



THE PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ORALITY ON REFUGEE ESL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Many refugee students come from traditionally oral cultures, where reading and writing have little or no impact. This situation is not simply illiteracy; scholars instead call it “orality.” Orality is widespread, as even countries that report widespread literacy often have populations that function mostly orally. Scholars claim that literacy transforms human thinking and consciousness, and that people who are illiterate think and learn in ways that often sharply contrast with literate ways. This paper summarizes research on orality, posits some of its implications for pedagogy, and presents the challenges and assets of orality in the ESL classroom.

KEYWORDS

Orality, Oral culture, ESL, Refugee concerns, Pedagogy

In 2015, the United States permanently resettled 66,500 refugees—more than any other nation (UNHCR, 2016, p. 3). Given this situation, the need for culturally responsive teaching to exceed the superficial awareness of differences in language and custom is greater than ever. Research shows clearly that culture impacts learning, and that students learn best when taught in ways that correspond to their culture, languages, and socioeconomic realities (Herrera & Murray, 2016; Ovando & Combs, 2016).

Teacher education programs for teaching ESL address the implications of culture; however, in my experience, the learning styles of people from oral cultures and oral traditions are dealt with only tangentially, if at all. While it may be unintentional, this neglect likely occurs because, as Bigelow and Tarone (2004) note, almost all research on second language acquisition has involved literate participants—even though data from the United Nations Educational,

Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2015) shows that worldwide “there are still 757 million adults including 115 million youths who cannot read or write a simple sentence.”

Some researchers have studied illiterate learners, despite challenges such as difficulty sustaining research access to refugee populations, cultural barriers between researchers and participants, and problems with obtaining informed consent from individuals who cannot read or write (Bigelow and Tarone, 2004). However, the limited findings about these non-reading and non-writing learners often do not specifically account for oral culture (Young-Scholten, 2013; H. Bandini, C. Bandini, Sella, & de Souza, 2014).

I experienced this kind of knowledge gap personally, in connection to refugees, when I volunteered in 2011 to observe and teach a class at the Church World Service Refugee Resettlement Agency

in Greensboro, North Carolina. One day, for instance, when I asked a man from Ethiopia how he would write his name in his own language he answered that he would not do so because he could not write in any language. My attempt to use his background knowledge as a bridge to English could not work in the way that I had planned.

The absence of research on oral cultures excludes a large number of people, particularly many refugees from cultures with low literacy, highly developed oral tradition, and a proclivity to orality. For instance, Barnes and Carmichael (2006) explain that in Somalia—a country that in 2014, saw 1.11 million refugees leave, according to the UNHCR (2016)—oral tradition and orality remain strong in the Horn of Africa, despite the promotion of literacy by the state and by NGOs. A person from the Horn of Africa, or any other oral regions, does not suddenly rid herself of the culture through which her life has always been expressed upon moving to a post-industrialized, literate country such as the U.S. (Barnes & Carmichael, 2006).

In addition to these challenges related to existing research, many Western teachers feel a wide chasm between their own literate culture and oral culture: no claim can be documented, no fact “looked up,” no historical event written down, and no modern Western systems of law and government put into place. Many literates also find it hard to accept that an emphasis on literacy is not always shared by other cultures. According to Delpit (2006), communities that value social collaboration and interaction, including the traditional Alaskan villages that she studied, can see literacy as promoting alienation and solitude (p. 94). She remembered being admonished as a child to “put that book down and go outside and play with your friends” (2006, p. 94).

Despite the shortcomings in research and the cultural challenges, teachers must learn to see their refugee students’ oral culture as an asset, rather than a deficit, and learn how to utilize the particular characteristics of their students’ oral culture as a para-

digim for teaching. This paper therefore aims to provide teachers a positive context for understanding orality, as opposed to the assumed deficit conveyed in the term “illiteracy.” Moreover, I summarize the features of oral cultures, referencing scholarly work ranging from sociology to linguistics. Lastly, I posit pedagogical implications of these features and discuss both challenges and strengths that students from oral cultures might bring to the classroom.

