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Fostering Diversity in the English Language Arts Classroom



“When I first found out that we were going to be taught a lesson in Spanish, I wasn’t too excited about it. I felt like it was a waste of time, only because I wasn’t interested in teaching ESL or ELL, so I wasn’t quite sure how it would benefit me.”

—Sally, a preservice teacher

Teaching a Spanish lesson to non-Spanish undergraduate students was an exciting and a scary experience. Last year, I had the opportunity to share the Spanish book *Lola, Gus y el Autobus* by Suzanne Bloom in a literacy methods course for preservice teachers seeking grades 4-8 certification. As I entered the classroom, I whispered repeatedly, “I can do it; I am a teacher; I can do it.” Once the professor introduced me, I walked to the

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front of the class, faced the preservice teachers, and greeted everyone with a smile and enthusiasm. Nevertheless, I was nervous. I wondered how they were going to respond to hearing a book taught in Spanish.

Despite having extensive experience with foreign language students, I work continually to locate strategies to prepare teachers to work with English language learners. For this occasion, I grabbed the preservice teachers’ attention by telling interesting facts about my home country, Costa Rica. Then I spoke some words in Spanish to check if they knew what the words meant. Noticing that some preservice teachers were eager to share more words in Spanish, I asked them to convey the words they knew. They yelled “de nada” (you are welcome), “el burro sabe más que tú” (the donkey knows more than you), and “¿cómo está?” (how are you?). Feeling more comfortable sharing information with them, I began the Spanish lesson, which lasted for 30 minutes.

I introduced several activities to keep them engaged. They sang and mimicked the actions of a song in Spanish, repeated the expressions of Bloom’s book, asked and answered questions in Spanish, practiced in pairs asking and answering questions using the target language, and shared how they felt at the end of the

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lesson. This lesson contained instructional strategies identified as effective practices: physical involvement with language, multiple media to present language, and opportunities to demonstrate language comprehension through physical expression. Overall, the class responded positively to the Spanish lesson.

Fostering Cultural Diversity in the English Language Arts Classroom

Fostering diversity in English language arts (ELA) classrooms can be achieved by adapting instruction to suit various students' needs (Athaneses, Bennet, & Wahleithner, 2015). Adapting instruction affords opportunities for educators to use different activities that highlight cultural diversity. Jimenez, Guzman, and Maxwell (2014) reported that in the United States and in Texas, in particular, "there are large cultural gaps between minority students and educators, who in most cases belong to the dominant cultural group" (p. 3).

With regard to Texas's education, the state has Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) common educational content standards. In addition, Texas's State Board of Education approved the English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS) in November 2007. In Texas, every content area teacher who teaches ELLs must address a language objective as well as a content objective. In other words, lesson plans should include both TEKS and ELPS standards. The ELPS ensure that the needs of English language learners (ELLs) are met, so that they acquire the necessary competencies to adapt and succeed in different academic contexts (Texas Education Agency, 2016). In order to provide students with meaningful activities that meet their learning needs, as well as acknowledge their cultural background, I describe in the next section some techniques and directions to engage students who are ELLs in English language arts classrooms.

Cultural Book Boxes

Tompkins (2016) described book boxes as a writing activity that can be adapted as an oral activity in English language arts

classrooms. According to Tompkins, students collect a series of objects related to a book they read in order to demonstrate reading comprehension. Students choose one book from a list of various multicultural books that the teacher provides for them. While reading the book, the students need to collect distinct artifacts that represent the cultural traits present in the book. After students read the book, they decorate the box and choose four or five items that represent the unique aspects of the culture they learned about. Students present their cultural book boxes in front of the class and describe the importance of appreciating different cultures around the world. As a follow-up activity, students write a short response about what they learned in the class during the cultural book boxes presentation.

