

Trading Places: New Perspectives for Preservice Teachers

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Abstract

Preservice teachers in an EC-6 literacy methods block created a specific experiential assignment. The assignment is called the Spanish Read Aloud. This experience is easy to organize and has benefits to both bilingual children (third grade and kindergarten) as well as preservice teachers. It promoted rich, deep discussions and focused on personal feelings. This assignment pushed the preservice teachers beyond learning theory and content and encouraged them to reflect on their dispositions, emotions, and attitudes.

Trading Places: New Perspectives for Preservice Teachers

I teach mostly white, middle class, monolingual young women in my undergraduate teacher education courses in literacy. I'm preparing them to be public school teachers—teachers in schools in which there are more and more children who have very different beliefs and values; children who are acquiring English as a second or third language. I wanted my college students to understand what it's like to be a language learner so that they would be more understanding and patient with the children in their care.

To this end, I created a specific experiential assignment, one that promoted rich, deep discussions and focused on personal feelings. This assignment pushed the preservice teachers beyond learning theory and content and encouraged them to reflect on their dispositions, emotions, and attitudes. As one preservice teacher stated, “We take classes on how to teach English Language Learners and the way to make the material comprehensible to them, but we are not taught how they feel” (R. Landrum, personal communication, April 2, 2015). This assignment raised their sensitivity toward those that are different. It gave them a glimpse of what is it like to “walk in someone else's shoes.” Over the past ten years that I have been giving this assignment, the reflections on the experience from the preservice teachers have been powerful and, in many cases, life changing.

The assignment is called the Spanish Read Aloud. This experience is easy to organize and has benefits to both bilingual children (third grade and kindergarten) as well as preservice teachers. Let's let two of the preservice teachers in one of the Literacy Methods classes tell about this assignment from their perspectives. One writer, Alexandra, is a white, middle class, monolingual student. The other writer, Maria, is a Hispanic middle class, bilingual student.

Both students will be certified to teach early childhood through sixth grade. Maria will also be certified as a bilingual teacher.

Two Perspectives

ALEXANDRA: *It was a normal day during Literacy Methods class, when our professor announced an assignment that shocked us all. The assignment was called the “Spanish Read Aloud,” and we were expected to read a Spanish children’s book to the bilingual children in kindergarten classes. Our professor had taught us all how to do great read alouds and we had been honing our skills in our Mentor Teachers’ classrooms (We all felt pretty confident about that!), but what was this? Read a book in Spanish? Of course, most of us spoke only English and couldn’t read Spanish. We looked at each other wondering if our professor was serious. This was impossible! “You are in luck,” said our professor. “I have private tutors for all of you!” The “private tutors” turned out to be the bilingual third grade children down the hall from our university classroom. Oh dear! To say we weren’t a little nervous and intimidated would be an understatement—that is, all except our bilingual colleagues. They could speak and read Spanish. Our professor named them the “Spanish Queens,” and their job during this assignment was to assist our tutors, answer questions, and help us practice outside of our tutoring lessons. The Spanish Queens were going to be our lifelines in this project.*

MARIA: *As a Spanish Queen, I was informed about the Spanish Read Aloud assignment beforehand. On the day our professor announced the assignment, I could see my peers’ initial reaction of shock when they learned what they would be doing. I was secretly grinning on the inside as I looked around the classroom at their scared faces--but not in an evil way. It was more because they would finally get a glimpse of what it was like to try and learn a new language. Perhaps this would be the moment in their lives where they would finally understand*

me and others like me. As an English Language Learner (ELL) myself, I was excited that they would see how scary it can be to try and learn a new language unexpectedly. I noticed some of my peers looking around the room, probably trying to find comfort in each other or wondering if everyone was feeling as shocked as they were. I knew they would have some frustrating moments because I did as an ELL, but the end reward would compensate for those few trying moments. We, the Spanish Queens, met with the third-grade class first to ask them if they would like to be Spanish tutors. We explained that our colleagues were going to be teachers soon, were not able to speak ANY Spanish, and would like to learn to read at least one book in Spanish. We told them they would be switching roles and instead of being the student, they would now get to be the teacher of college students. We then gave them their first “lesson plan” (See attachment A) and explained exactly how the 20-minute tutoring session would go. Then, we practiced with them. After talking through what they would be doing, you could see a mixture of excitement and fear on their faces, but they all volunteered to help.