UNDERSTANDING ORALITY

First, in order to gain a positive and nuanced understanding of the term “orality,” teachers can turn to Walter J. Ong, the scholar who coined the term. In his seminal work, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, Ong (1982), studied the psychodynamics of orality and posited characteristics of communication and mentality in oral cultures. The term “orality” refers to a culture and tradition existing without any writing or reading, in contrast to literate cultures. Rather than disparaging the lack of reading and writing as “illiterate,” “pre-literate,” or “primitive,” “orality” denotes the unique mental, psychological, and social attributes that the world’s oral cultures and oral traditions have in common. Orality characterizes cultures that function entirely differently than literate cultures. It does not, however, describe these cultures as missing the key to social advancement. For instance, despite being unable to document history through writing, oral cultures have maintained historical accounts and genealogies in ways that contrast with literate methods of writing and documenting, such as public performances of epic poems narrating the history and politics of a people, such as the Epic of Sundiata Keita from Mali.

The divide between orality and literacy is often not straightforward. Instead, the differences fall on a spectrum: “Primarily or strongly oral” characterizes those “cultures where reading and writing have a low degree of impact on the daily life of significant segments of the population” (Watson, 2010, p. 149). The

culture furthest removed from primarily or strongly oral culture is literate culture, in which relationships, communication, and culture are based on reading and writing, rather than oral speech (Hartnell, 2009). Ong (1982) shows that many of the features that people have taken for granted in philosophy, science, and literature are not innately human, but rather have come into being by the restructuring of human consciousness due to the technology of writing, even before the development of full-fledged literate culture.

Some research has cast doubt on Ong's (1982) conclusions. Saussure, the father of modern linguistics, considered writing a complement of oral speech, rather than as something that transforms thinking (as cited in Ong, 1982). More recently, Finnegan argued that there is not a "clear-cut or fundamental division" between oral and literate people (as cited in Hartnell, 2009). Foley (1998) even claimed that the fieldwork reports of scholars actually contradict the categories of "literate" and "oral." Hartnell (2009) summarizes the debate in suggesting that it consists of the question: "Is writing merely the graphic countersign of speech, or does it involve fundamentally different patterns of expression and cognitive processes?" (p. 27). While there is little consensus in the debate, a preponderance of evidence seems to confirm that literacy does indeed alter an individual's intellectual processes, cultural dispositions, and cognitive psychodynamics (Ong, 1982; McLuhan, 1962; Goody, 1977; Olson, 1977; Lord, 1960).

More specifically, even before the onset of alphabetic writing, humans began using lists, a practice that led to long-term changes in cognitive processing (Goody, 1977). Humans went from functioning through orally-based thought and expression to "chirographically and typographically based thought and expression" (Lord, 1987, p. 54). From the field of neuroscience, Petersson, Reis, Askelof, Castro-Caldas and Ingvar (2000) assert that "learning an alphabetic visual representation of language entails the development of new auditory-verbal processing capacities

(p. 373). That is, the brains of oral people and literate people can be clinically distinguished from one another. Accordingly, Thao (2006) and Foer (2011) both observed that the minds of individuals in oral cultures—which emphasize memorization—function differently than the minds of literate people. Likewise, Lovejoy (2012) found that in recorded sermons by western Christian evangelists, a "print-based way of organizing thought is still an obstacle in communication" between literate and oral peoples (p. 1). Clearly, Ong's term, orality, describes a culture and way of thinking that cannot be disparaged simply as illiteracy. It is incumbent upon teachers to respond to the magnitude of orality's implications.

