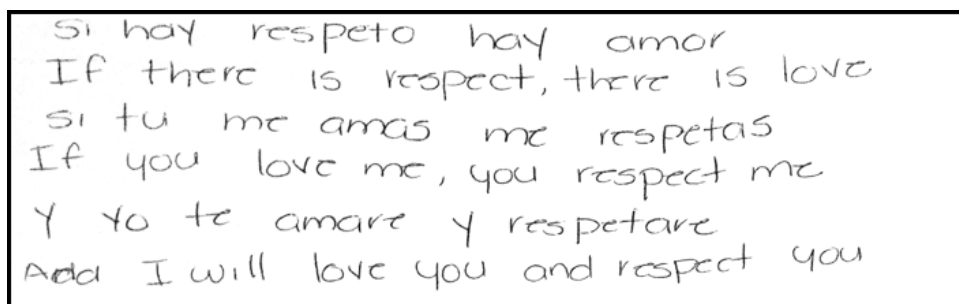


Figure 5. Student Poem 1.

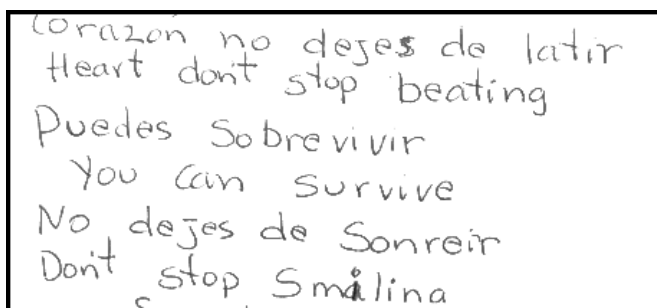


Figure 6. Student Poem 2.

After students had created their own lines in their own handwriting, I made a copy of all of the lines for each student, along with a copy of Valdez's (1971) poem. I gave students scissors and asked them to cut out each line so they had a strip of each line of the poem. Then, I asked students to arrange the strips to make their own poems using any of the lines that they wanted. (They also had the option of adding additional lines or choosing not to use all of the lines.) Students taped the lines in the order they chose onto the paper.

Along the way, we discussed translation questions and idioms in students' work, such as the phrase "van de la mano" (Figures 7 & 8), which we translated as "go hand in hand," and learners engaged in a complex writing process which included reading, drafting, discussing their writing, editing, revising their writing at the sentence level and text level, and sharing their work with an audience of their peers.

At the end of the activity, each person performed their poems to the group. Many of them indicated that they were impressed by the variety of different meanings students created from the set of lines. The ability to create multiple forms of meaning—forms which are not anticipated by the teacher or textbook and not marked as right or wrong—is one of the strongest affordances of text-based language play. By creating and sharing the poems, the participants engaged in bricolage while acting as "empowered subjects" (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 343).

In an informal survey I asked students to complete at the end of the class session, multiple students indicated that the poetic bricolage activity was one of their favorite activities of the semester because it allowed them to use Spanish as well as English and dialogue thoughtfully about deeper, relevant issues, such as love and respect. By creating bilingual poetry, they engaged in what Canagarajah (1999) calls "a highly creative and rigorous process of negotiating the extent to which local discourses can be fused with the established modes of English communications, without transgressing the integrity of either" (p. 212). Through this process, students engaged in bricolage of their identities inside the classroom (as English learners and native speakers of Spanish) and outside the classroom (as adults reflecting on themes like love and respect). They drew upon their knowledge of the genre conventions of poetry to create their own, sometimes following the model and sometimes straying from its conventions.

The act of bricolage moves beyond "monological knowledge" (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 326). Monological knowledge, like survival English, "reduces human life to its objectifiable dimensions, that is, what can be expressed numerically, but also is incapable of moving beyond one individual's unilateral experience of the world" (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 326). In cases of teaching, this privileged individual is usually the teacher or materials. The data reveal that text-based language play can be incorporated even in beginning-level community-based language classrooms for adults. This language play affords increased community-building and creativity with the language. In addition, this language play can be used to support instrumental survival English themes, move beyond them, or even challenge them. The students' creativity reveals that adults in community-based classrooms can engage in playful, text-based bricolage which displays their symbolic competence whenever they are given the freedom to do so.

