

themes and more specific cultural concerns. This establishes a safe and welcoming space in which students can explore challenging and complex issues together, to develop their understanding of literature and the world around them.

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Ok, ¿quién quiere seguir? [Ok, who wants to go?]: Engaging Students in Literature Discussions in their Second Language

By María V. Acevedo with Cheryl Gerken

Although some teachers fear that having students read and talk about texts while they are learning a new language could lead to a lack of comprehension and engagement, literature discussion about these texts is an authentic language experience. When students make personal connections and build meaning from texts during a literature discussion, they can question what does not make sense in their second language and develop authentic inquiries and explorations. While reading *La mulata de Córdoba* in Spanish, Eitan, a native English speaker, accessed his background knowledge regarding Córdoba's geography to enrich his connection as he talked about the main character. *Se parece como un poquito africana porque Córdoba es, amh, sabes como España,*

amh, es como así (utiliza gestos) y luego hay ese “tip” que casi está a África [She looks a little bit like African because Cordoba is, amh, you know like Spain, amh, is like this (uses gestures) and there is that tip which is almost in Africa]. Then he shared a personal connection. *Pues yo fui ahí una vez y Córdoba es ahí y muchas personas de África vienen de ahí, así que... y al otro lado es “Morocco” y cree que ella era una inmigrante de “Morocco”* [Well I went there once and Cordoba is there and many people go there from Africa, so... and to the other side is Morocco and I think she was an immigrant from Morocco]. Eitan is a risk taker in his Spanish class. Although not a proficient Spanish reader and speaker, he made connections that explained the story and its characters to himself and his peers in his second language.

Several educational approaches support building ideas through discussions with others and that the ideas that emerge from dialogue can change the world. A purposeful dialogue that allows the development of such important thoughts is present in classrooms that are supported by a constructivist curriculum using literature as a vehicle for further explorations. As Nichols (2006) argues, “When our children learn inside a constructivist curriculum that draws on talk as a tool, they are constantly challenged to think and give voice to their thinking as they negotiate and construct meaning” (p. 12). By talking meaningfully with peers and teachers about different topics, children expand their understanding with ideas that they may have not been able to construct on their own. This perspective places being literate beyond the basic conceptions of being able to read and write to include analyzing the elements of different texts and genres and connecting ideas to other texts or background experiences. Being literate includes critical and reflective thinking about the readings, about students’ learning processes, and about the implications for their lives and for their world, as they become agents of change.

Should conversations about texts only be in the students’ first language? Should teachers wait for students to be proficient in a language before engaging them in meaningful dialogue about the readings? Could a second language discussion allow children to acquire a language as they explore the issues in the texts? What struggles might teachers find when children engage in discussions in a new language? Freeman and Freeman (2000) say acquisition is a subconscious process that occurs in informal situations, however, acquisition also occurs in classrooms in which teachers create interesting lessons that involve students in authentic language use. People acquire language in natural communication contexts that require comprehension and building meaningful messages. The natural need for understanding and being understood leads students to produce their discourse by trying out the new language they are acquiring and learning.

The context of the school

To explore these questions, I observed a classroom within a Dual Language Spanish immersion program, where fourth and fifth grade students are exposed to 70 percent Spanish and 30 percent

English. Many students are from Latino families, but their first language is English, and they are in this school to learn Spanish as a second language. In August, December, and at the end of the school year, teachers measure Spanish reading levels using Developmental Reading Assessment tests (DRAs) with first through fifth grades to determine if students will move to a higher Spanish level. Three times a week for an hour and fifteen minutes the students change classrooms and go to their respective levels for literacy instruction in Spanish. Students with similar Spanish language abilities are grouped homogeneously across different grade levels.

I observed students at the highest level of the program for a month. The group consisted of fourth and fifth graders. The class took place in the school's library, where the librarian was the teacher. I observed how she used literature circles to enable deeper discussions as a way to help children build meaning from the books they read. The teacher focused on using literature discussions as an instrument to develop a second language by exposing the children to continuous oral language along with reading and writing.

The children worked on the semester's final project, an individual oral presentation about a country they had chosen earlier. Each child read a text set of folktales related to the country he/she was exploring to think deeply about that culture. They compared their readings and perspectives with their peers and engaged in Spanish-language conversations. Each literature group had children who read books representing different continents. The observed group consisted of one boy, Eitan, and three girls, Julia, Michal and Liav [pseudonyms]. Their folktales were from Russia (Julia), Spain (Eitan), Afghanistan (Liav) and Congo (Michal). Because it was difficult to find Spanish-language folktales from countries around the world students read a heterogeneous text set with books set on the continent, but not necessarily from the specific countries they selected.

Each small group completed a graffiti board, which consists of a big piece of paper where each child draws or writes their first thoughts and reactions after reading a text, as a response to three of the texts they read about a country. In their first literature discussion they shared the graffiti board along with their reading logs where they keep informal responses to periodic readings and their literature journals which included forms prepared by the teacher to develop specific literacy strategies. The teacher told the students that they would share their books and their thoughts about these books with each other.

