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Teacher Beliefs and the Heritage Language Learner: What Will You Teach Your Students?

You have just been told that you will teach Spanish to heritage speakers, a new course in your school. After the initial panic wears away, serious fear takes hold. There is no state curriculum. There is no local curriculum. Your academic training never mentioned that you would have to teach this group of students. A review of the few textbooks available convinces you that you will have to find other resources to establish realistic goals and outcomes for your students. When you ask for help, your supervisor suggests that this is an opportunity to be creative. The choices you make while teaching this course will depend on who you are, the training you have had, and what you believe about heritage language learners.

It is recognized that student motivation is one of the main determinants of second/foreign language acquisition (Dörnyei, 1994, Gardner & Trembly, 1994, Oxford & Shearin, 1994); however, we know very little about the impact of teacher motivation. Given the lack of all other types of support, the teacher of heritage language learners is the single most important element that will determine the success of his/her students. Each teacher's beliefs about how to teach and about the abilities of heritage language learners will have a major impact on the decisions he/she makes in terms of use of class time, types of assignments, and how and why students are motivated to learn (Vanpatten, 1997).

This article will examine the initiation of this teacher into the field of heritage language teaching as a prototype of what many teachers experience in light of the social context in which courses for heritage language learners are created and taught, the lack of institutional support for these programs and the dearth of materials available. Given the changing demographics of the US, all foreign language teachers should be prepared to teach heritage language learners. This article will discuss some of the essential components of that preparation.

Reflective Practice Model Case Study

Given the lack of traditional supports that heritage language teachers face, it would be beneficial for teachers of this specialty within our profession to use a "reflective practice" model of analyzing success. This is a model in which the instructor develops skills through practice and reflection of that practice (Kinginger, 1997).

Kinginger points to two different reflective practice models that can help teachers improve their professionalism:

> "the craft model, emphasizing imitation and emulation of the expert's professional wisdom, and the *applied science* model . . . accentuating implications of the profession's received knowledge, such as can be found in journals, textbooks, and courses on education" (p. 8-9).

This article would encourage a combination of both models of reflective practice, however, it recognizes that there is a third model: the *baptism-by-fire* model which is highly popular in urban schools. This model proliferates in the absence of available experts and the profession's "received knowledge". Teachers must draw on their own accumulated expertise, test their assumptions, and alter their practice accordingly. All three models rely on ongoing cycles of theory-building, practical application and reflection.

When my assistant principal first told me that I would be teaching the Spanish heritage language learner class, I was panic-stricken. I did not believe I had the proficiency to teach the class. He assured me that I did. He, however, did not speak Spanish. I am not a native speaker of Spanish, and although I have spent extended periods in Spanish speaking countries and had my New York State 7-12 teacher certification in Spanish, I did not believe that my proficiency could sustain a class of heritage language learners. Up until this point, I had taught the first two levels of the New York State curriculum. There were always several native speakers in these classes, so I was not unfamiliar with their needs and abilities. It was clear to me that the class needed to be taught entirely in Spanish. I was not sure I could do that.

I was also afraid that I would not be able to understand the rapid-fire Caribbean Spanish that most of the students spoke. My students' dialects had nothing to do with all the Romantic and Modern Spanish literature I had read in my undergraduate training. I still understood only about two-thirds of what I heard, if I were to be honest. How could I, with all these deficiencies, pretend to teach these students their own language.

My instincts told me that the only way to get through this experience was to be well prepared. I called every publisher I knew and asked them to send me any book that might be appropriate for this group of students. All the books I found, at that time, were filled with drill-and-practice spelling activities or short readings, and drill-and-practice spelling activities at the end of each reading. I thought that spelling was something I could teach because I really did know how to spell in Spanish, and my students definitely did not. My insecurities had led me to look for deficiencies in my students, so I would not feel so deficient.

I also called upon friends. The two most helpful were a high school ESL teacher, and a college remedial writing teacher. They introduced me to the writing process. They suggested several good books and articles on process writing and reader response. In addition, they directed me to the Adult Literacy Center. This is a center that is devoted to teaching adults to read and write in the language that they speak. Literacy classes are conducted in English, Spanish and Chinese. I met with their teacher trainer, was allowed to borrow books from their extensive library and given samples of student work and projects. The truth was, I had no intention of using any of this material because I would be required to explain these practices to my students.

For the first two months of the course, I sustained a posture of "I am here to teach you how to use your language properly." I taught the Spanish sound system, I tested my students, they failed the tests. They snickered and made fun of my Spanish. I began to have nightmares about this class. I taught "diptongos" and "triptongos", I tested them, and they failed. Disciplinary problems were reaching dangerous levels. I

had stopped having nightmares about the class because I was no longer sleeping. I taught accent marks, I tested them, and they failed. I was miserable, they were miserable, something had to change!

I finally threw myself on the mercy of the court. I told the students that I was very uncomfortable teaching the class because I knew that they could speak Spanish with much more ease than I could. In addition, I was uncomfortable being a non-Hispanic telling Hispanics what was correct and incorrect. I felt that the racism involved in the power relationship was not what I wanted to perpetuate. I admitted that I often did not understand what they said. I told them that I sincerely wanted to help them enrich what they already knew, but that I would no longer pretend that I knew more than they did. We began to find some common ground.