RELEVANCE OF ORALITY IN REFUGEE EDUCATION

Indeed, "orality" designates certain manifestations on the thinking and consciousness of those who belong to such cultures and traditions. One may ask, however, how widespread orality is in our contemporary world. While UNESCO (2015) notes the 757 million adults and 115 million youths who cannot read or write, it also finds that 83.7% of adults were literate in 2015 (p.1). Accordingly, some scholars have cast doubt on the current relevance of orality. Watson (2010) cautions that, although some cultures continue to operate orally despite exposure to literacy, cultures that are entirely untouched by literacy are "increasingly rare" (p. 149). Similarly, Kramsch (1998) acknowledges the limitations of the concept of orality and claims that "primary orality can never be recovered" because the consciousness of the world itself has been transformed through literacy (p. 37). Lovejoy (2012) questions the official statistics and complicates UNESCO's optimistic statistics, noting that literacy rates are notoriously difficult to accurately quantify, that governments have an incentive to inflate them, and that the term "illiteracy" cannot directly be identified with orality. Lovejoy (2012) offers a high estimate of the number of people func-

tioning orally: “approximately 4 billion [who] live primarily by orality because they are non-readers or have only basic reading comprehension skills” (p. 15).

Anecdotal evidence from across the world gives these claims credence as well. For example, the Abenaki Indian storyteller Bruchac (2010) explains that “oral traditions have not disappeared” (para. 5), and he offers examples from his two decades of travel from Mexico to Mali, during which he recorded his experiences of orality. Even many highly literate nations outside of Western Europe, the United States, and Canada, have groundings in orality. As one example, Watson (2010) highlights the “residual orality in widely literate Yugoslavia . . . where a strong tradition of oral epic rhapsodizing continues and flourishes” (p. 150). The research that does exist on orality emphasizes the cultures of the African continent particularly as having a wealth of oral tradition (Barnes & Carmichael, 2006; Foley, 1998; Hartnell, 2010; Jansen, 2000); as Foley (1998) notes, the numbers of studies emerging each year on oral traditions include the “vast panoply of oral tradition from various parts of Africa” (p. 3).

In addition to Africa, some of the indigenous groups from Asia that have seen large numbers arriving in the United States as refugees—including the Mong of Laos, whom Thao (2006) explains have had a “continuation of oral tradition practices” (p. 3), particularly as the Mong Elders continue to be imbued “with a non-literate tradition” (p.1). Other areas of Asia, including Central Asia and the Middle East, are also deeply oral cultures (Gezari, 2010; Slyomovics, 1998): “folk poetry,” for instance, “is a key cultural event in Arabian society because it is an integral part of political, social, and religious institution” (Slyomovics, 1998, p. 271).

Considering the focus here refugee students, better understanding the contexts in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East is crucial. The “Global Trends” report from UNHCR (2015) showed that in 2014 more than half of all refugees worldwide came from just

three countries which happen to be in these regions: Syria, Afghanistan, and Somalia (p. 3). In my own context in Greensboro, North Carolina, of the refugees resettled in 2014, 21% came from the Middle East, 34% came from South and East Asia, and 44% came from Africa (“Annual Report on Refugee Communities,” 2014).

The above discussion therefore suggests that orality indeed has critical implications for teachers of refugees in the United States. Those implications include both the unique assets and unique challenges that orality brings to the English as a second language classroom. In the context of such classrooms, what specific characteristics of oral culture constitute these assets and challenges, and how do teachers, as Watson (2010) encourages us to do, “incorporate characteristic forms of orality into the very structure of pedagogical practices” (p. 231)?

In order to best incorporate orality in their classrooms and utilize appropriate pedagogies, teachers should first aim to understand the deeper cultural and mental characteristics of orality. The following section outlines seven main characteristics into which oral culture can be generalized.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ORALITY

Characteristic One: Formulaic

Essentially, the characteristics of orality stem from the characteristics of conversational speech. According to Kramsch (1998), speech is inherently transient, impermanent. Once something is said out loud, it vanishes immediately unless there is a way to record it; thus, an individual from an oral culture must have a great ability to recall information. Memorization is typically accomplished through mnemonics and formulaic stories, and by aggregating information in epithets and ready-made chunks of speech—tools for which literate people have no need. (Ong, 1982, p. 38). As Ong (1982) explains, “Orally

based thought tends to be highly rhythmic, for rhythm aids recall, even physiologically” (p. 34).