ALEXANDRA: *Our first tutoring day had arrived! Entering the third-grade classroom was such an exciting moment. The Spanish Queens had us matched up with our tutors. The children were so organized: Each of our Spanish books and their lesson plans were carefully placed on their desks. Within a few short seconds, the classroom came alive with conversations. Our tutors were certainly taskmasters! We realized (as the four tutoring lessons went on) our tutors had “lesson plans” for each day, carefully reviewed and practiced with the help of the Spanish Queens. Our tutors always began by reading the book with us. Then, after this practice, they had us orally reread our books while they took notes. They wrote down words we didn’t know or didn’t pronounce correctly. They reviewed each of these. They assigned us homework-- flashcards to practice or look up the meaning of the words. At times, we played*

vocabulary games. (See Attachment B) For example, the tutors would lay the word cards on the table and then ask us questions. “Which word belongs in a bedroom? Which word is a color?” Our tutors were expected to have high expectations just like in a real classroom...and they did! Those 20-minute tutoring sessions went by quickly. As it got closer to the time we were going to read in front of the kindergarten bilingual class, we were all becoming more confident and secure in reading our books in Spanish. Our tutors were also becoming more comfortable in the teaching role. My tutor and I developed a close bond during our time together. I really appreciated having her there to guide me as I learned more Spanish. At our last session, my tutor had me practicing my accent while reading. It was incredible to see how far I had come in such a short period of time. I could actually read a book in Spanish--albeit a beginning child's picture book. I knew that I had a great tutor and that she had prepared me well. On the very last day before we were to read our books to the kindergarten bilingual class, my tutor told me that she was very happy she got to work with me and said, “I know you're going to do great reading in Spanish.” Who would think that these words of encouragement from an 8-year old would mean so much. I wanted to cry. This was an emotional day for me.

MARIA: As a Spanish Queen, my job was to walk around the class and assist the tutors and tutees if needed. During the first session, I saw timid and afraid faces from both the 3rd grade students and the preservice teachers. They were both trying to fathom these new roles they were taking on. I could see the same questions on all their faces: Why are we doing this? How is this going to work? What are they thinking of me? Am I doing a good job? It was fascinating to see how they had two different perspectives yet wondering the same things. As the time progressed, I observed the bond between them growing stronger and stronger. The atmosphere of the classroom also changed. The preservice teachers didn't look so afraid when they walked

in the room and neither did the 3rd grade students. The scared and timid faces turned into smiles and laughter. As I walked around the room I realized I was no longer needed as much because everyone was getting more comfortable asking their own questions. As I stood in front of the class looking around, I felt a sense of joy witnessing the preservice teachers' growing appreciation for these bilingual youngsters and what they encounter every day. My colleagues now understood what it is like to be us.

ALEXANDRA: *The day arrived for us to read our books to the kindergarten class, and it was an exciting time. We first went to the third-grade class and picked up our tutors. (They were going to be there for moral support when we did our read aloud.) When we arrived at the kindergarten classrooms, the Spanish Queens divided us into small groups. The children sat on the floor in front of us, and we took turns reading our books. Our tutors stood beside us as we read. They even introduced us to the kindergarteners! As each of us finished reading our Spanish book, we asked one question—in Spanish, of course! We practiced several that were easy, for example: ¿Que es esto? (What is this?) ¿Como se dice ____ in Ingles? (How do you say ____ in Ingles?) ¿Que color es este? (What color is this?) Our tutors were there cheering us on and encouraging us as we read.*

MARIA: *As the preservice teachers walked into the kindergarten classroom, I saw that intimidation and fear had returned to some of their faces. This was their big moment of truth. They had to show what they had learned in those four sessions to these five year olds. When it was time to start reading, not many preservice teachers volunteered to read first. Their fear of making a mistake was holding them back. Eventually, someone stepped up and began reading. As I stood back and observed, I could see them making eye contact with their tutors or with me. Perhaps, they wanted that reassurance that they were reading it correctly. There were times that*

some would stumble upon a word, but they would recover quickly and continue reading. It was wonderful to witness how much they had grown from the first day. These preservice teachers had now experienced the full magnitude of what ELLs encounter.

