

The Practicality of the Translingual Approach

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“Pero cual es esa luz, it the east and Juliet es el sol. Rise up beautiful sun y mata los celos. Solamente los mendigos aguantan their virginity.” During my student teaching experience at Hamilton High School, I witnessed ninth-grade Latino, white, Asian, and African-American students translating an archaic language in to various types of languages. Some students chose Disney, other students chose “ghetto,” and some even chose hillbilly. There was also sports, diva, and superhero. The language that impressed me the most was Spanish telenovela. I thought it was the most difficult translation to accomplish because the students had to understand the scene which contained archaic language, they had to translate it in to standard English, and they had to translate it once again in Spanish. However, they were eager to do it, even though some group members only considered themselves to be native English speakers.

This story made me think about our past and most recent class discussion in our Latinx Rhetorics and Community Writing course. We were thrilled to meet our guest speaker Dr. Steven Alvarez, who is an assistant professor in the English department at St. John’s University. Dr. Alvarez eloquently recited anecdotes about his life and how he became passionate to bring a bilingual library in to a Kentucky town. Dr. Alvarez formulated a pedagogically well-thought course titled “Taco Literacy” to explain much deeper concepts within Latino history. Alvarez spoke highly of his father because of what he went through in his own life with education. Teachers reprimanded his father whenever he spoke Spanish. As a high school teacher, I could never imagine telling a student that they do not have a right to their home language and even punishing them for using it. Thinking of his own father’s personal experiences, Dr. Alvarez advocated for a resource that would allow students to use the spaces to practice their own language and being translingual, which is what most teachers should implement within their own pedagogy.

Translingual pedagogy is a practice where students can move through various languages to develop their reading and writing skills. As an African-American woman, I found it easier to explain novels, poetry, and informational texts using African-American vernacular with my students at Washington High School while combining the language of standard American English. Even if they knew that I was using AAVE or not, they were able to comprehend complex texts and were able to write well-thought essays without worrying about using English “correctly.” Implementing translingual pedagogy does not mean that teachers should eliminate all Standard American English rules. A translingual approach offers a chance for students to retain their identity within their home and community. Students can also think in ways where language is not a barrier for them, but in a way, it helps them understand complex concepts, strategies, etc. When I think about the students who used Spanish to translate Shakespeare, they all showed a sense of passion that their language mattered within the context of Shakespeare’s own language.

Community building is also an important theme that relates to our course, and Dr. Steven Alvarez built a bilingual library to build the community of bilingual or multilingual learners. Unfortunately, community building can become difficult to obtain when the idea of language faces harsh governmental policies such as Proposition 227 and Arizona HB2211 where such bilingual programs are eliminated. These types of policies not only take away that sense of community building, but it takes away students’ identities as well. If policies were adhered in

Milwaukee, Hamilton would not be the school that I saw. The neighborhood itself was already not a community for its bilingual students because the school is on the borderline between Milwaukee's Southside and Greenfield, which is a predominately white neighborhood. Mitchell, Burnham, and Caesar Chavez were neighborhoods the students spoke highly of that represented their culture and their own community spaces. With a segregated city such as Milwaukee, we need those community spaces to allow our students to practice their language across different borders of literacy inside and outside of school. Therefore, this blog post is meant to have people continue a conversation about the translingual approach. What are the ways in which we can support our own pedagogy to help students beyond high school? How can we continue to support them in a college classroom and within their community in Milwaukee?

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