He related hearing a young man learning and reciting words of a praise line from an epic poem. The lines were first articulated by the griot, and then the young man systematically repeated the lines two by two before being asked to repeat all the lines in succession (Jansen, 2000, p. 26).

Characteristic Two: Epithetic

In addition to being formulaic, Ong (1982) argues that orality is “aggregative, rather than analytic” (p. 38). In other words, an oral culture needs to aggregate knowledge into memorable oral chunks of language. Such a need is epitomized by the Homeric “clever Odysseus,” or “Wise Nestor” (Ong, 1982, p. 38), or the European folktales’ “wicked witch,” repeated every time that character is mentioned in a story (Watson, 2010, p. 156). In another instance, in the Soviet Union’s oral residue culture, citizens referred to “the Glorious Revolution of October 26” when speaking of that event, in order to define and stabilize this history in cultural memory as something glorious (Watson, 2010, p. 156). Because these epithets are “instances of cultural wisdom that have been arduously created and preserved, oftentimes over generations, within memorable verbal units” (Hartnell, 2010, p. 41), and because there is no place outside of the mind to store long-standing expressions, information and wisdom would be forever lost were these expressions to be dismantled. Therefore, rather than being able to analyze whether the revolution of October 26 was truly glorious, as people from literate mindsets are persuaded to do, the oral mind must keep this epithet intact (Ong, 1982; Watson, 2010). Lord (1987) explains that “the unquestioning acceptance of such slogans or clichés forms part of the ‘oral residue’ in speech and thought” (p. 57)—even when oral individuals from oral cultures live in literate surroundings.

Characteristic Three: Redundant

Similar to the mnemonic rhythms and formulaic aggregative expressions, a redundant or “copious” quality also characterizes orality (Ong, 1982, p. 39). An oral-cultured individual is accustomed to repetition, because there is no way to return to or read what was previously said. Cosentino (1998) claims that “‘tedious repetition’ is the structural basis of the oral performance” (p. 176).

For instance, Lord (1987) found the quality of redundancy specifically in written versions of oral poetry, including South Slavic epics. Likewise, repetition and redundancy punctuate the Hebrew Bible, exemplified in each section of the creation story, beginning with “And God said...”; moreover, we can note that the creation story appears twice, but in different forms. Ong (1982) claims that this repetition was for the listener’s convenience, or to allow the speaker time to think of what to say, while Lord (1987) suggests this redundancy arose from ritual requirements that have kept repetitive language intact, while sometimes losing the original meaning. As these examples shows, oral cultures tend to encourage “fluency, fulsomeness, volubility,” rather than the traits that literacy stimulates—synthesis, summary, and succinctness (Watson, 2010, p. 160).

Characteristic Four: Traditional

The tendency to keep language patterns from antiquity intact exemplifies the fourth characteristic of orality—namely, that oral culture is traditional. Because knowledge and wisdom must be accumulated and stored in someone’s head, older individuals tend to be given deference and respect (Jansen, 2010; Ong, 1982; Thao, 2006; Watson, 2010). In oral culture, it is their wisdom and knowledge that is trusted, rather than novelty and innovation. Thao (2006) repeatedly refers to his people’s “Elders,” emphasizing the role of the elderly—not history books, textbooks, or written publications—in passing on knowledge and wisdom in his oral Mong culture.

