

Teaching, Classroom, and Personal Context

As a 1st/2nd grade Spanish-bilingual teacher I am continually thinking about and questioning the use and role of language in my classroom. What is it like for my students to be learning to read and write in their first language? Am I an effective teacher in Spanish? What is effective communication with the families of my students in their first language and my second language? Are my students aware of the power and opportunity derived from being bilingual? Will my students realize the power and opportunity derived from speaking English fluently? How do I fight the biases against people who do not speak Standard English? Can I successfully teach my students to speak, read, and write English? It often feels as if my entire day as a teacher revolves around language: its use, its effectiveness or ineffectiveness, its opportunity.

Melrose has been working on reform for the past fifteen years. I came to Melrose at the tail end of their focused effort to improve their reading instruction program. In the 3 1/2 years that I have been at Melrose, our efforts have narrowed and we are now focused on our ELD program for our bilingual students and an academic English program for our sheltered students. A central component of Melrose's reform effort has been a strong commitment to teacher inquiry. Staff development at Melrose (Collaborative Inquiry) is teacher inquiry which allows teachers to work in collaborative groups and ask and investigate questions about teacher practice and student achievement. The current school wide focus on ELD and academic English is a direct result of the teacher inquiry that occurred over the last few years.

Melrose is located in East Oakland and serves the neighborhood in which it is located. The school has approximately 480 students (80% Latino, 15% African-American, 5% Southeast Asian and other). Despite the passage of proposition 227, Melrose has been able to maintain its Spanish bilingual program by having parents sign waivers requesting that their children receive instruction in their primary language. The bilingual classes serve only Latino students, whereas the sheltered classrooms serve a mix of the student population. There is an hour of ELD instruction four days a week that levels students by their English oral language skills and targets instruction based on level. All of the students, 1st through 5th grade, participate in this program.

I have always been interested in and challenged by how my students learn English while receiving the majority of their instruction in their primary language. Despite the fact that the maintenance bilingual program does work for many of the students, I have been particularly interested in which components are involved in insuring that the program works for all students. A large part of me exploring this idea has meant taking a critical view of my own ELD class, my own practice, and the assumptions that I hold about language use. This year I decided to challenge the communicative norms of my ELD class, which in many ways reflect the communicative norms of the school, and investigate how challenging these norms might help me in creating an ELD program that works for all students.

Evolution of My Teaching and Research Questions

One of the major assumptions that I had been working under was that one of the best ways for my students to learn English was for them to be speaking English exclusively during their ELD hour. So despite the fact that Spanish was all of their first language, they were all emergent English speakers, and I was the only English model in the classroom, I insisted that when they communicate with one another that they communicate in English. Not surprisingly there was not a lot of talking in the class when students worked together at their tables. In fact, my English class was strangely quiet for a class of 20 1st and 2nd graders. When I decided to challenge this English only rule in English class I realized that I had also assumed that if students weren't speaking English during class they must not be talking about the content that we were covering in class. In many ways these assumptions that I was holding were in direct conflict with everything I believed about how children learn and acquire language. I left my graduate program fairly confident in the theory that I had learned about how students learn language. I believed that language was socially constructed and that in order for students to learn language that they had to be given the opportunity to make meaning with it. I also strongly believed that a student's primary language could be a tremendous support for the student learning a second language. Finally, I felt very strongly that students learn language from one another. Students were going to get better at English by talking with one another, not by listening to me speak English. However, in response to working in a climate that was fraught with pressure (Prop. 227 and district) to get students speaking English quickly in a program that had not been clearly articulated, I pushed aside many of the things that I believed about how children learn language. I began teaching my English class in ways that I had never anticipated that I would. In reality, I had actually never really listened to what the students were saying in Spanish during English class. Maybe they were making sense of the content that we were covering in English class in Spanish and if I wasn't letting them use Spanish to make sense of what we were doing in English, could they really be expected to learn English?

At the beginning of this school year I did away with my "This is English class and we only speak English during English class" speech. I decided that I wouldn't create any rules for the students about their language use during ELD, I wouldn't mention or highlight particular language use during the class and that I would only use English with the students during the hour. From the first day of ELD I noticed the tone of my class change. First, English class was no longer quiet. There was lots of talking and activity happening all of the time. Albeit most of it is in Spanish - but students were talking to one another and talking about what we were doing in English class. Second, my own personal anxiety about my students and their success has dramatically lessened. I no longer find myself panicking about how my students are doing and my own failure as a teacher of English. My students are asking me questions (in Spanish) and I am answering those questions (in English) - we are having conversations during English class. Somehow that feels much more productive than what I had been doing in the past. Finally, it seems as if my mind has been opened up to seeing language being used

(English) in many different places and in many different ways that I had not been seeing before. These observations have left me wondering about the contexts in which students feel comfortable to take risks with language. Does the structure of the ELD hour support students in taking the risks with language and using language in all different ways?

