Rural meets Urban: Advanced Placement Rural High School Students Supporting Urban Dual Language Learners

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Abstract
High School Advanced Placement (AP) Spanish students from a rural school district in Upstate New York translated picture books for second grade students at Urban Primary, where Spanish is primarily spoken at home. Each child received books that were translated, intended to be read in English, Spanish. This gave the students and their parents opportunities to read in both languages. The purpose of the project was to facilitate language development for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who are learning both Spanish and English in their homes. Children who come from low-income homes are at risk to enter Kindergarten performing below their middle-class peers. Children who are simultaneously learning two languages are at risk for language and literacy deficits in both languages (Wilson, Dickinson, & Rowe, 2013). This project won the American Council on Special Education 2017 Exemplary Program Award in the area of cross-cultural services.

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Presentation slides are available as additional files.
RURAL MEETS URBAN: ADVANCED PLACEMENT RURAL HIGH SCHOOL
STUDENTS SUPPORTING URBAN DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Abstract

High School Advanced Placement (AP) Spanish students from a rural school district in Upstate New York translated picture books for second grade students at Urban Primary\(^1\), where Spanish is primarily spoken at home. Each child received books that were translated and, intended to be read in English and Spanish. This gave the students and their parents opportunities to read in both languages. The purpose of the project was to facilitate language development for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who are learning both Spanish and English in their homes. Children who come from low-income homes are at risk to enter Kindergarten performing below their middle-class peers. Children who are simultaneously learning two languages are at risk for language and literacy deficits in both languages.

Project Overview

The project was conducted in one of the poorest school districts in Upstate New York, and the poorest urban district across the state, with more people living at less than half the poverty level than any other similarly sized United States (US) city, and the most extreme poverty (family of four with income less than $11,925) in the nation. Concentrated poverty levels in the district are getting worse, rising from 31.0% to 32.9% over the last year, with statistics being high for all racial and ethnic groups. It is the only US city where over half the children live in poverty, and has the highest rate of extreme poverty at 16.2% (citation).

Urban Primary school was chosen as a target school due to their large population of Spanish speaking students, and because the mission of the school focuses on “embracing and supporting Spanish speaking students by building an appreciation for both languages.” While Urban Primary is considered a bilingual school, the principal reports that, realistically, the population is monolingual Spanish, with parents learning English at the same time as their children.

The school serves children PK-grade 6. Student test passing rates for ELA at Grade 6 are significantly behind the overall scores for the school district, which are significantly behind the state scores. The passing rates for students enrolled in Urban Primary is 8%, which is well below the district average of 22% and state passing average of 58%. In 2015, EngageNY reported that on a 4-point measurement system: (a) well below proficient, (b) partially proficient, (c) proficient, and (d) excels, the number of students at Urban Primary who received a rate of 3 or

\(^{1}\) pseudonym
higher was 4.7%. The number of students who received a score of 2 was 19.6%, with the remaining 75.7% scoring at the well below proficient level 1.

Additionally, there is an “immigrant disadvantage” according to Glick, Bates, and Yabiku (2009), who assert the outcomes for children of parents where English was not their primary language are poorer than for those children born in the United States who learned English as a primary language. Both factors have a negative effect on school readiness for primary students.

Early language and literacy development is a strong predictor of later academic achievement and lack of progress in content knowledge in later school years is often related to gaps in language development. This is a common problem for English Language Learners (Winsler et al., 2014) Therefore, it is equally important to provide meaningful learning in both primary and secondary languages. Glick et al. (2009) found parenting practices and cognitive stimulation at home meditated cognitive and language skill deficits. Parent engagement through purposeful reading in both Spanish and English provided an opportunity for active learning.

Rural High School\(^2\) was selected as a convenience sample. As project developer, quick turn-around time was required because the project was funded by a faculty development grant. Knowledge of the district and proximity provided opportunity to discuss the grant with the Spanish department teachers and gain approval from the district for the project in a timely manner.

**Project Implementation**

The initial intention was to have one class of participants from the Rural High School class of AP Spanish students involved in the project. When word of the project got out at the school, a class of third year Spanish students and their teacher also joined the effort. This worked out well as the number of Urban Primary student participants was congruent to the number of combined participants from both Rural High School Spanish classes.

Initially, the students were hesitant; unsure if they would be able to translate the story appropriately (use grammar conjugations and vocabulary appropriate for the story). After consultation with the high school Spanish teachers, the best course of action seemed to be to scan the books, so each page could be projected on the classroom Smartboards. Each class worked on a different book. The teachers stood at the Smart Boards, and acted as facilitators of class discussions and as scribes. The students were allowed to use Word Reference (an on-line dictionary) on their phones, or a hard copy. Hard copy English/Spanish dictionaries were provided to each class as part of the grant. The students became quickly engaged, frequently asking to work on the project. One of the teachers reported,

I watched their confidence soar and soar after each page they translated . . . When the class ended, they all were ecstatic as they realized they had barely used their dictionaries and were impressed by how much they knew.

