

Using Spanish to Promote Academic Success in English: The Bronx Community College Model

by Andrea Parmegiani and Laura Kaplan

The Mother Tongue as a Resource for English Acquisition

Although it may sound counterintuitive, ESL students' mother tongue is actually a resource for helping them acquire English language and literacy skills. Krashen (1999) provided convincing evidence that in the United States "well-designed bilingual programs produce better academic English" (p. 7). Willig's (1985) and Greene's (1998) use of statistical meta-analysis techniques to examine educational outcomes in bilingual programs indicated that the use of mother-tongue instruction facilitates success in English.

Success Indicators and ESL Students at Bronx Community College

Bronx Community College (BCC)'s motto is "transforming lives." A study carried out by the BCC Office of Institutional Research (2011) has found that most BCC students start their college career with a strong desire to succeed, but sadly very few of them do. First-time full-time one-year retention rates for the entering class of fall 2013 is 61.2%; only 21.2% of the fall 2008 entering class of first-time full-time freshmen completed their associate's degree within six years (BCC Office of Institutional Research, 2015, personal communication). Finding better ways to meet students' learning needs is an imperative for realigning BCC's success indicators with its mission. Given the strong presence of ESL students at BCC, finding ways to use their mother tongue as a resource is one of the best places to start looking for ways to improve success rates (Parmegiani, 2015; Parmegiani & Utakis, 2014).

Inviting the Mother Tongue at Bronx Community College

Despite widespread misconceptions and negative attitudes toward mother-tongue instruction for ESL students in the United States (Baker, 2011; McQuillan & Tse, 1996), it was quite easy to set up a program at BCC to promote students' success by using their mother tongue as a resource. First of all, the vast majority of BCC's ESL students are Spanish-speaking, and most of them are enrolled in majors that have a foreign language requirement. The Department of Modern Languages already offered Spanish courses that were geared to native speakers, but these courses were not linked to ESL instruction, making it hard for students to harness the benefits of a literacy skills transfer from their first to their second language (Cummins, 1979).

The link between Spanish and ESL instruction started in fall 2013, taking advantage of the fact that BCC already had a learning community program in place. Learning communities (LC) can be defined as small groups of students who take clusters of courses together, with both the faculty and the students teaching and learning together. Clusters share a common theme and a range of integrated activities "to provide greater coherence, develop a deeper understanding . . . and encourage student-student, student-faculty and faculty-faculty interactions" (Hanson & Heller, 2009, p. 1). In our cluster, the integrated pedagogical activities were enhanced by the fact that in addition to teaching the ESL course, I (Parmegiani) participated in the Spanish course as a language learner, which gave me a much better understanding of the challenges my students face in their struggle to appropriate academic discourse in a second language (Parmegiani, forthcoming).

The Impact of the Mother Tongue on Academic Success

Success indicators show that students who take the linked Spanish-ESL courses tend to do much better than students who do not. From fall 2013 to fall 2015, 41 BCC students have been enrolled in this type of learning community cluster. During this period of time, only three of them dropped out (which means that 93% have been retained); only four of them had GPAs below 2.0; and 20 of them had GPAs above 3.0 (BCC Office of Institutional Research, personal communication).

Tables 1 and 2 present an analysis of success indicators of first-time freshmen (FTF). Retention rates are much higher among students who began their BCC career in the cluster: The one-year retention rate for this cohort was 93%, while it was at 56.6% for the rest of the incoming FTF population. The one-year average GPAs for retained FTF also presented a significant differential: It was 3.03 in the cluster, and only 2.62 for the rest of the FTF population. (For a more detailed analysis of success indicators, see Parmegiani, 2015.)

Table 1. Comparative Retention Rates for First-Time Freshmen (Fall 2013–Fall 2015)

	One Semester	One Year
LC clusters with SPN	93% n = 27	93% n = 14
All FTF students	74% n = 5506	56.6% n = 4491

Table 2. Comparative GPAs for Retained First-Time Freshmen (Fall 2013–Fall 2015)

	One Semester	One Year
LC clusters with SPN	3.17 n = 25	3.03 n = 13
All FTF students	2.46 n = 5505	2.62 n = 2541

Conclusion

Given the small number of students in the learning community, and given that so many variables come into play in determining students' academic performance, these quantitative findings cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, the differentials in average GPAs and retention rates are very encouraging. For this reason, this learning community program is continuing and its impact is being monitored through a longitudinal, quantitative study of success indicators and a series of focus group interviews. While a statistically sound argument for implementing this model on a large scale cannot yet be made, these findings suggest that creating learning community clusters where ESL writing courses are linked to composition courses in students' mother tongues could potentially increase success indicators significantly in learning characterized by a strong presence of ESL students who share the same first language. To this end, some members of the ESL team are currently exploring ways to scale up this project by creating links between ESL courses and other mother tongues shared among many of our students (especially French, Arabic, and Bangla) and by including regular English and other content courses in the link.

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