I remembered some of the suggestions that my teacher friends had given me and began implementing them. I gave my students the first page of a short story. I asked them to finish writing the story. They read their stories to each other. They gave each other feedback using some guiding questions. They clapped for each other. They encouraged each other. I ignored the errors. Some of the stories were so moving, errors and all, that I felt compelled to call friends and read them my students' work. The students felt successful, I felt successful, we had joined the same team.

Some students had turned the story into a Gothic horror. I gave them a short story by Horacio Quiroga to read as their next assignment. Others, wrote love stories so I gave them Corin Tellado novels to read. Another had a sports angle. His assignment was to read the sports page and report on it. I realized that this was the first time that most of them had been asked to write something in Spanish. They did not need to hear about all the spelling errors. They needed to hear that what they wrote in the language of their soul could be powerful and compelling. It was, and we all could tell.

We continued to work together on reading and writing assignments. I was learning much more than any of them. I was becoming more accustomed to their Spanish, and they were learning to understand me. I realized that I often used unfamiliar vocabulary. My vocabulary had come from novels, not real life. They learned some of my vocabulary, and I learned theirs. I still had not figured out how to approach the question of error correction, however, they were experiencing Spanish as a written language for the first time with very little difficulty.

The final project of the semester was to create a small booklet. I had some examples from the Adult Literacy Center of student work to show them. I asked my students to work in groups, write stories and illustrate them. They wrote the stories on the computer so that we could cut and paste the text with their drawings. As they were working on the computers, I began sitting with each group of students and correcting some of their errors. The students began asking me for explanations of why certain things were errors. They were extremely possessive of this project, and wanted it to be perfect. I began giving them individual explanations of what they were ready to hear. The final projects were not error free, but there had been a major improvement over the first days of the class when everyone was failing because the information I was teaching was of no use to them.

Without realizing what was happening, I was participating in a reflective practice model with elements of craft, applied science and baptism-by-fire. I searched out teachers who I knew were expert at teaching writing. I also consulted textbooks, a community center dedicated to teaching literacy, and read theoretical works. I began by theory-building. Unfortunately, my personal insecurities got in the way and I made poor choices at first. I implemented my plan and failed utterly. I continued to consult experts and theoretical works and developed better plans and evaluated their success.

I learned many important lessons that semester. First, my insecurities should not drive the curriculum nor could I look at my students from a deficit model. It served no one. I did not have to be the dispenser of all knowledge (Faltis, p. 118). We were all much more successful when I set the stage for the students to examine what they had done. Collectively we had a tremendous amount of knowledge about the language, the culture, and how to communicate. Once the students started responding to each others' work, the class was no longer about me (i.e., what I knew or did not know, or what my skills were), it was about what the students had produced.

It became evident that I had to start my curriculum from the point of what my students could do well. My job was to enhance what they did know and to get them excited enough about the language to want to discover what they did not know. When I was teaching isolated grammar points, no one found any use for them and the students were unwilling or unable to digest the material. When an individual youngster recognized a need for a particular grammar point, it became imperative that he/she have the necessary information.

It also became apparent that the social context which placed all of us in this classroom had an important impact on our experience. This class had been created by a programming accident. No one really considered a class for Spanish heritage language learners necessary even though this school's population was 45% Hispanic. I was chosen to teach the class simply because I had a Spanish teaching license. No one seemed concerned that I had no special training or expertise in this area. Neither New York State nor New York City had any curriculum to offer at that time. In addition, the textbooks available were severely flawed. When I discussed the difficulties I was having with the class with my supervisor, he assured me that it would work itself out. I could have continued using my drill-and-practice materials and sent all the "troublemakers" to the dean, and no one would have been the wiser. The students got the message loud and clear that what they were able to do, that is, communicate in Spanish, was not a valuable skill. I had even begun confirming this belief through my own poor curricular choices.

Conclusion

Educators who work with pre-service teachers cannot predict the situations into which any particular teacher will be required to function. Many schools however, are reporting growing numbers of heritage speakers. Foreign Language teacher preparation needs to include preparation to teach heritage language learners. In addition, all teachers need to be trained to uncover and actively choose the theories and beliefs systems that they will use to create their lessons. They must also learn that they need

to evaluate not only their students' work but also of their own assumptions about what and how they are teaching.

To improve institutional support, we need to pressure the state and local school communities to begin to recognize all parts of this diverse group of language learners so that all teachers will have the tools they need to be successful. Several states now have standards for instruction of heritage languages for students who are in federally funded programs to learn English. These students are only a small number of heritage learners in this country. There is a need to broaden the definition of "heritage language learner" to include all students with native or near-native abilities in languages other than English regardless of their abilities in English.

Many strides have been made since those first days 10 years ago when I struggled in front of my class. Heritage learners now appear in curricula and there are new textbooks coming out every year written by teachers who have worked with this population. The most important leap a teacher or community can make, however, is to identify the rich linguistic abilities of heritage learners. These students, while sometimes limited in their use of one or both languages in comparison with a monolingual person of each language, usually have the deep syntactic and cultural understanding in both languages that we strive for in our foreign language students. As their talents differ from foreign language students, so do their needs. To be successful as a heritage language teacher, one must first help his/her students perceive their language skills as assets, recognize what they already know, and provide a forum for each student to want to fill in his/her own gaps in usage. When curricula, teacher training and actual practice reflect these considerations, many more of our heritage learners will be able to more fully realize their dreams.

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