ALEXANDRA: *When it was my turn to read, I was certainly excited but not nervous. I knew my tutor taught me well. Then, I took my seat in front of these little five-year old “Spanish language Kings and Queens” and couldn’t wait to see their reactions. Reading to them was exhilarating. I had so much fun doing it that I wanted to keep going. I loved being able to interact with them. Then, the final question: ¿Te gusto mi libro? (Did you like my book?) It was like music to my ears hearing five little “Si”s coming from them. I felt validated that my Spanish was clear and I did, in fact, do a good job at reading my book. I was definitely not a “Spanish Queen” yet, but this experience made me realize perhaps another goal that I could set for myself would be the learning of a new language. “Ms. Williams-Spanish Queen” had a nice ring to it!*

MARIA: *To show their appreciation to the third graders for all their hard work during these tutoring sessions, my colleagues had to prepare a picnic lunch for their tutors. We (the Spanish Queens) went to the third graders and told them they were going to have a picnic and their college students would make their lunches for them. We told them they would get a sandwich, a juice drink, and a piece of fruit. I heard a few disappointing sighs. This was not the lunch they had hoped for. What about tortillas? We had to explain that our colleagues didn’t know how to make those sorts of lunches. However, when we told them, “You will get one surprise item in your lunch,” the smiles returned to their faces. They started shouting suggestions of what they would like as their surprise item, like Takis Chips. (We took their suggestions back to the preservice teachers.) We also told them, “Now, you have to write notes to your college students and tell them what kind of sandwich you would like and what you want*

on the sandwich. And please write this in Spanish to give your college students practice.” We also told them to draw some of those items to help the preservice teachers understand what they wanted. These hand-written requests, decorated with pictures, were then handed out to our colleagues. What fun they had deciphering what they were to pack in those lunches. The picnic day arrived at last. I must admit I was a little nervous about the students’ reactions because I saw their disappointing sighs when they were told they were getting a sandwich. However, as I stood in the back and looked around at the preservice teachers and third graders eating their lunches together, I could see them laughing, talking, and enjoying each other’s company. The student that caught my attention the most was a third grader who I had observed throughout the tutoring session. He was extremely shy and reserved with his preservice teacher. Now I saw him talking and laughing about all the great things that were in his lunch. He was so pleased with his sandwich, drink, fruit, and surprise item. Witnessing these experiences is something that I will never forget and neither would these seventeen other preservice teachers.

ALEXANDRA: *After the final event of the Kindergarten read aloud, our professor surprised us with something from our tutors. We were all given “report cards” showing how well we did and what we could improve on. The report cards consisted of a few questions of our progress throughout the session and how we did overall. Our tutors then gave us a “grade” on each of the criteria and our overall growth. Some of them even drew pictures or wrote extra notes. It was great to get feedback from our third-grade Spanish teachers! From my personal perspective of just being in the bilingual classroom as a native English speaker, surrounded by posters in English and Spanish and hearing people speaking in both languages, I really began to feel like an English Language Learner. I realized at the end of this assignment that I had learned so much from my little tutor. I saw and felt how it was to struggle, to risk, to learn another*

language. I was in her shoes for only a short period of time, but certainly long enough for my appreciation for ELLs to deepen. I believe, as a future teacher, I will be better able to not only implement many of the reading strategies that bilingual children need but to do this with more understanding and sensitivity. I'm sure these emotions and feelings will stay with me because I had been through some of them myself.

