

“Ni Soy de Aquí, Ni Soy de Allá”: Negotiating a Transcultural Identity in the Spanish for Fluent Speakers Classroom

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The purpose of this article is to contribute to the body of research done around best instructional practices for Spanish heritage language learners in secondary schools. It describes the ways in which immigrant Latino students enrolled in a Spanish Heritage Language Program develop and validate a new transcultural identity by means of a transdisciplinary, integrated, translanguaging and culturally responsive curriculum. It explains how students are able to recognize each other by their Latino roots first, and then, validate their transculturality. As a result, their self-esteem increases and are able to understand and appreciate what they are becoming.

Keywords: Spanish Heritage Language programs, transcultural identity, Cultural Responsive pedagogy, Latino students, translanguaging

Transculturality: A Two-fold Process

Those who have emigrated know how painful this process can be. It is abandoning in one stroke everything that defines us: Family, friends, landscapes, smells, tastes, loves... In short, everything that frames our identity. If it is painful for an adult, imagine what it is like for a child. To survive, they have to deal with the problem of growing between two worlds and feeling that they do not belong anywhere.

Based on observations in the classroom, I concluded that the development of a transcultural identity is a two-fold process and, consequently, doubly painful. First, students have to reconcile their individuality with a global Latino culture; at the same time, they confront a completely different culture, the US culture.

Most of my former students came from El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Guatemala, Bolivia, and Peru, with Salvadorians being the largest group. Although they all shared the same language and culture in a general sense, they had different ways of expressing, celebrating, and experiencing their respective language variations and culture. Consequently, there was a constant power struggle among them. Salvadorians bullied Hondurans; Hondurans bullied Peruvians, and so forth. In addition, the school prohibited them to speak in Spanish and disciplined for demonstrating Latino cultural behaviors, such as greeting each other with a kiss. Moreover, my students lived in a constant worry that the *Migra* (immigration officers) would take them back and they believed they had little chance to succeed academically because they did not know the English language. Regrettably, they realized that to achieve academic and personal success they had to accept and adapt to the new culture, and that meant forgetting themselves, their traditions, and their values and culture.

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The following poem, written by an eighth grader, describes the anguish, anxiety and despair minority students feel when they realize that teachers and other adults do not understand, believe in, or not care about them:

Si sólo. . .

*Si sólo pudieran ver que yo soy diferente
Que soy única e independiente.*

*Si sólo se dieran cuenta de lo que tienen enfrente
Y que yo nunca seré como la demás gente.*

*Si sólo pudieran ver más allá de lo que los ojos ven
Y que yo triunfaré sin importar donde los obstáculos estén.*

*Si sólo supieran que un día todos mis sueños realizaré
Aunque todo el mundo me diga que con su apoyo no contaré.*

(Jacquelin Martínez, SFS II 8th grade student, 2010)

As illustrated in the poem, many middle school Latino students like Jacquelin, dream of a bright future: They would like to become senators, lawyers, physicians, singers, actresses,... but they wake up to the cruel reality that most of the people around them may not care enough about them. They still have faith in themselves but, when they enter high school, their faith disappears and most of them end up dropping out of school.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2016 only 79% of Latino students graduated from high school compared to 91% of Asian American and 88% of European American students. There is still a gap in the educational opportunities offered to Latinos. If we, as pedagogues, want to contribute to narrowing Latino students' opportunity gap, we need to create effective educational programs that meet the academic, social, and affective needs of those students. Research done on this topic has strongly affirmed that a powerful solution is a *Spanish for Heritage Speakers* program. However, in order for such a program to be effective it should be taught in a different manner from that used for second language learners (Parodi, 2008); have a flexible curricula adaptable to the diverse needs of students (Beaudrie, 2012); and address students' cultural and individual differences (Carreira, 2012, 2007; Rodríguez, 2014). In addition, it should promote students' critical consciousness (Leeman, 2012); focus on identity and affective issues (Martínez, 2012; Potowski, 2008); operate in a bilingual mode (Carvalho, 2012); and have a rigorous academic curriculum (García, 2001). Moreover, it should allow students to use their full repertoire of literacy practices (Stewart, 2014) and to develop literacy skills by

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expanding the knowledge of genres of written discourse (Chevalier, 2004). We believe that the Spanish for Fluent Speakers Program (SFS) possesses all those characteristics.

Centering on Students' Lives

In the SFS program, students are encouraged to direct their own learning and to work with other students on research projects and tasks that are personally, culturally and socially relevant to them. Consequently, in the SFS program the student is the focal center of the curriculum. This means accepting the culture and language of students, their families, and others as legitimate and valuable, and embracing them as valid learning tools.