Folktale Storytelling

Telling folktales in ELA classrooms might be a useful activity to encompass culture, students' heritage, and literacy development. Incorporating folktales in the curriculum can be appealing to students' identities and enhance their learning process. According to Akpınar and Ozturk (2009), folktales build bridges between cultures. Telling folktales might be an important didactical resource English language arts teachers can utilize to promote cultural awareness and help ELLs learn distinct literacy traits: vocabulary development, organization of ideas, background knowledge, and reading comprehension. In Akpınar and Ozturk's study of the effect of using folktales in the English language art classroom, the results demonstrated "a great interest of the learners in folktales and illustrations besides an increasing awareness to cultural diversity and they improved their literacy of arts in speaking, writing, reading and listening in English language to the target standards of NCTE/IRA" (p. 69).

Bring different folktales that represent various students' countries like *La Llorona* (the weeping woman), which is renowned through Central America, *The Dragon King's Daughter* from different regions of China, and *The Three Deaf Men* from Southern India. Before reading the folktales, activate students' background knowledge by asking them questions regarding some facts the folktales might present. In order to teach vocabulary words that need more content exposure, use a word wall, which is a series of words displayed in the classrooms with highly visible letters and pictures, and other literacy clues to have students grasp their meanings.

Once students are familiar with the vocabulary, read one folktale to students. For instance, in Latin America, *La Llorona* (the weeping woman) is a popular folktale that has several versions depending on the country where it is told. Ask students if they are familiar with *La Llorona* or if they have heard any version of the story. After telling the folktale to the class, tap students' creativity and ask students what other endings they could add to it, or what other features they might include. Have students represent the story using a collage. As a follow up activity, students can reenact different folktales and share the overall message.

Cultural Songs

Using cultural songs in the ELA classroom might be a valuable engaging activity that can provide students with a closer outlook to a variety of cultures from different societies. Teaching cultural songs from different countries is a meaningful resource that teachers can use to touch on the cultural questions students might have about different cultures. Pascale (2011) posits, “By incorporating this information [songs] into our teaching, by participating in singing the songs and listening to the music, students gain a deeper understanding of and insight into a wide range of cultures from many ethnic groups around the world” (p.1). According to Pascale, students’ bias and cultural beliefs toward other cultures shifted; music and other art expressions were implemented in the classrooms to have students gain cultural understanding and awareness. Hence, using songs to address the cultural heritage of different individuals and a community is a useful hands-on activity that ELA teachers might include in their instruction.

Importance of Fostering Cultural Diversity in Classrooms

Acknowledging the cultural diversity in English language arts classrooms is important to highlight multiethnic cultural heritage. Appropriate pedagogical practices addressing students’ needs and culture are valuable for their academic and personal growth (Gay, 2000). It is necessary to be aware of the students’ backgrounds in order to better understand who the students are and what the students need, as well as to allow all students to gain appreciation, respect, and understand the students’ differences. Likewise, encouraging students to acknowledge the diversity of cultures that surround them can help to promote social and educational development (Jimenez, Guzmán, & Maxwell, 2014).

ELLs who are studying in environments that are different from their own cultural backgrounds might face a daunting experience. Not being able to adapt to places or people who do not speak the same language could prevent learners from being successful learners. A teacher’s main objective should be to embrace ways of teaching for diversity so that students can identify with the content they are studying and be acknowledged in a new environment (Athanases, Bennett, & Wahleithner, 2015).

In ELA classrooms, it is important for all students to feel comfortable and appreciated. Teachers are responsible for creating welcoming environments that allow a more equitable and meaningful learning. Gay (2000) affirms that culture is the heart that incorporates every aspect of education. It involves a series of cultural values, social views, and language codes. That is why it is of utmost importance that teachers value culture and become aware of the differences that exist within their own social contexts.

Two preservice teachers in the literacy methods course found the Spanish lesson transformative. Sally wrote, “I think this experience will help me be more sensitive to second language learners in my classes. It will help to recognize how much language is used in class and how frustrating it would be to take a class that you do not understand the language.” Nancy concluded, “I really feel like this experience impacted me for the positive in the future. Coincidentally, I ended up being placed with an ESL teacher for my observations and was able to know the type of questions to ask my mentor teacher as I felt like I had some type of connection with the students already.”

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