Characteristic Five: Story-Based

Because knowledge cannot be structured outside of lived experience without literacy, Ong (1982) characterizes orality as “close to the human life-world” (p. 42). By this he means that knowledge and information are communicated through stories based on human experience, rather than through neutral, abstracted lists or statistics, as is done in literate culture. In order for the knowledge and message to be memorable, language must be given narrative format, such as in biblical genealogies. Research on students from oral cultures, including the Kurds from Iraq and hunter-gatherer groups, has also found this tendency to turn information into stories (Biesele, 1986; Loukia, Pernicek, & Sweeney, 2007; Nykiel-Herbert, 2010). Similarly, in the Jewish Rabbinic tradition, Jesus—as part of the oral Palestinian culture—taught through memorable stories and parables rather than isolated moral directives.

Researchers argue that storytelling as the basis for oral culture is common to all oral cultures. For instance, the ancient Greeks learned through the oral epics that later became the written literature attributed to Homer (Gezari, 2010). Similarly, the ancient Hebrews communicated through oral stories that later became the biblical stories of the Torah (Ong, 1982). The indigenous Mong from Laos “learn about their cultural values as well as understand their past” through “tales and legends” (Thao, 2006, p. 53). In West Africa, the importance of the griot has been described by many researchers (Cosentino, 1998; Jansen, 2000). Cosentino (1998) called the African oral narrative “paideia for the young . . . and encyclopedias for everyone else in the traditional Africa of countless villages” (p. 174).

Concerning the pedagogical purposed of narrative, Biesele (1986) found that among the !Kung and other hunter-gatherers, a story has “scaffolding in the unfolding of a plot” so that “stories can be understood as effective didactic devices” (p. 159).

Characteristic Six: Experiential

Given orality’s “closeness to the human-life world” (Ong, 1982, p. 42), it also tends to be “empathetic and participatory, rather than objectively distanced” (p. 45). In other words, oral culture is founded on an engagement in real experiences and does not focus on an emotionless analysis of the world, as literacy does. Objective distance from a topic requires writing—or, at the very least, a way to abstract information and knowledge from its context, as done when creating a list (Goody, 1977, p.111). In Rushforth’s (1992) studies of the Dene indigenous people in Alaska, he notes that the “Dene usually prefer to learn by firsthand experience rather than by other means.” (p. 484). Confirming this, Watson (2010) wrote that “experience is a teacher that orally educated people trust and rely on, and it takes a lot of convincing to get them to believe an abstract fact or categorization that conflicts with or lies outside of their experience” (p.165).

Similarly, orality is situational rather than abstract. This characteristic could also be called “context-dependent.” Truth is told through the interactions of humans rather than lists or how-to manuals devoid of context. For instance, Biesele (1986) explains that among the !Kung, “many sorts of knowledge are acquired through hearing the dramatized story of the day’s events rather than in a directly didactic learning context” (p. 163).

This trait of learning solely through context and personal interaction impacts operational thinking. Examples from Luria’s (1976) landmark study on the operational thinking of oral peasants in the Soviet Union in “areas that had been 100 percent illiterate for centuries” assessed deduction, inference, generalization, and abstraction (p. 13). In one experiment, the subjects were presented with syllogistic questions that illuminated differences in the thinking of oral and literate people, as the following quote demonstrates:

In the far North, where there is snow, all bears are white. Novaya Zembla is in the far North and

there is always snow there. What color are the bears?

Here is a typical response, ‘I don’t know. I’ve seen a black bear. I’ve never seen any others . . . Each locality has its own animals’ (Luria, 1976, pp. 108-109)

Overall, an individual from an oral culture does not prefer to deal with the kinds of analysis, formal logical reasoning processes, abstract categorization, and other mental activities such as hypothetical reasoning that literate individuals take for granted. In reality, therefore, we might say that the capacity for analytical thinking derives not “from thought itself, but from text-formed thoughts” (Ong, 1982, p. 55).

Characteristic Seven: Group-Oriented

Finally, oral speech is dialogic, meaning that one cannot orally communicate in isolation. Speech is therefore people-centered, rather than topic-centered. Speakers try to engage listeners, appeal to their senses, and base their oral performance on group dynamics, responses, and interests (Kramsch, 1998). Oral culture is relational, interconnected, and interdependent rather than individualistic. These manifest as group-oriented culture (Nykiel-Herbert, 2010). Biesele (1986) found that among oral cultures, “information is acquired additively, and individuals benefit from the contribution from many others, rather than a single teacher” (p. 163).