\(^2\) pseudonym
As students became more confident, the teachers asked if anyone else would like to be the facilitator/scribe. The teachers report the students took charge. They worked collaboratively to choose the most appropriate vocabulary and talk through verb conjugations. The teachers also incorporated small group work/peer editing. One of the teachers broke her class into small groups charged with translating 2-3 pages. Then she collected the materials and gave them to another group to proofread. This gave the students the opportunity to critically think about what tenses were being used, and whether they agreed with the usage of grammar and vocabulary. The pages were returned to the original groups with the notes from the peer editors, and then each group developed their final copy. In a review of the final products, the teacher reported “aside from a couple of vocabulary mistakes, the grammar was accurate and vocabulary too.” The teacher approved final paper copies before the students translated the books. Using markers, the students wrote on translation tape to add Spanish text to the page.

**Urban Primary**

Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to own books. The students from Urban Primary and their parents were provided literary media to keep, gaining exposure to both languages. Research demonstrates that for every $1 spent on a young child, there is statistically an $8 return on the investment (Adams & Tapia, 2013; Schweinhart et al., 2004; Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003). The ultimate goal for Urban Primary was to positively affect the ELA passing scores and rates, with a longer-term goal of positively affecting educational performance.

Glick et al. (2009) found parenting practices and cognitive stimulation at home mediated cognitive and language skill deficits. Parent engagement through purposeful reading in both Spanish and English provided an opportunity for active learning. Parents filled out a feedback sheet for data collection after reading the book. They had the option to fill out the feedback forms in either Spanish or English. The second-grade bilingual inclusive education teacher interpreted forms that were returned in Spanish.

**Rural High School**

The project helped the high school Spanish students develop communication skills via writing. The Spanish teachers reported that it was a hard concept for students to embrace not translating word for word from their native language (English) to the desired language (Spanish). Word for word translation often leads to choppy sentences that ultimately have a slightly different meaning and do not follow the syntax of the Spanish language. The project helped take all the elements of grammar and vocabulary the students learned in their Spanish studies into account. Culturally, translating helps students to realize that the idiomatic expressions we have in English are not the same as other languages. Students learned cultural nuances for expressing ideas in Spanish.

Yang (2015) investigated combining theory and practice of translation through social constructivism. He found, through translating organized project-based learning activities, that
students improved their intercultural awareness. This type of student engagement resulted in the student translators achieving a more meaningful level of communication and benefiting from in-context teaching, while at the same time learning skills.

The interpersonal aspect is a key factor contained in project based translation activities (Kiraly, 2015). The student translators interact with each other, their Spanish teachers, and the Urban Primary students, parents, and teachers while learning to translate, and learn about the bilingual Spanish community.

Additionally, based on 2014 census statistics, Rural High School is located in a relatively mono-ethnic rural town (99% Caucasian). The Work Group for Community Health and Development (2016) at the University of Kansas states that an appreciation of cultural diversity is the first step in creating a “just and equitable society” (n. p.). They further assert that to ascertain change, we must understand the strengths and perspectives of cultures different than our own, and to work together for the benefit for the larger community. Understanding a culture unlike their own can help Rural High School Spanish students overcome and prevent racial and ethnic divisions that result from misunderstandings, asserts the Work Group for Community Health (2016).

Since adolescents tend to have preferences for same-ethnic social relations, it is important to build in positive exposure beyond the microcosm of their mono-ethnic school and neighborhood. Kruse, Smith, van Tubergen, and Maas (2016) posit that interethnic exposure alone does not lead to less prejudice or more positive attitudes, as often these exposures are superficial. To provide a more meaningful experience, direct contact between both populations helped to build positive interethnic experiences. The project plan included a workshop about cultural diversity for the Rural High Spanish students. Further, at the end of the school year, as a culminating project activity, there are plans for Rural High students to read to Urban Primary students.

**Summary**

Researchers have called for increased attention on children being raised in the context of two languages and their early educational needs, as they are at increased risk for difficulties during their later educational careers (Winsler et al., 2014). However, research on children who are being raised in the context of two languages (dual language learners) is very limited. This project summary adds to the literature base as it focused on language development in both native Spanish and English through facilitated parent interaction.

The project, funded by a St. John Fisher College Faculty Development Grant, provided Rural High School students awareness of diversity beyond their own immediate community and allowed them to make a difference in the larger upstate New York community, while simultaneously gaining essential conceptual skills. The teachers report “this was a wonderful opportunity for the students to enrich their understanding of Spanish language in a realistic setting.”
The cross context between rural and urban environments makes this program unique. The program was a collaborative effort between St. John Fisher College, Rural High School and Urban Primary. There are many dedicated faculty from both schools, working to support the second-grade students in the inclusion class and their families. The high school students were excited to support children in the greater community of Upstate New York.
References


