

Creating a Culturally Responsive Classroom in Teaching to Bilingual Students from a Monolingual Perspective

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I have learned a great deal on what bilingual education is, what it means, and how it affects millions of students in the school system all over this country. I've been able to understand the personal effects of the mistreatment of bilinguals in this country. I've learned the history of bilingual education, theory, politics, and laws. Finally, I've been able to read the different perspectives and ideas on how to incorporate Arts into the curriculum and education of emergent bilinguals. Each one of the authors and books, combined with my own readings throughout my graduate work helped me to understand what it means for me, a monolingual teacher, to teach and engage with emergent bilinguals. In my own ignorance, I thought that anyone who spoke a language other than English had to be taught by someone who spoke his or her own language.

I actually thought that in my teaching career, since I only spoke English that I would only work with English-speaking students. Fortunately, I was and still am wrong. I have had the privilege, in my work with students, to teach students who have spoken multiple languages. I may not always understand them, but because of my education into emergent bilingual education, I can now say that I can teach students who are not proficient in English. I cannot discredit my monolingualism to mean that I will not teach students who are bilingual. So, this paper will follow my own journey and self-discovery in the ways that I, a monolingual educator, can teach to students whose language and dialect is different from my own.

Creating a Culturally Responsive Classroom

Creating a culturally responsive classroom is the backbone for knowing how to teach to all students, no matter their race, gender, language, ethnicity, SES, etc. It is through the work of Curran, M., Tomlinson-Clarke, S., & Weinstein, C. (2003) that I have gained insight and understanding into what it means to create a culturally responsive classroom.

Awareness

The first way that I can work to create a culturally responsive classroom, as a monolingual educator teaching to emergent bilinguals, is through awareness. I have to gain awareness and educate myself on the culture, community, and language that I am teaching. I cannot teach my students as if they are all the same. Their culture, community, and language has value to them and is a huge part of who they are and I need to be aware of and respect that. One way of gaining awareness is through what Curran et al. (2003) write on how educators, "should use acquired cultural knowledge as a way of demonstrating an openness and willingness to learn about the aspects of culture that are important to students and their families" (p. 270). Culture and community are important to all students, so I have to prove to students that I have

an openness and willingness to educate myself and immerse myself in the communities I am teaching. One example of this is when I was teaching in Jacksonville, FL. I worked a great deal at an inner-city elementary school, but I lived in the suburbs of Jacksonville, which was about 25-30 minutes away. So, on Saturdays, I would go to the farmer's market that was right near the school in inner-city Jacksonville and a lot of times I would see the students that I taught and a lot of their moms worked at the market. I loved seeing the students outside the classroom and it always meant so much to me when they wanted to introduce me to their moms or grandmas.

Awareness is more than just knowing my students in an academic way; it's means knowing who they are in terms of language, culture, community, and family. Garcia & Kliefgen (2010) speak to the importance of language and how it is something that should be valued, respected, and utilized. Prior to my research and experiences, I didn't understand the importance of language and how it makes up a huge portion of who we are. I need to understand that in any classroom I'm teaching in, that students' home/native language is important to them. Even if I don't speak their home language, it does not mean that we can't find ways to communicate and connect as teacher and student.

Finally, in order to bring awareness of language, culture, and community into the classroom, I have to be aware of the social structures that affect students outside the classroom. I am doing students a disservice if I ignore the issues that they face outside the classroom. Pine (2009) writes that critical reflection is done through "making connections between what happens in the classroom and the wider moral and social structures that affect what goes on in the school and the classroom" (p. 181). The majority of the students that I led field trips for through STEM Outreach were from the farming and border towns of New Mexico where Spanish is the primary language. I had to take this into consideration when planning a lesson or activity. I may not know their language completely, but I would work with my other colleagues who spoke Spanish and ask them how to say certain phrases in Spanish. I would be doing the students a disservice if I ignore who they are and what they face outside the classroom. The classroom should be a place of empathy and feeling like you can be yourself. Schneiwind (2000) writes about how to build a community of trust in the classroom and that is through sharing hardships and working to create empathy in the classroom. I do think that creating a community of trust and a culturally responsive classroom is possible and it starts with awareness of the students' language, community, and culture.

Humility

The second ingredient that must be present in order to build a culturally responsive classroom is through humility. In order to teach bilingual students, from a monolingual perspective, I must have humility. I must be able to admit when I don't understand something or I'm struggling to communicate with a student. Students need to see humility from their teacher. They need to know that their teacher is learning right alongside them and that it's admissible to make mistakes. As a teacher, making mistakes is probably one of the best things I can do because it brings me to the human level of my students. They are able to see that it's welcome to stumble over our words. Friere (1998) reminds us of humility in saying this, "How can I respect the curiosity of the students if, lacking genuine humility and a convinced

understanding of the role of the unknown in the process or reaching the known, I am afraid of revealing my own ignorance." (p. 65). I absolutely love this because I am never going to gain the respect of my students if I never reveal my own ignorance. If I can reveal my own ignorance in front of my students, then they can see that it's all right to learn and make mistakes along the way. I think humility is learning my students' language alongside them as they learn English. Let it be a learning process where the teacher and students learn from each other. It is crucial for the students to see the humility of their teacher when working to create a culturally responsive classroom.

