

Providing Adult Students with Multilingual Instruction in an ESL Classroom

by Ruhma Choudhury and Leigh Garrison-Fletcher

As faculty in the academic ESL program at LaGuardia Community College, City University of New York, we aim to build the academic skills of our students and prepare them for a successful future. Although ESL classrooms traditionally follow an “English only” policy, research has shown that a strong correlation exists between academic literacy skills in students’ home language (L1) and in their second language (L2). Students’ L1 can be an invaluable resource in learning an additional language (L2) (Burt & Peyton, 2003; Collins, 2014; Cummins, 2009; Thomas & Collier, 2003). Cummins (2005) argues that languages share a common underlying cognitive/academic proficiency that makes transfer of academic skills across languages possible. As practitioners, we apply this theory to our teaching and encourage students to build academic literacy in their L1 in order to strengthen their English academic skills.

In Choudhury and Garrison-Fletcher (forthcoming), we found that when we built upon our Bengali-speaking students’ L1 literacy, these students were more successful in their ESL class. Based on these findings, we feel strongly that developing L1 literacy skills will lead to enhanced performance in L2. While this was a promising pilot study, one important question that arose was what to do when students in your classes speak multiple L1s. In this paper, we discuss two activities to promote academic literacy in L1 and L2 that can be used in a linguistically diverse ESL classroom.

Activity 1: Summary Writing

Writing an effective summary is a skill that many ESL students do not possess, and yet it is a skill they need to be successful in college. Summary writing assesses not only reading comprehension but writing aptitude as well. Prior knowledge plays an important role in reading comprehension. How well students understand a reading, and later summarize that reading, largely depends on their knowledge about the topic.

The strategy that we use to build students’ schema is to get them to read a news event in their L1 and then write a summary of that event in their L1. The rationale behind assigning an article in their L1 is that they will find it easier to understand and thus to comprehend the information. Prior to assigning this task, we go over the guidelines for summary writing. In the following class meeting, the students share their summary, translating it orally into English. The class lists the key points that they heard on the topic from each summary.

Next, we assign students to read and summarize, in English, an article on the same news event that appeared in English. The idea here is to help students make connections to the text that they are reading by using their prior knowledge on the topic to increase their understanding of the news article in English. This time, the summary is written in small groups to allow students to combine forces to write it.

Activity 2: Open-Ended Writing

In order to encourage students to use their L1 and compare the writing conventions in their L1 and English, we give an open-ended assignment, asking students to write one page about anything they want, in any language. Every time we give this assignment, the students appear perplexed at first. We then explain that we want them to write in the language they are most comfortable writing in and to write something they want to write.

In the following class period, we start by having the students write, in English, a few sentences describing what they wrote. They do this even if they wrote in English (we always have a few students who do the assignment in English, which is fine). Then we put students in groups of two or three, trying to put students who speak the same L1 together. The students first read the English description of what they wrote and then, if there are students with the same L1, they read one another's original writing. We instruct students to do this in the small groups and then to report to the class what the students in their group wrote about. We have had students comment on poems they read and on topics their classmates chose. In this part of the class, we have noticed a high level of student engagement, with students wanting to know what others wrote about and being happy to share their ideas with the class.

The next part of the lesson is to have students share how they went about completing the assignment. We ask them what they did to start the assignment, how long they spent on the assignment, and if they did any editing of their writing. We ask them to compare the experience with this assignment with the experience of writing an essay in English for the class.

Students in our ESL courses often see their L1s as liabilities, and feel that they must forget/hide their L1 in the L2 classroom. However, because of our finding that learning a second language builds upon prior knowledge, including linguistic knowledge, we see students utilize their L1s to develop their L2s. Thus, by doing activities that build upon students' L1, instructors can empower students to see their backgrounds as a resource that can help them acquire academic skills in their L2. This in turn helps them to see that their L1 is an asset; furthermore, we see our duty as not only to educate students in English, but also to give them the tools to be successful learners, which includes multilingualism and multiliteracy.

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