



The Reading Matrix © 2010
Volume 10, Number 2, September 2010

Teaching Bilingual Teachers How to Teach Bilingual Education: A Balancing Act

Lois Spitzer

The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey

Introduction

As an experienced ESL teacher, I understand that the discussion of the inherent strengths and weaknesses of nonnative English-speaking students in the English-speaking classroom usually focuses on the language proficiency and level of acculturation of the students. Now, however, I find myself facing this issue, not in the context of a K-12 classroom, or even an undergraduate college classroom. I am currently presented with this situation in a graduate class, where the majority of the students are nonnative English-speaking students who are studying bilingual education. This situation has become a delicate balancing act of linguistically scaffolding the material while retaining the integrity of the content. This commentary details my reaction to this situation by adjusting the pace and content of the course to accommodate the varying levels of English proficiency of these graduate students.

Class Demographics

The group is a cohort of individuals who teach in a community whose demographics have changed within the last decade to accommodate a high number of Spanish-speaking immigrants. Of the eight students who took the first class, seven are nonnative English speakers and one is a native English speaker. Of the seven nonnative speakers, five were born outside this country and two were born in the US. All seven learned English as a second language. The five born outside of the US were raised and educated in their native countries and came to the US sometime in or after their teenage years. Two had received their university educations in their native countries.

The Class

In the fall of 2009, I began to teach a graduate class entitled “Introduction to Linguistics” as part of a four-course sequence of courses leading to this state’s bilingual/bicultural teaching endorsement. Eight students were registered for the class, seven of whom were nonnative speakers of English. This was not unexpected, as this was a class required for the bilingual education endorsement in my state. After meeting my students, I was impressed by the wealth of experience, cultural knowledge, and sensitivity they brought to the class. I did, however, realize immediately that the levels of English proficiency of four of the students (half of the class) were

lower than the rest of the class, and that I would have to make adjustments to the course regarding the pace and the depth of the topics covered. As an experienced teacher of students with limited English proficiency, I was fully aware of, and ready to, make adjustments to a class based on academic and linguistic proficiencies and needs of the students.

From the beginning of the semester, I realized that I had been overambitious in the amount of material I had planned to cover in my syllabus. But as I made adjustments in the pace, I also noticed—to my surprise and delight—that the students were asking for more depth. The students were demanding far more from me than I had prepared. I chose to respond to this demand by preparing more materials and lectures that provided more information on each topic. What I had initially assumed as a slackening pace due only to limited English proficiency was actually also being caused by inquisitive minds wanting more information despite a lack of language proficiency.

I was being challenged in a way I had never been before, and I realized that my response would affect these students throughout their graduate program. The challenge of accommodating students with varying levels of English proficiency in the same class is always present when working with bilingual individuals. I decided to accommodate my students by slowing the pace of the course and providing what they needed, and in doing so created a classroom climate that was relaxed, enjoyable, and academically rewarding for them and me.

To compensate for this decrease in pace, I extended class time slightly and encouraged more work outside of class. Students reacted positively to this change and they all completed their assignments and did the extra reading I assigned. This was the way I insured that the content of the class was not compromised. Some topics did get covered more fully and others were covered more quickly. I made the executive decision of what to spend more time on by looking ahead to their other classes and deciding what topics and knowledge they will need in their other courses. Since they will all be taking the same courses in the same order and I will be teaching all of them, I know what course content lies ahead and can make this determination.

For other instructors, most of whom will not teach the same group of students through a sequence of topics, communication with other teachers is important. Some teachers might not be prepared for this kind of group, and they need to be given advance notice of possible modifications that can be made to enhance comprehension. This is the delicate balancing act to which my title alludes. The teacher must be willing to make scaffolding adjustments while retaining the integrity of the content to make this learning experience successful.

Adjustments

When I began to prepare to teach this class, which was the first of their graduate courses in their bilingual education teaching endorsement program, I created a course outline that included twelve topics, one to be covered each class meeting during a three-hour class.

The students had so many questions! Their questions were not always grammatically perfect, but revealed inquisitiveness and a desire for complete and thorough comprehension. These students impressed me with their motivation and work ethic. Never before have I seen students work and study so hard! I wish I could showcase these model students to my college. While many professors would dismiss some of these students as not linguistically proficient or unprepared for graduate work, I found them to be some of the most eager and efficient learners with whom I have ever worked.

My prior teaching experience with nonnative English speaking college students in this country has most often been positive. I have met exemplary students throughout the years who have juggled unbelievable work schedules and family obligations alongside their academic studies. This, however, is my first experience working with bilingual individuals who were either already teaching in a bilingual setting or hope to obtain such a position. In seeking to document my experience, I have searched for studies or accounts of professors in similar situations, and have found none. If I have overlooked any resources, please let me know! Having done graduate and doctoral work in second-language acquisition, I do know that there is a plethora of research on SLA and teaching techniques to facilitate learning for nonnative English-speaking students. What I am seeking to document here are the modifications made to accommodate the rate and depth of the instruction presented to the bilingual individuals in this graduate class as part of bilingual teacher-education program.

Revised Goals

Good teaching is, among other things, the willingness to be flexible and to make adjustments that take into account the idiosyncratic characteristics of each particular class, and this class required adaptations I realized I needed to make after the course had begun. My revised goals included:

- 1) Relieving student anxiety (which impedes comprehension) by letting the students know I was willing to make adjustments.
- 2) Building confidence, thereby encouraging students that past experiences are valuable. By affirming what students already know, and referring to this experience in discussion, students can relate their experience to new knowledge.
- 3) Articulating American college-level academic expectations. This was the first American college experience for some of the students, and these expectations had to be made explicit.

Accommodations

I made the following accommodations for my students:

- 1) The material in each lecture was covered twice, the first time in depth when introducing the unit and the second time quickly when reviewing.
- 2) Students were given time to ask as many questions as they needed. I did not push them ahead to keep to a schedule and was ready to adjust it whenever needed.
- 3) Reflection journals were assigned in order for students to process what they had learned and use the language learned in the unit. These journals were also *not* critiqued for grammar, because I know that students had worked hard to hand in assignments that were relatively free of grammatical errors, and I wanted to encourage written expression.
- 4) Discussion was encouraged and not hurried in order to help the more reticent students participate to a greater degree.

- 5) Assignments were based on what had been covered, not on a future unit. I usually have students do assignments based on chapters not covered yet in class to encourage them to complete their reading before class, but this would have created too much stress for them. Instead, I asked them to write about the chapters covered in the previous class.

Lessons Learned

This past semester was a learning experience for all involved. When I informed the students that I would be their teacher for the next three semesters, they seemed genuinely happy with this news. I have learned more about their needs and they have learned that I will listen to them. Above all, they know I want them to succeed and learn the material, and I will do anything to help them reach this goal. Since these students will be entering bilingual classrooms as teachers, it is imperative that I model good bilingual pedagogical techniques. By modeling the teaching practices I want them to learn, these courses will not only transmit theoretical information, but, far more importantly, the students themselves will see bilingual teaching practices in action, and this is precisely what they will hopefully take into their own classrooms.

Lois Spitzer is Assistant Professor of Education and TESOL Program Development at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey where she teaches courses which lead to teaching endorsements in ESL and Bilingual/Bicultural Education in New Jersey. Her teaching career of 30 years includes teaching ESL to adult learners and K-12 students, and ESL and education courses to college students. She is currently working on creating English language services for nonnative English speakers at her campus, as well as working with content area teachers to better prepare them to work with nonnative English speaking students in their classes.

Email: Lois.Spitzer@stockton.edu