Communication

The next ingredient in forming a culturally responsive classroom is through communication: communication with the students and communication between the teacher and families/parents. I may not know the language of all the students in my class, but I can still educate myself on their language. Unfortunately, with so many of our teachers in our schools today being White, female teachers, there is a lack of multicultural competence (Weinstein & Curran, 2004). Going into schools as a long-term substitute, I realized that many times, there was a language barrier and I had to learn from my experiences as I went along. Weinstein & Curran (2004) write about culturally responsive teaching and how this is "the missing piece in the preparation of white teachers" (p. 29). As a White teacher going into the classroom, the thing that I lacked in my education was cultural awareness and knowing how to teach to various cultures other than my own. I've learned in the furthering of my education and through my experiences that it's acceptable to have the cultural and language differences between teachers and students.

In order to communicate with students, I have to know how they communicate with each other. I need to know the cultural differences in language and communication. Brown (2003) speaks to understanding communication by stating, "effective urban teaching involves implementing culturally responsive communication responses and instructional strategies, developing respectful teacher/student relationships, and recognizing, honoring, and responding to the many cultural and language differences that exist among students" (p. 278). These are some of the many crucial factors that go into creating culturally responsive communication among students.

In communication, the teacher can utilize the family and parents' language in knowing how to communicate with students. Garcia & Klieffen (2010) write that, "Teachers could ask parents to teach them how to say simple phrases such as 'Good morning,' 'Good afternoon,' 'Thank you,' 'Please,' and 'Good-bye'" (p. 132). This is such a simple way of letting the students and families know that the teacher is trying to communicate and understand their language. It is valuing their home/native language and giving it importance by making an effort to learn phrases in their language. It also involves the family in the learning process of the teacher.

Finally, in communication with students learning English, we as educators cannot constantly correct and tell our students when they're wrong. We have to give them room to make mistakes and tell them in an appropriate way. Delpit (1998) speaks beautifully to this issue by stating, "Despite good intentions, constant correction seldom has the desired effect. Such

correction increases cognitive monitoring of speech [on the part of the student], thereby making talking difficult” (as cited in Santa Ana, 2000, p. 243). Constant correction of students’ grammar, language, or speech can actually hinder their learning. If we are constantly correcting students, then it’s going to have the opposite affect and cause them to close up and not want to speak in front of the teacher for fear of making a mistake.

Respect

The next key ingredient to building a culturally responsive classroom where emergent bilinguals feel valued and celebrated is to give respect. This has to start on the teacher’s part and then the hope is that respect will be reciprocated from the student to the teacher. In terms of respect, the teacher has to respect every language in the classroom. Respect that their home/native language is part of their family, their home, and part of who they are. Respect that this is the language they speak with their family and friends. Littky (2004) writes about respect by stating, “when you respect kids, and when you make their time at school worthwhile, it is not hard to see how that translates into being able to trust them to behave without all the constraints traditional schools rely on” (p. 55). Respect has the power to do this. Respect has the power to break down the cultural barrier, social structure, and language differences between teachers and students.

When teachers respect their students, who they are, their language, their culture, and their community, the hope is that respect will reciprocate into trust between the teacher and students. Students need to feel that they are respected and that their teacher trusts them. Trust is something that we, as teachers, need to give more of in the classroom. We have to trust, if the relationship is built between the teacher and student, then, when two peers speak to each other in their home/native language that they are not talking about the teacher or speaking about something inappropriate. Chappell & Faltis (2013) write that, “many teachers who are monolingual may fear using bilingual strategies in the classroom because they cannot participate in their students’ movement between languages” (p. 105). Unfortunately, this has been true of me. I have had these fears and I have worried that two students were talking about me, but what I realize now looking back, is that the relationship, the trust, and the respect was not present between the students and me. This is where I’ve failed and where I will work harder in the future.

Importance of Family

The next ingredient in creating a culturally responsive classroom is to respect the importance of family and to use the family as a tool for success in the students’ lives. Unfortunately, research has shown that emergent bilingual families end up getting labelled because of history or problems in their community and Chappell & Faltis (2013) write that, “these problems frame minorities families in terms of what they ‘lack’ and what schools and community centers should ‘fix’ in those communities” (p. 37). Instead of using families as a resource, we end up pushing them to the side thinking they are not valuable. We as educators need to be working to include families as much as we can. There may be a language barrier, but that does not mean they are any less important. Again, Ramirez (2003) speaks to this issue

stating, “the parents of bilinguals, who in many cases have limited formal schooling themselves and may not communicate proficiently in English, continue to be stigmatized and considered incapable education partners” (as cited in Garcia & Kliefgen, 2010, p. 96). We have to make a change concerning this issue. We have to value our families as important and use them as a resource to better their children’s education and academic experience.