As shown in the table below, the SFS curriculum revolves around the students, as it offers them opportunities to know and understand themselves: Life experiences, values, and how to meet their linguistic, social and emotional needs, and academic plans. It respects individual personalities and their moral and ethical contributions, regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic status, educational label and/or literacy differences.

SFS I	Who I am? Learning about us	Research Cultural aspect	Capitalization Punctuation Outline/Summarize Expository paragraph	PP presentation Expository essay
Unit 1				
Unit 2	Where I come from? Literature as a legacy of our people.	Reading analysis Myths /legends	Accentuation, main idea Chronological order Fact or opinion Inferences	Journals Midterm exam
Unit 3	How I feel? Literature as an expression of our self	Creative writing Short story	Elements of a short story Verb conjugation Descriptive paragraph Narrative paragraph	A short story
Unit 4	What I believe? Speech as an instrument of personal growth	Oratory Persuasive essay	Public speaking skills Types of sentences according to speaker attitude	Speech presentation Persuasive essay Final Exam

Embracing All Cultures

Instruction is culturally responsive when it incorporates and integrates different ways of knowing, understanding and representing information. Students should understand that there is more than one way to interpret information, events or actions. By being allowed to learn in different ways or share points of view in a given situation based on their own cultural and social experiences students become active participants in their own learning.

An excellent example of this contentions is what students do in SFS II Unit II: *How I can be a better citizen*. To make this lesson meaningful, personal, and culturally

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relevant to my students, I identified a theme pertinent to them and selected activities in which they had to think critically, as well as speak, listen, read, and write in the target language. Firstly, I reviewed their answers to a questionnaire given to them at the beginning of the year. One of the questions was: "*What do you like most in life?*" Seventy four percent of the students answered sharing special moments with their families and friends.

Secondly, I identified activities that gave them opportunities to share time with family or friends. The activities that stood out in their answers were: Birthdays, *Quinceañeras*, soccer, Thanksgiving, Christmas, summer vacations, shopping, watching a movie together and going to church. I chose Christmas as the best topic for this lesson for various reasons: It is the most important tradition for people of Latino heritage (even more important when they are far away from their country and extended family); it is also a celebration upholding their cultural roots. Moreover, it was a topic they felt relaxed and comfortable with. They had all experienced it and celebrated it every year with families and friends and they therefore could contribute easily to class discussions.

Thirdly, since 80 % of the students are imaginative learners, meaning that they need to get involved on a personal level and that they are interested in culture and people, Christmas was an excellent topic to honor that way of learning. Fourth, another survey conducted at the beginning of the year revealed that 95% of the students in the group had higher levels of the interpersonal intelligence, 79% were highly kinesthetic, and 63% were highly musical. The topic of Christmas therefore offered the opportunity to show their singing, dancing, and instrument playing skills. Lastly, as it was that time of the year it was an authentic setting for them. In sum, Christmas was the perfect topic to create a social, linguistic, and cognitive setting that encouraged students to interact and communicate in meaningful ways, explore perspectives behind the products and practices of a culture, and value such intercultural experiences.

The unit introduced the topic of Christmas by providing students the opportunity to discuss how they celebrate it in their countries and compare it with how it is done in the US. While doing so, they clarified misconceptions about the different activities they do; they also identified similarities and differences among Latino countries and the US. Some of them did not know why they celebrate Christmas; thus, they were also concientized about their own values. They did a scavenger hunt on the Internet, in which they had to identify what particular traditions are celebrated in Spain, Mexico, Peru and the Dominican Republic on Christmas' Eve, Christmas' Day, New Year's Eve, and other relevant dates like December 16th or January 6th. The students were supposed to explore preselected Web pages, but they were also encouraged to search for their own sources. They finally prepared a PowerPoint presentation to describe their findings.

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Culturally Responsive Instruction also considers students' learning styles. A good example of this is Unit 2 of SFS I: *Where I come from*. In this unit, students read stories, legends, and myths from their countries. Just like every year, I recently researched my students' preferred learning styles. In one of the groups, 15 of 22 of the students were identified as imaginative learners. This means that they learn better by processing new information in a reflective manner; in other words, by listening to others and sharing ideas. In addition, they look for meaning and clarity as well as associations and personal participation; they hence are interested in culture and people and above all need to be involved on a personal level. Consequently, I fostered that commitment by connecting the lessons with their personal experiences. After reading a legend, instead of writing in their diaries about a character's behavior or the message of the legend or the plot, the students answered questions like: "*Can someone die of love?*", "*Has someone betrayed your friendship?*", or "*Do you believe in love at first sight?*" Through this activity, students better understood and enjoyed the act of reading in the classroom; it was not a task to get a grade anymore; it was an act of knowing themselves.