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

In practice, of course, one cannot neatly separate orality into seven specific characteristics. For example, aggregative language is not used independently of formulaic language or group orientation. Transporting the totality of the oral milieu into the literate U.S. is impossible; like all cultures and patterns of thinking, orality is an integrated system. However, parceling this culture and consciousness into seven characteristics to be used in lessons can still inform

pedagogy and transform ESL lessons. Because orality denotes a way of thinking and processing that is truly distinct from a consciousness deeply affected by the use of writing, pedagogical approaches for individuals from oral cultures is more effective when harnessing these oral dynamics.

First, considering formulaic, rhythmic, and aggregative language use, evidence shows that formulaic language transcends orality when people learn to write. Burgos (2014) demonstrates that Chilean ESL college students use the same formulaic phrases repeatedly and base their writing on the structure of oral formulaic language. His study found that “the students’ written texts have the structure of an oral text because they use many lexical bundles which are frequently part of oral speech . . . It seems that novice students develop texts in oral forms mostly, instead of written forms” (p. 32).

Ong’s (1982) implications corroborate Burgos’ study: “When Xhosa poets learn to write, their written poetry is also characterized by a formulaic style” (p. 26). Therefore, “teachers of English as a foreign language need to design tasks which include the use of lexical bundles to help foreign language students gain more fluency in the language” (Burgos, 2014, p. 32). Teachers should thus focus on helping students use common lexical bundles of speech—formulaic phrases such as “I think that” and “I don’t know” (Burgos, 2014, p. 30)—and scaffold writing instruction based on these oral formulas. Moreover, teachers can teach stories and poems that use redundant formula in English, such as versions of Beowulf.

Second, employing an oral individual’s proclivity to storytelling would serve useful in English language instruction. Nykiel-Herbert (2010), for instance, utilized storytelling culture when teaching Iraqi Kurds: she based her literacy instruction on the experiential narrative material of her students, some of whom had a limited level of literacy. The students came from cultures that valued their spoken performance much more than the written word, so they were first encouraged to give spoken performances in class. In

order to help the students to better understand the concept of the written word, she recorded their stories and then transcribed the words to read back to them. Such a method effectively works at “bridging the oral and written modes” (Nykiel-Herbert, 2010, p. 9). The students’ desire to improve their spoken stories created the incentive to create notes for use during their oral performances. These texts then began to serve as tools in more formal writing instruction. Every aspect of this teaching procedure was thereby scaffolded from oral stories generated from students’ real experiences.

As another response to the storytelling impulse, teachers can employ drama and skits both by performing these themselves and having students create and perform skits. Such lessons appeal to what Biesele (1986) notes to be common in traditional hunter-gatherer’s oral culture—that “drama is a mechanism that acts in folktales, as it does in epic, to aid memory by compelling involvement” (p. 159).

Third, teachers of students from oral backgrounds must draw upon knowledge that has been learned through their students’ experiences, recognizing the difficulty of the oral mind to abstract knowledge from the context of what has been experienced (Luria, 1976). As a simple example of this challenge, even instruction in abstract language topics such as grammar must be based on how language is used situationally, rather than on a set of rules. *Games for Language Learning* by Andrew Wright, David Betteridge, and Michael Buckby (2006) is an excellent resource for this task. The authors introduce their handbook by stating: “Games also help the teacher to create contexts in which the language is useful and meaningful” (p.2), and is particularly important for oral people.