This takes a lot of work on the teachers’ part, because many times families are not involved in their child’s school. This means educators have to work even harder to create communication and ways to get the family involved. We have to trust that emergent bilinguals enter school with their own funds of knowledge (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010) and it may be different than the White, middle class student, but they still enter school with knowledge. Chappell & Faltis (2013) write that, “emergent bilingual youth bring to school a historically accumulated wealth of community cultural knowledge that the arts allow them to express through multiple modalities” (p. 23). Emergent bilinguals have learned from their family, community, and culture. Focus on what the families can bring to the classroom, instead of what they cannot bring. Trust the families’ intentions and even though they are a migrant family or speak limited English, does not mean they are not smart or capable of so much more. Chappell & Faltis (2013) write about how to include families by saying that we can, “re-envision homework and family nights as opportunities for collaborative inquiry, focusing not only on school-based ways of learning and knowing but also on ways in which young people and their families can take on a teaching role” (p. 40). From my own personal experience with working and knowing Hispanic families, they tend to be very family-oriented, so teachers should utilize the family aspect on including the families on the academic learning of their child. Create homework assignments and projects where the families can work together.

Advocacy

Finally, the last way that I’ve learned to help create a culturally responsive classroom where all students feel accepted, valued, and listened to is, as the teacher, to be an advocate for my students. Being a teacher means that we are the one that have been entrusted with children’s lives five days a week for seven hours a day. We are the ones that see their successes, failures, struggles, heartaches, so why shouldn’t we be one of their biggest advocates? Educators should be the voice that speaks out to the importance of each and every student’s life, community, language, and culture. This is power. Being a person of privilege in this country, I am honoured to get to speak out and advocate for the ones who are oppressed.

One of the ways in being an advocate is to learn and familiarize myself with the culture and community I am/will be teaching (Garcia & Kliefgen, 2010). This is the first step in being an advocate. I have to know my students. I have to know their culture, language, and community. I have to pursue a relationship with my students. Garcia & Kliefgen (2010) write about advocacy stating that, “advocates can promote stories about schools where emergent bilinguals are learning and where school leaders and educators are making a difference” (p. 126). It’s our joy and privilege as educators to get to speak out and honour our students. We get to celebrate their successes and work alongside them as they struggle through something. We get to promote them, their lives, their value, and their importance.

Conclusion/Reflection

For my conclusion and reflection of how to build a culturally responsive classroom where students' languages, cultures, and communities are celebrated, I reflected on personal narratives and on my own education of emergent bilinguals. I have not had a vast experience of working with students here in the Southwest. Most of my experiences come from working in inner-city schools with students of colour, but my mind has changed on how I view various dialects and languages in the school system. I have been able to gain insight into the lives of emergent bilinguals and I was able to empathize with their stories. It makes me much more sensitive to how I view people whose first language is not English.

One of the stories that stirred so much inside me was from *Tongue Tied* and it was Tan's (1990) narrative. She writes about how she used to refer to her mother's English as 'broken' and I realize that we do this all too often. If someone does not speak the way we do, then we look at it as 'broken', when in reality, there is nothing broken about it (as cited in Santa Ana, 2000). This personal narrative had profound impact on how I view emergent bilinguals and the struggle people have in learning English. It breaks my heart to reflect on how I viewed people's language as 'broken'. What is 'broken' about it? Is it just because it sounds different than my own language? I'm thankful that I've been able to reflect on this because I know I can make a change and speak out to those who feel their English is not proficient or they don't sound like everyone else.

Finally, I read another personal narrative from *Stories of the Courage to Teach*, and this spoke to me personally on how I view being a teacher to students from various backgrounds, cultures, and communities. Young (1998) writes,

"I received my teaching credential and found myself teaching elementary school children – mainly Hispanic immigrants or their sons and daughters. Again, I discovered my passion. I was teaching what I had lived: my students' frustrations with a foreign language and culture. Whereas many of my colleagues found these students 'too low' or 'unmotivated,' I found them captivating. Their parents handed me their precious children with the implicit plea to educate them, to guide them toward a life that they, the parents, knew they could never achieve for themselves" (as cited in Intrator, 2002, p. 31).

I love how Young (1998) writes how these parents handed her their precious children. This is how we should view students who enter our classroom. We have to realize that the parents trust the teacher with their most valuable possession – their child. As educators, we have the privilege and honour to teach students and to have their families trust us with their children. Young (1998) writes about her students stating, "My students were determined to succeed in their adopted homeland, and I was to be their bridge" (as cited in Intrator, 2002, p. 31). This is the potential of a teacher. To be the bridge of students to succeed in their adopted homeland. This is a huge undertaking, but one of the greatest honours that anyone can have and should be taken seriously.

Finally, Young (1998) ends her personal narrative by stating, "Only if you learn what gives you true joy will you be able to help your students find what gives them joy" (as cited in

Intrator, 2002,p. 31). We get to help our students find joy in their successes, their community, their culture, and their language.

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