### Discussion and Conclusions

Due to students' multilingual lives and the variety of roles they occupy, they engage in bricolage on a regular basis. They are parents, significant others, students, and employees. They interact with their families, bosses, and friends in person and over social media in English and Spanish. Their children are often bilingual, and many raise their families to be bilingual and bicultural. The language classroom can be a place where they use bricolage to explore and play with these multiple roles and identities. I have proposed that teachers can

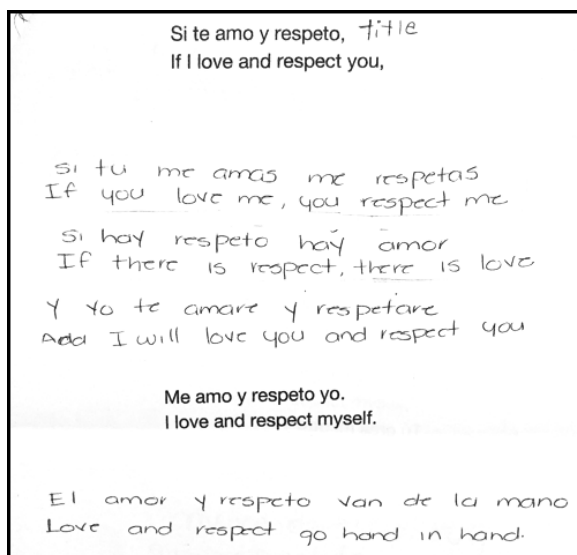


Figure 7. Bricolage Poem 1, "Si te amo y respeto / If I love and respect you."

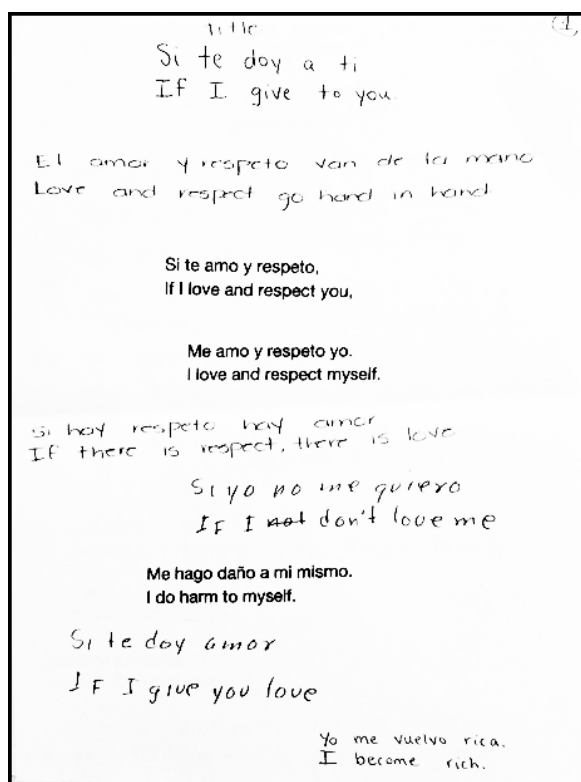


Figure 8. Bricolage Poem 2, "Si te doy a ti / If I give to you."



incorporate several forms of bricolage into the language classroom, including but not limited to digital, media, textual, identity, poetic, and genre bricolage, none of which are mutually exclusive.

Students' appreciation for the poetry activity may seem surprising given the urgency they feel to learn English in order to accomplish everyday tasks such as visits to the doctor or the resolution of bureaucratic issues. After all, students *do* hope that they can practice the English they need in their everyday lives in the classes they attend. However, the language they need in everyday situations is not just valuable to them because it is pragmatic; it also opens up opportunities for them to explore complex meanings.

Perhaps one flaw in the construct of symbolic competence is that it focuses too much on what interlocutors *gain* from interactions, much like communicative competence does. Symbolic competence focuses on the power and legitimacy that speakers have during discourse, and it is certainly critical for language teachers to be aware of these dynamics. Kramsch (2011) argues that speakers with symbolic competence have the ability to reframe contexts and position themselves strategically to accomplish their interactional goals. In other words, speakers demonstrate symbolic competence by *manipulating* situations. However, she implies that to be successful, this manipulation must always occur in the direction of the most dominant power structure; that is, speakers must understand the discourse of the dominant power structure and then manipulate this discourse to meet their goals. But speakers do not always (or even usually, I would argue) want to manipulate situations or speakers. Instead, they want to build relationships, they want their language use to be mutually accepted by their interlocutors even as they learn new discourses and languages, and they want to play with the multiple languages at their disposal.

The students who participated in this study demonstrated a yearning to maintain Spanish by using it in their work, for example, and by sharing in course evaluations that they most enjoyed activities which allowed them to creatively incorporate Spanish, such as the poems. They also demonstrated a desire for relationships with others, as evidenced by their involvement in community organizations, their eagerness to organize pitch-ins for the class and staff of the library where the classes took place, and their animated conversations over Facebook, in which they often asked each other how their days were or wished each other good morning or good night. In these cases, students were not using language to try to manipulate the context in order to achieve a goal; they were using it to build relationships.

Future research in adult second language classrooms should consider how symbolic competence is correlated not just with controlling the outcomes of exchanges, but with the development of relationships across interlocutors. Bricolage, by its nature, celebrates multiple voices instead of anticipating a set outcome for student work. For this reason, bricolage is one pedagogical activity that allows students in language classrooms to display and celebrate their variety of interests, identities, and experiences. By offering students opportunities to act as bricoleurs of language and meaning, teachers provide them a space not just to survive using a language, but to play with the language and engage in critical thinking, especially in beginning-level second language classrooms.

