Getting to Know Newcomers with Translingual Practice

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This Perspective on Practice describes how translingual practice can support teachers in getting to know newcomer students beginning to develop proficiency in English.

Just before the bell rings for my morning Language Arts class, a group of girls from Honduras, Guatemala, and Puerto Rico come down the hall, speaking in Spanish about an incident from their bus ride that morning. Two Chinese girls take their seats towards the back of the class and scroll through their phones, using Mandarin to discuss and explore content. A group of boys from the Congo bursts through the door, talking excitedly in French and English.

While my classroom might seem typical in a place like New York or Los Angeles, it is actually a mixed-level English as a Second Language (ESL) class in a small city in central Illinois. My classroom resembles other learning contexts in “new destination states” (Marrow, 2011), where students recently arrived in the US—sometimes called newcomers—are learning content and English simultaneously in schools that have not typically worked with these populations. Recently, the middle school where I work has become the primary site for all newcomers in the district, prompting my colleagues to call my classroom a “mini U.N.”

I (Carissa, first author) began thinking of different ways I could get to know my newcomer students while I was taking a university course on assessment (led by Mark, second author). As part of a larger course assignment, I created different types of activities to help me get to know my students who were at the earliest stages of developing proficiency in English. In this Perspective on Practice, I share some of the most powerful approaches that I developed and used. As an ESL teacher, I recognize the importance of getting to know my students and then using this information to inform my instruction. I also recognize the challenges of eliciting this information from students who are just beginning to learn English. My approach is informed by Canagarajah’s (2013) description of translingual practice, or the use of multiple and varied resources to communicate and make sense of information. These resources can include multiple languages, as well as images, gestures, texts, and music.

While using pictures, body language, or even home languages with language learners is certainly not a new or revolutionary idea (see Zapata & Laman, 2016), these instructional approaches can be easily overlooked when teachers like me are faced with the immediate task of teaching English to newcomers. Similarly, while incorporating students’ backgrounds in instruction is encouraged in most approaches for newcomers, making space in the curriculum to do so can be challenging when trying to meet grade-level content standards (see Miller, 2014, for a powerful pedagogy that uses audio-recordings with students’ home experiences to respond to grade-level texts). Below, I describe
Getting to Know Eugene

Eugene is quirky and friendly, likes manga, and gets along best with a 7th grade girl from Vietnam. He was born in the Congo and has been in the US for about a year and a half. He is a conscientious student but generally won’t volunteer answers in whole-class discussion unless called upon. When asked to do pair or group work, he gently takes the lead, helping his peers stay on task or if they’re confused.

Eugene joins me for Language Arts instruction, science and social studies, and a study period where I help him with his homework and other assignments. In this study period, I asked Eugene to write down a few things that were important to him on index cards. I then gave him twelve green chips, and asked him to place the chips on the cards, putting more chips on things that were more important to him and fewer chips on things that were not. Next, I gave him twelve yellow chips and told him these represented his time. I asked him to distribute those twelve onto the cards, proportional to how much time he invests in each thing.

Eugene wrote down friends, language, school, and family. For each card, I asked him to explain why he chose each item, why it was important to him, and how it compares to the other cards. Eugene reported that he doesn’t have many friends at school, but when asked about the “language” card, he said, “I like to help people learn language,” including his mom and his classmates. This is true: he often jumps at the chance to help other students from the Congo who have lower levels of English proficiency.

I also learned how much Eugene values his family. His parents’ encouragement is one of the biggest factors pushing him to do well in school, even though he doesn’t see them very often because they work late and his mother is taking classes at the community college. He is the youngest of four children, and enjoys talking with his family members when he gets home, speaking in a mixture of French, Lingala, and English.

Though this activity might seem simple, I use it to highlight its efficiency as well as the different resources that Eugene and I used in our interaction. Eugene used colors, physical objects, and oral and written language to tell me more about what he valued. In this relatively effortless interaction, I learned a good deal of information about Eugene as a person. As a teacher with 31 students, I value this efficiency. This activity might also be helpful for colleagues that teach math and English composition to newcomers.

Other Translingual Opportunities

I have looked for other simple and efficient ways to enter my students’ worlds. Occasionally, during independent work time, I allow them to listen to music, and sometimes I ask if I can listen to what they’re listening to for a moment. Not only does this help me build rapport with them, but it also opens the door to conversations about their favorite music and other likes and dislikes that they have.

Another classic example of a simple get-to-know-you activity is to give students the writing prompt, “I wish my teacher knew...”. I ask them to write in English or their home language. If I can’t read the Vietnamese or Arabic or French, I’ll type it in to Google Translate to get a rough idea of what they are saying, or I’ll enlist the help of a translator who I trust to keep students’ confidentiality. In response to this journal prompt, one of my students wrote in Spanish, “I wish my teacher knew that there are some things that have happened to me that I can’t forget, and that’s why I’m not focused on my work all the time.” This opened up the opportunity for me to talk to her about her extremely difficult immigration experience, a story that I elicited by pointing to her journal entry and asking her, “Can you tell me more?”

Conclusion

As an ESL teacher, I work intensely with newcomers on developing their academic and language skills. I recognize, however, that I also need to structure opportunities—whether for five minutes or for an entire class period—to build personal connections with my students. Even though I already
knew that Eugene was a dedicated student who values learning English and enjoys helping others, this activity gave me a glimpse into his motivation for doing well in school. I also realized the depth of linguistic capital that Eugene brings to the table: he is trilingual, proficient in French and Lingala, and quickly becoming fluent in English.

I think many of my students feel eager to participate, but are unsure of how; they are well-rounded and curious and invested learners who need opportunities to show their strengths in multiple ways, including their home languages. As an educator, I am excited to learn more about my students as they learn English and content in my classroom.

**References**


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