Language in Education

Although Larroque’s piece specifically addresses the needs of “French-speaking Louisiana,” his acknowledgment of similar situations with other languages within the NWP network reflects the greater reach of the issue. The accompanying article, “Toward an Urban New York Spanish Curriculum” by Nathan Dudley of the New York City Writing Project, gives further credence to the breadth of the issue of language in education by exploring some of the day-to-day issues educators face.

Toward an Urban New York Spanish Curriculum

NATHAN DUDLEY

Language scholars seem to pretty much agree, and the casual empirical data of my experience have confirmed, that immersion works best for language acquisition. People learn to speak when they have to and want to, and it sticks through repetition, much as children learn their native languages. Independent of whether learners are more structural/grammatical learners or more experimental learners, language acquisition requires the constant reinforcement that comes from being surrounded by language.

The United States is a language-arrogant country. Geographically and economically, we can afford to be. So how can we ever expect the current high school model of forty-five isolated minutes a day, four to five times a week, to have any real effect on students? There is no constant reinforcement of the language and no necessity to speak it beyond the forty-five-minute period. “You have to go to the country, or get a girlfriend who speaks only French. That’s the only way,” my frustrated high school French teacher used to say.

Crystal will not speak Spanish in class, no matter how hard I work to get her to say a word. She is afraid. The black students in class razz her. “You are Puerto Rican, how come you don’t speak?” Sometimes they even give the right answer after Crystal has gone through her tongue-tied, “I can’t say it mister.” She is caught in the “I should speak, but I don’t, so I won’t” mentality that afflicts many second generation immigrants who don’t want to look bad in front of their peers.

The lack of immersion does not begin to address the problems of teaching Spanish to Spanish speakers and non-Spanish speakers in the same class. Teaching the “middle” bores the already-speaking and loses those without any background.

Eylean has a big booming voice: “Hol-ah seen-yor, what’s up?”

“Como estas?” I say. She mimics me. At least she tries, I say to myself. Her personality is so “out there” and she is so sure of herself that she doesn’t mind making mistakes in the language. I wish everyone would try to speak like she does. Too bad she never does any homework.

I am looking for ways to have students reach new plateaus in foreign language, when almost everything around them works against such a development. Motivation is fundamental for language acquisition and the forty-five-minutes-a-day model allows for an “out.”

Of my forty-seven students in first- or second-year Spanish, more than half come from Spanish-speaking backgrounds, but perhaps only ten show any real motivation in class. The most motivated is a Pakistani girl who already speaks five languages (Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, Arabic, and English). A show of hands in class shows me that five out of the forty-seven do more than one hour of homework for class per week. And I assign homework, believe me.

Tayaba and Alexis turn in their restaurant project entitled “El Submarino Amarillo.” It includes a full-color menu complete with photos of Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and the Beatles. Their dialogue is three times longer than any other group’s and more interesting. The restaurant diagram is on posterboard, with a yellow submarine as part of the dining room floor. Everything is in Spanish. They more than “get it.” They embrace it. A couple of other groups come close to embracing the project, but none quite like this.

So where does it come from, the urge to reach new language plateaus, the urge to get “drunk” on the language, or simply embrace a project? What can be the motivational constant that can engage the students? Is it possible to create an immersion model in high school? And would it be fair to all students, regardless of their language background?

continued on page 38
Spanish

continued from page 35

And motivation? If students are not motivated in forty-five minutes, why would they be more motivated in a longer class? This calls for the creation of a new curriculum that creates units straight from their lives to teach language-related skills. Such a curriculum would include long-term projects with oral presentations, skits, and many dialogues. There would also have to be some sort of language lab, to actively listen and practice both comprehension and speaking.

Felicia and Lisa are hard workers. They don’t understand a lick of Spanish and get a satisfactory mark simply because of their hard work. I ask them in Spanish about their project. “What?” is the inevitable reply. How can the written work be so good and so little transfer have taken place?

Paulo Freire understood language literacy for adults as something that could be taught only when the learners have a direct relationship with the content they are learning. Freirean lessons that I have taught in Brazil and Nicaragua always involve a simple important concept taken from the daily lives of the students. I haven’t yet seen any Spanish texts that relate to my students’ lives, texts that treat language as the living, changing entity it is. Perhaps the Spanish-speaking students could be engaged to come up with a list of the “Spanglish” words in use, and to teach those who may not come from Spanish-speaking backgrounds. Perhaps whole units could be devised out of this list. For example: “pagar la renta.” Since renta doesn’t exist in “correct” Spanish, connections could be made to the cultural history of New York that led to the development of new “Spanglish” words and phrases.

Toward an urban New York Spanish curriculum is where I am headed. In my Spanish class, I struggle to grab my students’ interests, creating a focus in order to teach the language. Immersion may allow some real language acquisition to take place. But will my students meet me halfway in the language-arrogant culture in which we are all immersed?

NATHAN DUDLEY, formerly a Spanish teacher at Manhattan Village Academy, currently teaches economics and history at Schomburg Satellite Academy in the South Bronx. He has worked for five years in the New York City Public Schools.

Reprinted with permission from the New York City Writing Project Newsletter, Fall 2000.

Writing, in French

continued from page 34

participate in presentations given by AWP teacher-consultants, and they share their writing in reading and response groups. They are “teachers teaching teachers”… in French.

The French writing institute is particularly exciting because of the support it will lend to the participating teachers and, by extension, to the French immersion program. Because parents in this region are eager for their children to value their cultural heritage, the French immersion program has become a popular alternative to customary schooling. As Charles Larroque points out in “Telling the Louisiana Story,” (see article, page 34), language is a fundamental part of any culture, and when the traditional one disappears, as French so nearly did among the Acadian and Creole peoples, memories and traditions fade with it. A critical part of family and personal identity is lost. Going to school in French is one way to keep that history alive and that culture ongoing.

Although the purpose of the French immersion program—to transmit a cultural heritage—may be fairly abstract and general, the means used to achieve it are quite specific. To produce bilingual students who are as proficient in French as they are in English, teachers present subject matter en français. And since writing is fundamental to all learning, attention to writing in French is a major part of the curriculum.

How the writing project—and specifically the French writing institute—fits into this scheme, then, is readily apparent. And people most closely associated with the new institute are quite upbeat about that fit. Sandy Labry, who serves as language arts supervisor for Lafayette Parish, has been struck by the enthusiasm with which the French fellows have welcomed the institute.

“The participants are as energized as those in any writing project institute I’ve ever visited,” she noted. “I believe that we will see the fruits of our collaborative labors in even stronger instruction in the classrooms, in satisfied teachers who nurture their own self-expression through writing, and in a broad and varied selection of workshop offerings for audiences who speak French.”

To this Nicole Boudreaux simply adds that she has never worked harder—or had more fun. And that simple statement—whether in English or in French—says a lot.