*Acknowledgements*

I would like to thank Professor Chantelle Warner for advising me on this project and supporting her students' work in community-based settings. I would also like to thank the staff of Literacy Connects and the Santa Rosa Library for working hard to make English classes accessible to adults in Tucson and for making this project possible. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers and the Editors of WPEL, particularly Andrea Leone-Pizzighella, for her hard work and patience through multiple revisions of this manuscript. Finally, I thank the students in my classroom, whom I admire in new ways every day and who inspired me to write this piece.

Amanda Snell ([amandasnell@email.arizona.edu](mailto:amandasnell@email.arizona.edu)) is a second-year doctoral student in the Second Language Acquisition and Teaching PhD program at the University of Arizona. Her research interests include how adults with beginning-level proficiency acquire new languages in community-based settings, and she has volunteered with second language learners in the United States and Germany.

**References**

- Auerbach, E. R., & Burgess, D. (1985). The hidden curriculum of survival ESL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 19(3), 475–495.
- Bateson, G. (1972). A theory of play and fantasy. In *Steps to an ecology of mind: Collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution, and epistemology* (pp. 138–148). Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.
- Callois, R. (2001). *Man, play and games*. (M. Barash, Trans.). Urbana: University of Illinois Press. (Original work published 1961)
- Canagarajah, A. S. (1999). On EFL teachers, awareness, and agency. *ELT Journal* 53(3), 207–214.
- Canagarajah, A. S. (2014). Theorizing a competence for translingual practice at the contact zone. In S. May (Ed.), *The multilingual turn: Implications for SLA, TESOL and bilingual education* (pp. 78–102). London, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1(1), 1–47.
- Cook, G. (1994). *Language play, language learning*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (2005). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 1–32). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Derrida, J. (1993). Writing and difference. In *Sign, structure, and play in the discourse of the human sciences* (pp. 278–294). (A. Bass, Trans.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. (Original work published in 1970)
- Freire, P. (1981). *Education for critical consciousness*. New York, NY: Continuum Publishing.
- Gramer, M. F. (2002). *The basic Oxford picture dictionary*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Huizinga, J. (2007). *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. London, United Kingdom: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

- Hymes, D. H. (1966). Two types of linguistic relativity. In W. Bright (Ed.), *Sociolinguistics* (pp. 114–158). The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2001). Describing the bricolage: Conceptualizing a new rigor in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7(6), 679–692.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2005). On to the next level: Continuing the conceptualization of the bricolage. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 11(3), 323–350.
- Kramsch, C. (2006). From communicative competence to symbolic competence. *The Modern Language Journal*, 90(2), 249–252.
- Kramsch, C. (2008). Ecological perspectives on foreign language education. *Language Teaching*, 41(3), 389–408.
- Kramsch, C. (2011) The symbolic dimensions of the intercultural. *Language Teaching*, 44(3), 354–367.
- Kramsch, C. (2016). *The uses of symbolic competence* [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from [slat.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/uagc\\_page/u\\_of\\_arizona\\_27.2.2016.ppt](http://slat.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/uagc_page/u_of_arizona_27.2.2016.ppt)
- Kramsch, C., & Whiteside, A. (2008). Language ecology in multilingual settings: Towards a theory of symbolic competence. *Applied Linguistics*, 29(4), 645–671.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1962). *The savage mind*. (G. Weidenfield, Trans.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Literacy Connects. (2016). *Impact report*. Retrieved from <http://literacyconnects.org/img/2014/01/Impact-Report-2014-2015-Final.pdf>
- Pomerantz, A., & Bell, N. D. (2007). Learning to play, playing to learn: Foreign language learners as multicompetent language users. *Applied Linguistics*, 28(4), 556–578.
- Reynolds, K. (1999). Bricolage in the classroom. *Science Scope*, 22(4), 10.
- Savignon, S. J. (1997). *Communicative competence: Theory and classroom practice*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Savignon, S. J. (2007). Beyond communicative language teaching: What’s ahead? *Journal of Pragmatics*, 39, 207–220.
- Valdez, L., & Martinez Paredes, D. (2012). In Lak’ech: You are my other me. *Voices in Urban Education*, 34, 19.
- Vygotsky, L. (1933/1967). Play and its role in the mental development of the child (C. Mulholland, Trans.). *Soviet Psychology*, 5, 6–18. (Original work published in 1933)
- Waring, H. Z. (2013). Doing being playful in the second language classroom. *Applied Linguistics*, 34(2), 191–210.
- Wittgenstein, L. (2010). *Philosophische untersuchungen*. (G. E. M. Anscombe & P. M. S. Hacker, Trans.). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell. (Original work published in 1953)