Enfolding Students' Concerns

A transdisciplinary curriculum moves instruction beyond just merging disciplines. Inquiry is one of the biggest differences in this learning approach. The SFS curriculum is a transdisciplinary curriculum in which students perform tasks that demonstrate their ability to apply knowledge in a creative way. It focuses on authentic learning, new points of view and current problems in the context of multiple disciplines. As shown in the table below, the curriculum is organized around students' questions and worries, resulting in differentiation for them.

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One of the biggest problems students had was the existence of *maras* (gangs). The SFS program gave them a safe space to talk about this problem, understand their behavior, make changes and find a support group. Little by little, students developed a sense of community and they discontinued using *maras'* symbols at school.

Celebrating Translanguaging

In the SFS classroom, students can speak English and Spanish simultaneously according to their communication needs. They have a safe space in which they speak, read, write, research and learn without being ashamed because many of them have been told in the past they cannot communicate “well” in English or Spanish or both. While according to García (2013) the notion of “code switching” assumes that the two languages of bilinguals are two separate monolingual systems that could be used without reference to each other, translanguaging assumes that bilinguals have an integral linguistic repertoire from which they strategically select characteristics to communicate effectively. That is to say, the translation has as its starting point the linguistic practices of bilinguals as a rule and not the language of monolinguals as it is described in textbooks and grammars. Translanguaging takes the position that language is action and practice and not a simple system of discrete structures and skill sets. Thus, when researching a topic for their projects, students can look for information in either of their languages and they can write their drafts in either language or both. However, the final product should be in Spanish. This practice is very easy and “normal” for them, as many of them are language brokers. They are used to translating or interpreting on behalf of adult family members, siblings, or peers who do not speak English. Crafter (2009) conducted two studies with child language brokers and found that language brokering enhances confidence, fortifies students’ sense of belonging at school and empowers them by feeling respected and admired by others.

Students’ Profile after the Program

In 2014, I conducted a survey to identify the impact of the SFS Program on students’ attitudes, self-esteem, language skills and future academic plans (Nieves, 2015). The study found out that the Spanish for Fluent Speakers program described in this article improved students’ self-worth. For the first time, my students felt that they were important and unique because they got to know their culture and language. More importantly, they got to know themselves, who they were and where they came from. They understood that, even though they came from different Latino countries, all of them shared the same ethical, religious, and social values. The program gave them a positive vision of Latino culture, changing in doing so their attitude about their culture. Moreover, they developed a sense of cultural pride and identity, not feeling marginalized or silenced anymore because they did not speak English or Spanish well enough. In the SFS class, students translanguaged and expressed themselves in both languages if necessary. Therefore, they are more motivated to improve their literacy

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skills in Spanish and English. This is an opportunity for teachers to teach and compare grammar rules and other aspects of both languages. Accordingly, students gradually develop a broader command of two languages; best of all, they are conscious of it. When asked how learning Spanish had affected their school experience, an SFS II student said:

The SFS class is helping me a lot. One time, my English teacher asked me to write a poem. It had to be one page long! Thanks to my SFS class I could do it because we have already learned how to do it. This is the reason why I think it is necessary to have the SFS class in the school. Thank you for offering it!

Moreover, students discover that they belong to a new society that is bilingual and bicultural, and they realize this is a positive and convenient condition. One student stated:

Sometimes I have to translate for a Latino student that does not speak English, and others, I have to translate for a teacher that does not speak Spanish. Then, I feel good about myself.

Students' self-esteem augments when they understand themselves and when they develop a sense of community or belonging, e.g., a feeling of being integrated into the different Latino groups within their school and community. The SFS program also helps to ameliorate the power struggle between students. They comprehend that Salvadorians are not superior to Hondurans; and Hondurans are not superior to Bolivians or Guatemalans. Students understand that unity means power and this is central for their motivation, engagement in learning, and perceptions of their own intelligence and importance. Since 2007, Latino students have begun to participate in activities offered by their school and county, such as the Latin Dance Club, International Night, Talent Show, Student Council elections, and the Spanish Language Gala, a county level event in which they voluntarily compete in spelling bees, and grammar, oratory, short story, essay, and poetry contests. In conclusion, the SFS program gives them hope to dream and believe that their dreams can become true.

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