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Stories and Projects and Movies, Oh My: A curriculum for exposure to bilingualism in middle school

The bilingual environment is a place where culture, identity, and coursework collide. This collision can either be utilized for further learning and growth or be manipulated to further oppression and stagnation. In his article, “Strategies of Bilingual Teaching,” education scholar John Downing premised that there were three general ways in which one could approach a bilingual setting. Firstly, the majority in an area can impose their primary language on the minority students. Secondly, the minority students can initially receive instruction in their primary language, which will then switch to instruction in the majority language. Finally, the instructor can offer equal amounts of instruction in the primary and goal languages. My project was developed off of the argument that an equal amount of instruction in both the primary and goal languages would foster the most welcoming classroom environment for students.

Establishing a welcoming classroom environment is a key element to effective learning. This is explored in Downing’s article when he speaks to the importance of what he calls the “Affective Variable” in the bilingual classroom. This variable relates to the emotional well-being of students in a classroom. Despite the best of curriculums and academic content, if the emotional health of a student and the value of his or her identity is not established, then the instruction is all for naught. Scholar Sonia Nieto also discusses this topic in her article, “Teaching, Caring and Transforming.” Nieto explains that empowering the students always begins with valuing the students. Thus learning a new language should always begin with a common ground of respect and value.

Out of this space of understanding the importance of valuing and respecting students, I began to explore how a classroom could better foster an inviting space where students of every language would feel welcomed. I worked from the conception of a bilingual, middle school classroom within a school that has one overall, goal language. I assumed that the there would be members of the classroom who spoke the majority language, as well as those who spoke only the minority language.

I then developed a two part curriculum with the goal of establishing a welcoming space where students value each other’s’ language(s). Although this curriculum includes some assignments that work with building vocabulary, verbal, and oral skills, its true goal goes beyond teaching language skills. It is about hearing, reading, and writing a language. By learning to appreciate the diversity of language, the students can then engage more fully with the process of learning a second language as well as appreciate more fully their peers who speak a language that differs from theirs.

Another goal of this curriculum was to engage the students within the bilingual classroom who have a solid grasp of the goal language or who are primary speakers of the goal language. Oftentimes the emphasis of bilingual programs is to teach the goal language to minority speakers, but it is equally as important that the goal language speakers develop an appreciation of the minority students’ language. Thus, this curriculum strives to ensure that both languages are given equal value within the classroom. This demonstrates to all students that their backgrounds, cultures, and identities are valued.

The process of designing a curriculum was difficult, and, in many ways, I know that this program is just the beginning. However, these two lessons can serve as examples to the deeper issue of teaching language appreciation in conjunction with language skills within a classroom where students arrive with various levels of language speaking abilities. When the elements of a bilingual education collide, the most important outcome is that each and every student feels valued and accepted, which is the heart of my curriculum.

Exposure to Bilingualism Curriculum:

**Overall goals:**

* Students will be exposed to the language learning process.
* Students will experience reading, writing, and hearing two languages in the classroom.
* Students will gain a respect of and appreciation for the diversity of languages.

Lesson 1— Telling Your Story: Exploring, Expressing, and Exchanging Language

**Objectives:**

* Students will see the classroom as a comfortable space to express ideas in any language.
* Students will begin to be comfortable with expressing themselves in front of a group.
* Students will be exposed to the backgrounds of their peers, and begin to be more conscious of the value of difference.

**Time:** Two 30 minute sessions

**Suggested Procedures:**

First Session:

* Prepare a story about an event in your life to tell the students. The story should be approximately 3-5 minutes in length. Pick a story that will allow you to be passionate and animate in your delivery to the students.
* Deliver the story to the classroom in the goal language of the school, while translating the story into the non-dominant language throughout. Take care to be equally passionate when speaking in both languages in order to demonstrate their equal value.
* At the conclusion of your story, engage the students in a conversation. Make sure to tell the students that answering in any language is acceptable. Translate between the languages so that all the students have access to the questions/answers. You can ask the students:

Content:

* What happened in my story?
* How did I describe … ?
* What would have happened if …?

Expression:

* What different body language did you see throughout the story?
* Did my voice change in the story? When?
* How could I have made this story more interesting?
* Finally, have the students brainstorm one short story to share with the classroom in the next session. This story should be 3-5 minutes in length, and will be told in the primary language of each student. After securing their topic, the students will write a summary of the events of their stories.

Second Session:

* The students will begin by reviewing the written summary they made of their stories. Allow the students time to change any of the details if they wish.
* Begin the student presentations, and translate their stories throughout. Allow a short question and answer portion after each story.
* At the conclusion of the story telling, give the students 5 minutes to reflect and write about the process. These responses will be collected. You can ask the students:
* How did you feel while you were giving the presentation?
* If you could do the presentation again, would you change anything? If so, what?
* What is one story you remember a classmate sharing?
* How did you feel when a student was presenting in a language different from your own?

**Assessment:**

* Evaluate the student responses to the story telling activity. Did they:
* Feel comfortable sharing their stories/ideas in the classroom
* Feel confident speaking in front of their peers
* Take note of the different stories of their peers, and the languages those stories were shared in.

Lesson 2: Exploring Difference: Appreciating Your Non-Primary Language

**Objectives:**

* Students will complete a writing assignment in their non-primary language
* Students will begin to view other languages as equally valid to his or her primary language.

**Time:** One 60 minute session, One 90 minute film viewing

**Suggested Resources:**

* *Toy Story (Spanish Version)*. Dir. John Lasseter. Pixar, 1995. DVD.

**Suggested Procedures:**

* Students will choose a writing assignment from a premade list of prompts including topics like food, weather, entertainment, and religion.
* For the first 30 minutes the students will research this topic selecting 2 resources in the student’s primary language and 2 in their non-primary language.
* Finally, the students will write 1-2 paragraphs about the topic in their non-primary language with the assistance of dictionaries and the teacher’s help. The focus of these assignments should be on content and not grammar.

**Assessment:**

* Evaluate the students’ writing samples. Did they:
* Engage with their topics and complete the full assignment
* Work diligently on the assignment, despite it being in their non-primary language

Film Session:

* Select an age-appropriate film in the non-dominant language of the school. For example, in dominant-English, minority-Spanish bilingual classroom, the *Toy Story (Spanish Version)* is an appropriate film selection. Confirm that the film has subtitles in the goal language.
* Prior to showing the film, pass out thought-provoking questions/comments in order to target attention to language throughout the film. These could include:
* List 3 action verbs you noticed in the movie and their translations
* Does the language change when a character in the movie is talking to someone familiar versus when they are talking to someone new?
* What are four new words/phrases (in either language) you heard in the film that you did not know?
* The students should be instructed to focus on whatever format (either the spoken words or the subtitles) that is in his or her non-primary language.
* After watching the film, have a 10 minute discussion addressing the following topics:
* Answers to whatever focus questions you assigned for the film.
* The difficulty/ease or focusing on your non-primary language
* Any confusion that you experienced while trying to interpret the film

**Assessment:**

* Reflect on the discussion held after the film. Did your students:
* Take note of the non-primary language throughout the film
* Understand the equal validity of the different languages
* Appreciate the differences between languages

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