Creating Inclusive Learning Communities through English Language Arts: From Chanclas to Canicas

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Summary:
This article begins with a 1940’s teacher-student dialogue in which a monolingual teacher asks her class to think of words that begin with the letter “c.” When calling on Hermán, a bilingual student, he offered the word chancla. After a brief conversation about the spelling, meaning and significance of the word, the teacher decided to conclude that “there is no such word…” (211) and proceeded to ask for another word. According to the article, by responding the way the teacher did, she only provided a limited opportunity for the student to use his or her experiences as a resource for learning. This method of prohibiting a child’s “cultural and linguistic resource” (211) was typically justified by the beliefs that languages other than English are inappropriate, inferior, and interfere with the learning process (212). The article illustrates the failure of many teachers to be able to recognize the important role of language and culture in literacy development (212). National statistics are demonstrating that teachers are now more homogenous while students are becoming much more diverse. The article illustrates one chief question: “If I am not fluent in the languages my students speak, how can I effectively teach English language arts to a linguistically diverse class?” (212) The article’s answer relies on the idea that teachers do “not have to be fluent in a language to recognize its value to the learner, permit its use in the classroom, and respect, reaffirm, and legitimize its role in students’ learning and students’ self-esteem” (212). The idea of inclusion relies on the ability of teachers to be guided by “sociocultural understandings” (213). According to the article, with such methods, teachers will begin to produce patterns of interaction. The article then illustrates a story of a first-grade classroom that was being taught the five senses. Margarita, a bilingual child who
seemed very reluctant to participate in the activity, suddenly smiled during one of the
demonstrations. The first-grade monolingual teacher then encourages Margarita to respond with
her answer. The teacher reinforced that it was fine to answer in Spanish and thus Margarita
answered, “canicas” (213). Soon after, the teacher invited the entire class to repeat the new
learned word. “The teacher’s explicit invitation for Margarita to use her own linguistic resources
not only legitimized Spanish as an appropriate vehicle for learning, but provided an opportunity
for a linguistic diverse learner to be a competent member…” (213). Another example of
inclusive learning was shown when a fourth-grade classroom used a variety of languages to form
greetings. The class then collected and recorded twenty-two different languages and as a result
affirmed their importance in their learning community (214). Secondly, a classroom that
initiated inclusive-type learning was one that provided flexibility in language usage. The
kindergarten classroom that provided such method was one that altered languages by days. Although the program separated the days by Spanish and English, the students were never
condemned for using the opposite language than that of the day. Instead, the teacher allowed the
students to use the languages they preferred and still reinforced and validated their knowledge
(214). The article then discussed the new positive method of using codeswitching as another
linguistic resource instead of viewing it as a linguistic “interference” (215). Lastly, the article
described learning a second language as being “in-between state” (216). Many Latino scholars
call this space nepantla. Such Aztec word means the land in the middle, or being in the middle
of two cultures/languages. As the article states, “nepantla is the point of possible confluence and
transformation” (217). Such idea provides teachers with ideas to prepare their students to
carefully transition. In general, the article deals with possible ways to perform inclusive learning
in the classroom. It also analyses teachers who were not limited by their monolingualism. Such
inclusive learning would draw upon available “linguistic and cultural resources” to make a productive learning community for diverse learners (218).

Note: “From Chanclas to Canicas” refers to the shift in creating more productive literacy learning communities in comparison to the 1940’s example.

Some Helpful Quotes:

- Requiring the exclusive use of English, the official language of the school, and strict adherence to an established curriculum designed for mainstream English-speaking students can lead to self-doubt on the part of linguistically and culturally diverse learners. The practice often justified on at least two counts: 1) languages other than English are inappropriate and even inferior forms of communicating, and 2) language “borrowing” interferes with academic learning (pg 2)

- Many teachers, then and now, fail to recognize the fundamental role of language and culture in the development of literacy. (pg 2)

- In addressing the burning question, we rely upon multiple theoretical perspectives (sociolinguistic theory, critical theory, second-language acquisition theory, bilingual education theory, and Chicana feminist theory) to understand better the complexity of literacy learning experiences for linguistically and culturally diverse students. Informed by these perspectives, we position ourselves within particular theoretical orientations: 1) we view language as an integral part of the sociocultural context of the local community, 2) we view the lived experiences of students as important resources for academic success, and 3) we view access to both native and non-native language(s) as a critical resource in students’ opportunities to learn… and we seek to understand the ways in which teachers and students use these principles to construct inclusive learning communities in diverse classrooms. (pg 2)

- We have found that teacher proficiency in the students’ language, although ideal, like “best method,” is neither sufficient, nor the single most important element for student
success or failure...In our research, we have found that students’ use of their own languages and, thus, their own cultural knowledge as resources for learning, can be more important than a teacher’s use of the students’ languages. (pg 2)

- When teachers understand the social nature of language learning, inclusion of children’s talk becomes part of regular classroom practice and, thus, a pattern of interaction. Through such acts of inclusion, teachers utilize all linguistic and cultural resources in the course of literacy learning, including a range of language registers and codes (e.g., from standard to more colloquial forms of speech and from monolingual to more mixed language uses). (pg3)

- The teacher’s explicit invitation for Margarita to use her own linguistic resources not only legitimized Spanish as an appropriate vehicle for learning, but provided an opportunity for a linguistically diverse learner to be a competent member and more “expert other” (Vygotsky, 1978) within an English lesson. (pg 3)

- The social and linguistic strategy of codeswitching is informed by a shift from seeing language as a deficit to seeing language as a resource. This view of codeswitching as a resource is important for teachers to understand because, in a heteroglossic community where two or more language registers are in daily contact, meanings are mediated within and between languages and language varieties. (pg 5)