Fourth, teachers should be aware that fervently adhering to a lecture topic, while ignoring the context of the class group dynamics, might be incongruent with group- and interaction-oriented cultures. As Hartnell (2010) describes, oral performance is contingent upon audience participation and is shaped by

the context of the storytelling and audience. Nykiel-Herbert (2010) explains further implications of the group-oriented dynamic during her work with Iraqi Kurds: “In American classrooms, students are encouraged to do—and to be satisfied with—their ‘personal best’; by contrast, the Iraqi children strived for the standards achieved by the most advanced among them” (p. 8). Therefore, the individualism of many classrooms—personal best, individual grades, and personal assessments—is incongruent with oral culture as well. Teachers should therefore develop creative ways to draw on group-oriented methods of teaching and assessing, including group performances and choral readings.

Indeed, many Western educational theories emphasize student-centered learning and teacher-as-facilitator classes—environments in which students form their own theories and construct their own knowledge. Yet such paradigms may be antithetical to oral culture. The overtaking of the “known by the new” is to “a degree quite foreign to oral noesis” (Watson, 2010, p. 165). Students from an oral culture will likely look to the teacher as a repository of knowledge, especially if that teacher is advanced in years, and would find a student-led, constructivist classroom incompatible with their mindsets.

As a further pedagogical consideration, formally analytic thought is also antithetical to orality, as both Ong (1982) and Luria (1976) note. The lack of formal analysis is a sharp contrast with the Western intellect—namely, that “without a writing system, breaking up thought—that is, analysis—is a high-risk procedure” (Ong, 1982, p. 39). By “high-risk” procedure, Ong means that by considering a train of thought piece by piece, the memorability of these thoughts can diminish, and knowledge in an oral culture could be lost forever. Accordingly, Matute et al. (2012) find that children in oral cultures cannot think of language as a string of words, and that this “lack of word awareness interferes with their ability to use words as objects of reflection” (p. 121). This inability can pose a particular challenge when a teacher is asking

students to analyze and break apart speech, engaging in the formally analytic thought that is common to literate culture.

Much like the tendency to aggregate information into memorable epithets and clichés rather than to analyze information, the need for redundancy among individuals from oral cultures poses a particular challenge in a literate classroom. As Watson (2010) notes, “It is not hard to understand why high school newcomers without prior schooling typically find it extremely difficult to distill a discursive whole into the form of an outline, or to locate or articulate a main idea” (p. 162). The oral mind wants to continue repeating an idea or phrase, rather than outline or summarize into a main idea. Therefore, teachers must allow for more redundancy and repetition than they might for students from literate cultures. For example, students may want the structure of teaching methods to be repetitive, such as learning vowel sounds with songs that each utilize the same rhythm, or learning the names of shapes through a narrative.

A guide for educators in Iowa teaching about the tradition shared in that state, “Additional Folk Life Information” (2004) notes that traditional American culture has oral components, including jokes, riddles, and customs passed down from generation to generation. In classrooms with students from “different ethnic groups,” the guide encourages teachers to: “Ask them for proverbs from their culture and an explanation of what they mean; then see if there is an equivalent Anglo American proverb” (p.1). For Eng-

lish learners, this activity could be used as a tool to bridge a spoken first language and English. Since oral cultures are replete with epithets and sayings, individuals from these cultures will likely be accustomed to remembering epithets and proverbs as they learn English.

In conclusion, the need for culturally responsive teaching is greater than ever, especially in the field of English language instruction for refugees from oral cultures. For teachers of refugees, the importance and relevance of orality cannot be underestimated. To ignore orality is to privilege students from literate cultures. More specifically, for teachers of English in the United States who instruct refugees coming from oral cultures, the challenge is to harness these types of learning methods so as to use the unique cognitive characteristics that accompany orality. In this way, teachers can build an effective pedagogy of language instruction.

In order for students to reach their potential as active and successful learners accustoming to a new society, teachers of students from oral cultures first must use the characteristics of orality as the paradigm itself through which their students learn and ultimately as a bridge for oral students to adapt to a literate culture. By adapting to literacy, without abandoning the cultural wealth of orality, newcomers to the United States can enrich both their culture and the culture of their literate neighbors.

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