Literature discussion as a meaningful context for language acquisition

Meaningful contexts to acquire a second language can be found wherever learners build meaning by interacting with a text or with other people in that language. During a literature circle, students and teachers share their ideas, understandings and wonderings about the readings in an informal setting. The participants collaborate to develop stronger ideas that will enhance their initial and

individual conceptions. They use the different aspects of language -- semantics, syntactics, pragmatics, phonology, and morphology -- as well as their background knowledge to construct utterances in their second language.

The Spanish-language discussion that I observed showed the children's accomplishments while they applied these aspects of language along with other strategies like code switching to complete coherent utterances about their connections and their evaluations of the characters' actions. For example, Eitan commented about one of the characters, *Cuento suena como una leyenda y es un poquito como "harsh" porque quieren quemar a ella* [The story sounds like a legend and it's a little bit harsh because they want to burn her].

One of the goals of the literature discussion is to encourage students to think about the implications of the text in their world. By talking about big issues in the literature children can understand themselves and become agents of change in their societies.

Michal: Tenía (el libro) buena lección y la lección es que no debes ser mal a nadie, no importa quién es [(The text) had a good lesson, and the lesson is that you should not do harm to nobody, no matter who it is].

Liav: Oh.

Eitan: Pero, ¿si hacen como un "Highjacker"? [But, if they do like a highjacker?]

These Spanish-language learners confirmed that deep discussions are possible in a second language with non-proficient speakers. My transcript analysis of their discussions revealed that they talked about personal and intertextual connections, inferences, literary elements of the text, the author, and even about metacognition by evaluating their own speech. They took a metafacilitator stance by assuming the role of the teacher and kept the dialogue alive by asking for clarification, expanding on their peers' comments and recapitulating when necessary. They took responsibility for their contributions and learning process and showed that proficiency can be acquired through engagement in real conversations. When these engagements take place in the classroom, teachers can expose students to a variety of useful strategies that will help them become bilingual.

Factors influencing literature circles in a second language

Although the discussions were successful in supporting immersion in the second language, I identified factors that could enhance or weaken the learning process.

Time structure. Eitan: *iNo no, porque no tenemos mucho tiempo!* [No no, 'cause we don't have much time!] The children constantly struggled with having enough time to complete their conversations and work. For example, some of the children kept drawing on the graffiti board after

the teacher told them to stop because the time provided was not enough. After the first ten minutes of sharing their books, they began to progressively use gestures to indicate to their peers the need to increase their discourse's speed.

Eitan to Michal: *Sólo tenemos como 30 segundos, ok* [We only have like 30 seconds, ok.]

Michal: *Y este libro que se llama El naranjo que no daba naranjas. No tiene un buen mensaje como Las bellas hijas de Mufaro porque no más es el niño esperando por las naranjas* [And this book called *El naranjo que no daba naranjas*. It doesn't have a good message like *Las bellas hijas de Mufaro* because it is just a boy waiting for oranges].

The time factor provoked stress and distraction. The students limited their sharing to basic information that they could produce in Spanish. Second language learners need a lot of time to transfer their metacognitive knowledge about their first language to the one they are acquiring to discuss and understand second language texts. Activities like sharing a graffiti board or literature logs can help children begin to think and talk in their second language while using their peers as a primary support, but they need more time to struggle through their use of the language.

Dealing with internal problems during the discussion. During this literature circle the teacher decided to stay outside the discussion and I remained a distant observer. The students decided the order to talk, not by raising hands but by asking questions. **Liav:** *¿Quién quiere empezar?* [Who wants to start?] This democratic strategy shows respect and equality of roles and enables voluntary participation. As soon as the discussion started the natural sequence (turn taking) of a dialogue became my interest, especially how the students knew when it was their time to talk. If the students were at snack period they would not have trouble taking turns in a natural conversation, but after years of raising their hands to contribute to the class, they were learning to take turns again. This might be the reason for their continuous interruptions; they might have been expecting a teacher to guide the participation and call-out those who were interrupting. The children used higher intonations to regulate their classmate's ineffective behavior. **Eitan:** *¡Liav!* They did manage to keep track of the conversation and answer and clarify their peers' inquiries.

Santman (2005) says, "Kids need explicit lessons in the language they can use to stretch their minds" (p. 126). The presence of the teacher in the first literature discussions could be used to identify the teachable moments and model the language that enables participation, appropriate turn-taking and the emergence of ideas, effective attitudes, proper behavior and efficient techniques to solve issues. The students struggled in these discussions with turn-taking in ways that interrupted their talk and the ideas.

