

Chapter 17

Humanizing and Linguistically Responsive Pedagogy: Examining How Teachers Engage ELL Knowledge, Interests, and Struggles in Social Studies Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the work of successful, self-identifying critical social studies teachers who demonstrated (or a desire to adopt) a humanizing pedagogy and linguistically responsive practice in support of their mainstream English language learning (ELL) students. The author proceeds by outlining some of the challenges ELLs face, some of the linguistic theories in their support, and how social studies disciplinary skills (inquiry and dialogue) can exist as a part of linguistically supportive social studies pedagogy. The teachers in this critical case study successfully incorporated supportive disciplinary, linguistically, and culturally responsive pedagogical approaches to social studies teaching. However, because the teachers had little linguistic training, the author argues they could have benefited from formally incorporating supportive language practices in their everyday pedagogies.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores how three self-identifying critical social studies teacher worked to incorporate pedagogies that honored student culture, included student language literacy, and supported their interrogation of disciplinary knowledge. The teachers utilized critical inquiry and dialogical learning to center the rich linguistic experiences students brought with them to the classroom. Teachers and students conducted inquiries that revealed some of the tensions that exist within relationships of power related to culture, social studies, and civics. Subsequent dialogue uncovered ways these topics were internalized and together the classes troubled cultural, linguistic, and curricular domination.

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Policy attending to the demographic imperative and the experiences of ELL students has historically focused less on culture and student experience and more on grammar and increasing test scores (García, Arias, Murri, & Serna, 2010; Rodriguez, 2012; Salinas, Naseem-Rodriguez & Blevins, 2017). As a result, many cultural aspects vital to the language learning experiences for non-English speakers are often neglected in favor of dominant white middle class codes of power (Giroux & McLaren, 1994). Often policy encourages teachers to disregard existing language and culture in order to achieve social capital associated with English (Bourdieu, 1987; Magill & Rodriguez, 2015; Ovando, 2003). Many teachers adopt these perspectives, understanding assimilationist or reductive practices to be in the best interests of students (Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999). Pedagogical approaches commonly result in the problematic “discount[ing] [of] the home languages and cultural understandings” of language learners and their communities (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010, p. 2).

Understanding the linguistic and cultural needs of ELL students is central to developing meaningful experiences for them in formal schooling. However, many pedagogical approaches and educational philosophies are inconsistent with what the field has suggested are best linguistic practices. Learning a new language requires a learning partner or teacher who can support many different aspects of language acquisition. Research suggests that students should learn a new language by applying their first language (L1) linguistic schema to disciplinary skills and content. Further, language learners require an educational environment in which they can creatively examine their own culture in school (Cummins, 2005; Darder, 2016). As a technical aspect of practice, schooling experiences should also attend to grammar, morphology, and phonology (Harper & de Jong, 2004).

Unfortunately, teachers commonly believe that eliminating a student’s first language (L1) will result in developing language skills in the second language (L2). Rather, when a language learner begins using (L2) with elements of (L1) or using (L2) with logical errors, they are actually demonstrating linguistic improvement in (L2). Further, students see no reduction in (L1) skills as they develop skills in (L2). As Chomsky (2015), Krashen (1981), Cummins (2001), and others note, restricting access to (L1) and home culture actually limits a student’s ability to learn a second language (Rodriguez, 2012). Students possess the innate ability to understand commonalities in language structures and therefore have the requisite experiences to develop skills in (L2), which means when students apply the schema of (L1) to (L2), they are utilizing their biological and language learning skills (Krashen, 1985). The process allows language learning to occur naturally if supported by a native speaker.

Several other practices, typically associated with the disciplinary learning, have been shown to potentially support the development of linguistic skills and the inclusion of student culture. Critical dialogue and critical disciplinary inquiry, for example, have demonstrated potential to foster a student’s disciplinary, linguistic, and cultural needs when paired with an appreciative teacher stance (Bomer, 2017; Salinas, Fránquiz & Naseem-Rodriguez, 2016; Subedi, 2008). Students are able to work creatively, independently, and in groups to utilize their language skills to create and share new knowledge (Salinas & Blevins, 2014; Subedi, 2008). Applying knowledge and skills for real world implications helps language learners build bridges between culture, content, and language (Cruz & Thornton, 2009). Similarly, the practices support student development of a “critical awareness.” Through disciplinary experiences like inquiry and dialogue, students are able to make authentic and meaningful connections to the real world. Therefore connections made between content, experience, language, and individualized critical social interrogation is key when working with ELL students (Freire, 2000; Siegel, 2006).

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