The changes in how the students and I communicate in the classroom have unintentionally impacted the curriculum in my ELD class. Previously, my curriculum had centered on the language generated by the students. This was often very difficult for the students and frustrating for me because the students simply weren't in a place to produce a lot of language. The consequence was that I would generate the language that the students would then be expected to use. However, the language wasn't grounded in any context that the children were familiar with. The language came from me. I have noticed that the lessons that I have created this year in English rely more heavily on a text (usually a piece of literature) that the students have access to and are able to use their primary language to help them make sense of. We are acting out stories, putting on puppet shows, and writing our own stories based on texts that we have read and explored together. I am supporting the use of their primary language between one another in order to make sense of the content we are covering. After the students have had the opportunity to talk with one another in Spanish, I have then been trying to create listening and speaking tasks in English. All of this feels like good teaching to me; it feels connected to my training and to theory. But until I challenged the communicative norms in my classroom I was unable to teach in this way.

My Current Research Question, Data Collection, and Analysis

Another assumption that I was operating under, but did not realize it until I had the opportunity to work with a group of upper grade students who had been in my very first class, was that I knew that some students would probably never be ready to transition. In my first year of teaching I had predicted the students who would struggle with English, and now, in fourth grade, I was seeing my prediction realized. Why had I been so sure that these students would struggle and not be successful at our school? And since I had been so convinced, why hadn't I done things differently for those students? It wasn't until

As I continued to incorporate the upper grade students into my English class on a weekly basis, the questions and concerns I had about these students continued to nag at me. What was it about these particular students that made learning English so difficult? Why does the current bilingual program and ELD structure work for some students at the school but not these students? All of these students had been at the school since kindergarten or first grade so the school had a tremendous amount of data about these students. The upper-grade teacher and I decided to choose a group of eight students and organize the data that the school had on these students to see if these students had anything in common besides the challenge of transitioning. Not surprisingly, these students had all had very similar experiences at school. The majority of them had been retained in kindergarten or first grade and received a primary language reading

intervention (reading recovery, after-school tutoring, one-on-one tutoring). All of these students had struggled and continue to struggle with their Spanish literacy. These were the students who made up the after-school program and extended school program (all programs intended to support students who are struggling academically). Finally, a large number of these students were on behavioral reports and were "known" in the school for being challenging in the classroom.

As the upper-grade teacher and I reflected on this data we exchanged stories about the students that we had in common. Over and over again she told stories of students that I could have shared about the students three years ago. Her challenges and frustrations seemed to mirror the challenges and frustrations I had with these students in first grade. Was this a coincidence or a personality thing that she and I shared or had these students been experienced by all of their teachers in similar ways? We set out to interview the teachers that these students had since their arrival at the school. We asked teachers to reflect on the strengths and challenges of these students and to try and recollect anything in particular about these students learning in Spanish and English.

She and I interviewed 10 different teachers once (including each other). These teachers were the Kindergarten through 4th grade teachers of the eight students (three of the teachers these students had at different grade levels were no longer working at the school and we did not interview these teachers). We asked the teachers to reflect on the students (What do you think of when you think of (student name)?), reflect on the student's strengths and what was challenging about the student, and to comment on anything that they remembered in particular about the students Spanish and English learning.

The teacher interviews have provided us with an overwhelming amount of data that in no way has been exhausted by the initial analysis that we have done. However, after initial analysis three interesting patterns emerged from the interviews. The first was that the teacher's recollections of working with these students were all very similar. Over and over again different teachers attributed the same strengths and challenges to the same students. There weren't any teacher reflections that shared a contradictory opinion or experience of the students. Second, teachers mentioned over and over again the low literacy skills of these students' parents. Students often acted as translator, interpreter, or intermediary in the community for their parents. Finally, although the ELD program for these low-level students tends to focus on oral language development, over and over teachers commented on these students' passion and skill for writing in their primary language, a skill that had yet to be explored in English.

Implications

The challenge for me has been to figure out how the work that I have been doing in my own ELD class and the work that I have been doing with the upper-grade students and teacher is connected and what are the implications for all of this work. First, students in our school ready to transition at different times including a group of students who are not ready to transition by the end of 5th grade. Second, within the current structure I feel confident in predicting which of my first and second graders will not be ready for

transition in the next two to three years. Third, although most of the conversation is happening in Spanish, by eliminating the "English only" rule in my ELD class students are talking more with each other and with me. Finally, despite the numerous attempts to support the student's success in the existing program, the program itself has not changed to try and better meet the needs of all students.

Unfortunately, I don't know what is the best thing to do for the students who are struggling right now in my English class and who have struggled historically at the school. However, in light of what I have come to know and understand, I am inclined to want to change the structure of the ELD program rather than come up with more ways in which to support the students success in the current structure. My own research into my own practice and ELD class has challenged me to think of ways that primary language instruction can support second language learning. It is necessary that the learning of English be completely separated from the learning that is going on in the student's primary language? I have also begun to rethink the environment in which this learning takes place (which I think in many ways is particular to my school site). After observing students using English in a variety of ways and settings during the day, I have begun wonder whether or not it is appropriate to ask children to change classes for the purpose of learning English. Finally, many of the beliefs that I came into teaching with 3 1/2 years ago about how children learn language have been confirmed by many of my observations in my own ELD class and by the work I have been doing with the upper-grade students. Students are using their primary language to make sense of the content that we are covering in English. Students are also using English in situations that they have mastered in their primary language. Students are also making sense of the curriculum with one another. They are talking and negotiating with one another.