

The ESL Teacher's Role in Heritage Language Maintenance

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Introduction

As professionals in the teaching of English as either a foreign or second language, we spend the majority of our education and practice focusing on the process of second language acquisition, appropriate teaching methodologies for greater effectiveness in students' acquisition of English, designing and implementing materials, tests, programs, etc. This is to move our students from little or no knowledge of English to a sufficient knowledge for them to access their goals to study, to interact, and often to live in an English speaking environment. That is our profession--to teach English. However, without the need to refer to the extensive research, our experience tells us that the native languages of our students greatly influence their acquisition of English. The heritage language, that which is used by the parents and ancestors heavily or exclusively at home, and which is usually native to the students, serves to connect the students with their culture while living within another, majority language community and culture. Its linguistic influence on English acquisition and its importance to identity and motivation cannot be ignored. Sometimes, nonetheless, in our focus on the acquisition of English, which is the crux of our profession, we do ignore our students' need to maintain their heritage language. This paper addresses that vital linguistic link to their culture which our students need and calls for sensitivity to the issue of heritage language maintenance as we teach English.

Furthermore, the paper will give specific suggestions as to how to incorporate support for the students' heritage languages into the daily classroom and school experience. These were gathered via a questionnaire from ESL professionals in the 87% bilingual Spanish/English Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Thirty-two teachers and teacher-trainees responded to Sandra Kouritzin's article "A Mother's Tongue" via an open-ended questionnaire. There was no attempt made to randomly sample a population, but to elicit the teachers' own experiences, many of which paralleled Kouritzin's. Seven questions, which followed the general sections of Kouritzin's article, asked for personal and familial experiences with their two languages and then elicited techniques which ESL teachers could use to help parents of and heritage language students cope. These techniques and suggestions will form a major segment of this work.

Who Needs to Address Heritage Language Maintenance?

For the majority of English as a foreign language teachers, the maintenance of the heritage language is of little concern so this discussion is focused toward the ESL rather than the EFL teacher, whose students are usually surrounded by their heritage language when they leave our classroom. For the ESL teacher and some EFL teachers whose students' heritage languages may not be the general medium of communication outside the classroom (such as Korean L1 speakers among EFL learners in Mexico), support for the heritage language is more vital. For this work, I will use the term ESL to include such social situations as the latter type of EFL teaching.

The Challenge

In public education in Texas, as elsewhere in the United States, elementary grade children can be enrolled in bilingual classes if they are not proficient in English. These bilingual programs vary greatly, but are generally geared to move children from their heritage language to English as the school language without regard to language maintenance and the heritage language is rarely used in school after elementary grades. Additionally, though the bilingual option exists, many immigrant parents often reject it in order to ensure that their children learn English more efficiently.

If language loss is a serious threat even for bilingual students in the Lower Rio Grande Valley where Spanish is used on a daily basis

outside the educational domain, it is a far more serious concern when the heritage language is not used in the environment other than at home or within an isolated, small group of speakers. We know that, as Hornberger (1998) noted, individuals who practice literacy in their heritage language usually also work hard to learn English and express a general appreciation for all languages. This leads to a versatility which is "essential if immigrants and their languages are...to thrive and contribute in their new land." (449) Although heritage language support should be addressed as an independent and important issue in our classrooms for this reason, the personal need must also be considered.

Kouritzin's Article

Sandra Kouritzin (2000) reports on a variety of personal, emotional, and social issues which relate to the desire she and her husband have to raise their children bilingually in Japanese and English. As Kouritzin explores these personal, sociocultural, and educational issues through her own emotional filter, she recognizes that perhaps parents of ESL learners endure the same challenges, yet without recourse to the professional literature and availability of a support structure.

To consider these aspects brought out by Kouritzin, I used her article as impetus for the open-ended questionnaire which generated a number of important issues for ESL classrooms and resulted in many of the classroom suggestions given here. The respondents were teachers from a variety of programs, public and private, K-12 and adult among the bilingual population of the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas where both English and Spanish share the daily communication tasks outside the classroom. They recognize that it falls to the members of our profession to help heritage language children succeed not only in learning English as a second language but in maintaining their heritage language and finding success in the educational environment as a whole.

Classroom Practices for Heritage Language Maintenance

There are three primary areas in which the ESL teacher is key to supporting the heritage language. First, is the area of communication with the parents of heritage language children. Second, is the area of effectively conveying heritage languages to all students as a positive, a plus, rather than something to be overcome and changed, a negative. And, third, is the area of accurately and compassionately interpreting the specific heritage language and its culture within our classrooms. Within these three areas, a variety of suggestions will be offered for the classroom teacher.

Communication with Parents of Heritage Language Children

Considering the first area, which is communicating effectively with parents of heritage language children, we realize that all parental needs cannot be met by the classroom teacher. Yet, understanding these parents is vital. Many ESL teachers are from a cultural environment where the school is quite basic to life, as in the U.S., where the school was often a community center. However, many cultures around the world do not associate school with community but often with oppression, governmental authority and so forth; ESL teachers must be aware of this. It may be very difficult to encourage some parents to attend functions at the school even when language barriers are not a factor. Teachers' suggestions--hold an early event, such as a picnic for the students and families at a local park not associated with the school. Parents of previous ESL students can be invited so that non-English-speaking parents will have others to interact with than just the teacher and their own child or children.