When students are familiar with the purpose and procedures of an activity, they can participate effectively. Small and whole group discussions with the teacher before and after the literature

discussions about the expectations and outcomes can help students to recognize aspects they could improve in the future, such as dealing with classmates who need help to focus on the discussion or applying strategies when they encounter language challenges. They can also help the students develop new strategies in the language they are learning.

Children using an efferent stance. The transcript indicated that many students took on an efferent stance to talk about the books, where they focused on what they were learning or taking away from the text rather than immersing themselves in the story world (Rosenblatt, 1938). This inclination could represent a strategy to make sense of their text in the second language. They used the efferent stance in two particular circumstances. One of these was when reading unknown or confusing words. They were aware of the phonological aspect of the words and discussed the correct written form to attach to the appropriate meanings in English or Spanish.

Michal: *No es como “planes”* [It’s not like planes].

Liav: *No, como los “african plains”* [No, like the african plains].

Eitan: *Oh, los “plains” como p/l/a/n (deletreando)* [Oh, the plains, like p/l/a/n (spelling)].

The students each shared three words from the books that were unknown to them. They spelled some of the words to understand their definition and translation. This action shows the importance of acquiring and developing vocabulary to become a bilingual speaker, and their awareness of comprehending the second language.

The children each read different books, most of which were unfamiliar. When children are reading text sets their first literature discussion tends to be retellings and summaries because it is the way they find appropriate to present their books and make everyone part of their own experience. Harste, Short and Burke (1996) claim, “The group meets to share their books with each other through brief retellings so that others can get a sense of what the book was about, particularly in relation to the topic of their set. Sometimes the group members spontaneously begin making comparisons across the books and other times the group stays with retellings” (p.541). The fact that they were using a text set of folktales was the second circumstance that seemed to generate the use of an efferent response to understand and translate the readings for themselves and their peers.

The children’s talk also addressed the literary components that they were using as part of the process of understanding and engaging in the readings. They talked about the characters and their physical characteristics to create a mental picture that would help them comprehend the story. They described and questioned the settings where the stories took place and analyzed the quality of the illustrations with the phrase, **Liav:** *Y no creo que las ilustraciones son tan buenas* [And I don’t think the illustrations are that good]. They discussed the story’s message, its lesson and whether the author’s writing style made sense or not. These findings revealed that the students used an

efferent stance to engage in a known structure of discussion that allowed them to feel comfortable when using their second language.

The next steps for these children will be to engage in Spanish-language discussion to analyze their responses and connections as well as the issues that they want to explore about their books. Allowing children to share their efferent responses in a second language and helping them build a collective and stronger understanding about the book with their peers will facilitate subsequent deeper interpretations and ideas in the texts. The children will feel more secure knowing that their peers could assist them in their process of acquiring and practicing the new language. Talking about books in a second language may lead to a more efferent stance initially, which means that they need more extended experiences in these discussions to gradually move to a more aesthetic stance. They will probably not as quickly assume an aesthetic stance as would occur when discussing books in their first language because they first need to struggle to understand the story in their second language.

Conclusion

Teachers must trust their students' natural abilities to construct meaning about their world in many languages, including those in which they are not proficient. By providing students with purposeful interactions they can acquire their second language. These children engaged naturally in the literature discussion even though they had not regularly participated in discussions. Their discussion, even with these limiting factors, revealed that they were able to develop a dialogue and collaborate in understanding the texts in Spanish. As teachers we need to consider their need for more time when discussing in their second language and for demonstrations of how to manage their talk as well as find ways to encourage their movement from an efferent to a more aesthetic stance.

The role of the teacher should be to guide these abilities within a reflective and critical perspective that enables the acquisition of other languages. Although, their talk was not highly critical in reflecting on the implications of the texts to their world, by engaging in multiple literature discussions and immersion in second language contexts, they can move toward deep level conversations about social issues and change.

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Immigration Stories: Students Write about Their Journeys to America

By Ragina Shearer

Growing up in the seventies, I was constantly frustrated in my Grade 6-12 “Reading” classes, because we never read. Day after day we worked on skill after skill, and when it appeared we were actually going to read something, it was “Round Robin” style. Awaiting my turn to read, I remember listening to students struggle over the words or to the timid voices of students whose voices I could barely hear. Consequently, I usually lost interest in the story. I do not remember the teacher reading aloud to us or even introducing stories that were stimulating or challenging. Fortunately, I was an avid reader on my own and knew the excitement and pleasure that could be found in literature.

When I became a teacher eighteen years ago, I knew that one of my top priorities would be to share my love for reading with my students. As a teacher of various grade levels, I have taken my students on many literary adventures. I have found reading aloud to my class to be a valuable asset across content, genre, and grade levels. Currently, I teach reading and language arts in a middle school to sixth and eighth grade English Language Learners (ELLs). My students are primarily Latino, mostly from Mexico, another from Honduras and one from Austria. Together we share in the excitement when I read aloud from culturally relevant literature. They bubble over with