Suggestion two--visit in homes of students. The ESL teachers can make this a priority for any reticent parents who do not attend functions of their children. We realize that this requires extra, non-school time, a constraint for many ESL teachers. However, the results can lead to heritage language support and successful parental programs. For a few hours of organizational strategizing and then a social "event" with the ESL students and parents in an off campus location, many teachers have found rewards of lasting friendships with parents who will return to the ESL classroom and present information about their own heritage language even after their own children have left the school.

Next--invite parents to the classroom to observe--their children. Many parents are fearful of interfering in their children's education or do not come to school because they are afraid that they will appear strange to the peers of their children. A system of rotating visits from all students' available family can help to overcome this fear. When the parents are specifically and individually issued an invitation to the class, and know that this is a part of the education for all the children, they will usually make efforts to attend. When children see that their peers and teachers value their parents' presence at the school, even though their parents may appear "different" or not speak English, they will realize that their parents are respected individuals and will continue to give respect to them as well outside the classroom.

As we build relationships with the parents individually, we can reassure them of their children's progress. Some parents equate language learning with grammar exercises and homework papers parsing sentences and memorizing vocabulary. As most professionals use a more thematic, task-based or functional approach to teaching ESL, we must reassure the parents that their children are progressing despite the lack of copious grammar exercises. It may prove fruitful to spend one hour with parents before a school event demonstrating a typical language class where the parents are asked to be the "students." The teacher should make every effort to have the "class" as near to how he or she teaches the children with additional visuals to make the exercises age appropriate for the parents. An overview of what has been learned, with plenty of visuals, can help parents realize that their children are, in fact, learning without the grammar exercises they may believe to be language. Usually the parents enjoy the "language" class using Total Physical Response (TPR) or other methods and may even begin to think about enrolling in adult ESL classes themselves.

It may be necessary to have translation in parental meetings. Teachers' suggestion--use a school counselor or other adult rather than a child of some of the parents. If that is not possible, then try to use an older sibling rather than the child enrolled within the actual class, since this role reversal places the parents in a difficult position in front of the teacher. In many cultures, such a loss of social status or "face" is difficult to overcome when the teachers wishes to have further access to the parents.

Consciousness Raising about Languages for All Students

The second area in which the ESL professional can encourage the maintenance of heritage language is that of consciousness raising about languages for all students. Of course the emphasis in our classes is on the acquisition of English, yet when our students feel linguistically isolated and their identity is threatened by this new language, they cannot learn as effectively. Thus it is important for the ESL teacher to show, by word and attitude, that all languages are of equal value for their speakers. It is also important for students to know that their teacher is interested in their heritage language as a language itself. The credibility given to the heritage language by their teacher's interest may help children see that their language is a potential area for further study, even later employment.

The very nature of teaching English implies the attitude that it is somehow "better" for education than the heritage language. Teacher suggestion--have a language awareness minute! A few minutes of a Chinese or Swahili lesson in the form of a puzzle or other activity can help foster understanding about other language structures. Focus activities on speaking/listening one day, reading another, and even a day of writing in the student's first language in order to help them find their "voice" in English. These activities should be short with a goal of opening the door to greater respect for all languages of the world.

Another area important to remember is that of testing. Obviously the heritage languages of our students will not show up on state mandated tests, but the importance which we give to preparing for these does give importance to the subjects covered by those tests. As we prepare our students for the testing program of the school system, we may as well want to add a few practice test questions about facts presented in our classrooms regarding the students' heritage languages. Although the topic itself will not be covered, the practice in test taking is still important. And the credibility for the heritage languages that is given by "testing" facts about them along with other aspects of English usage supports the heritage languages of our students as IMPORTANT.

These classroom suggestions are not to become a large part of our teaching. Our primary goal is to teach English. Nonetheless, the inclusion of some time each week, a few questions among other items on the class tests, parents' presentation about native language, or a puzzle, can serve our students by validating their linguistic identities and easing the personal transition to English user.

Interpreting the Specific Heritage Language and Its Culture Within Our Classrooms

The final area which the teachers of ESL can use to support heritage languages while teaching English is that of accurately and compassionately interpreting the specific heritage language and its culture within our classrooms. Suggestion--use willing parents! A parent writing in his or her native language in a journal while the children are writing in their journals can stimulate discussion of how the written word, although differently constructed, still conveys messages, resolves inner conflicts, records special events, or just jogs the memory. A parent can read a poem that is interpreted by the child. Be creative!

Another suggestion--alert students to the key contrasts which identify them as non-native and which may socially stigmatize them. Age related techniques for teaching English sounds, for example the retroflex [r] of English, and possible contrast with similar sounds of the native language can foster awareness of the specific language differences. Younger learners understand the "tongue around the (clean!) pencil" technique while diagrams work well with somewhat older children. Some older learners can look on the world wide web for vocal tract sites which show sounds of various languages. Such comparisons of English with the heritage language not only

teaches English, but also gives status to the languages of students. And the Internet may help the heritage language child find a whole new universe about that language outside of the home/family context. We teachers cannot be the sole interpreters of the heritage languages and cultures of our students, but when we acknowledge by our actions and words the importance of understanding other's languages, we bring compassion and understanding as values within the learning of English.

Concluding Thoughts

There are numerous tasks which all ESL teachers must complete to simply "do the job." One of the most important may not be related to the teaching of English at all. That is the task of helping foster a climate of respect for languages in general and strengthen, in the educational domain, the learners' ties to the specific heritage languages from which they come. As Kouritzin so eloquently states: "The difficulties...are not intellectual; they are personal and emotional...." (2000: 322).

References

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