MARIA: Throughout the whole experience, the preservice teachers showed growth in their Spanish speaking abilities, but they also seemed to gain an immense appreciation for bilingual students. They learned more of what these children experience during school and even outside of school. Being able to experience firsthand what it is like to be an ELL, the preservice teachers now had more knowledge of what to bring into their classroom for their students. During the sessions, the preservice teachers asked themselves the same initial questions that ELLs ask. They went through the same emotions, the same moments of doubting their abilities and questioning their intelligence. Having to do this Spanish Read Aloud assignment opened their eyes about the many needs and support that bilingual students need. Although this assignment impacted the preservice teachers, it was also a special time for our third-grade bilingual students. The tutoring sessions gave them time to show pride in their native language. They were given the opportunity to show adults what it is like to know their language and how much it means to them. And, the third graders learned what it was like to be a teacher and the need for patience, encouragement, and pride in the work done by students. Everyone took important lessons from this assignment.

MARIA and ALEXANDRA: After we both wrote our reflections for this article, we perused 137 final reflections from preservice teachers who had been given this Spanish Read Aloud assignment in the previous Literacy Methods classes. They were asked to write what they

were thinking after the Spanish Read Aloud assignment was finished. We found many similarities between what we thought and what other preservice teachers thought. It was an interesting project. Our most noteworthy findings were as follows:

1. All the reflections had statements indicating the assignment was a positive experience. Words were used like great, awesome, scary, fun, enjoyable, meaningful, and amazing. One quote we particularly liked: This assignment “was one of the coolest and most eye-opening experiences I have had in my college career.”
2. Many talked about their own feelings about learning to read Spanish and used words like frustrating, embarrassing, intimidated, hard work, nervous, worried, stressed, uncomfortable, feeling dumb, challenging, and terrified. One student said, “The idea of having to read a book completely in Spanish made me break out into a sweat!”
3. Reflections always included positive remarks about their third-grade tutors. Statements that appeared over and over included: Shy at first, super sweet, smiled a lot, so patient, encouraging, so smart, proud of knowing Spanish, attentive. Our favorite quote: “When reading by myself the first day, I know I butchered every other word, but my tutor kept a smile on her face and gave me a hug. Oh, that felt good.”
4. Most all the reflections thought the assignment helped them as future educators.

Here are a few quotes that are representative of most responses:

- a. “This gave me a different perspective on learning a language and how it felt to try to understand.”
- b. “This really opened my eyes to how ELLs must feel when thrown into an all English classroom. I am definitely going to be more considerate and patient.”

- c. *“I realize how easy we have it when everyone around us speaks English. And how hard our students have it when we are trying to teach them in a foreign language. This experience taught me a lot as a teacher.”*
- d. *“I can’t imagine being immersed in a language that is not your first language! Overwhelming! I’m definitely going to remember this when I have my classroom someday.”*
- e. *“I realized the importance of visuals when learning vocabulary.”*
- f. *“I’m keeping my book to read in my future classroom.”*

The most interesting comment that was repeated over and over in a variety of forms was, “I’ll remember this forever!” That is just the way we felt when the Spanish Read Aloud assignment was over. This experience was powerful, transformative, and one that we certainly will never forget.

Conclusion

The Spanish Read Aloud is one assignment that makes an impact on the dispositions of our emerging educators toward children acquiring English. It is during these moments of trading places that these preservice teachers get a glimpse of life from the eyes of those who are very different, those that aren’t perhaps as privileged, those that hold less power. When they can feel what it’s like, that memory, that experience will cause lasting change in the way they teach, believe, and live.

Attachment A

20 MINUTE LESSON #1



1. **TALK** through the book by looking at PICTURES. Ask, “What do you think is happening here?” Let your student answer. If your student is right, that’s fine. If your student isn’t right, go ahead and say what’s going on.
2. **READ** the book TO your student.
3. **READ** the book WITH your student.
4. **LISTEN** to your student try to read the book alone. Help your student with the hard words. Write those words down as your student reads. Use the “Hard Words” chart.
5. **VOCABULARY LESSONS:**
 - ◆ Go through each page and point to words that your student might not know. Double check with the words you wrote down in the “Hard Words” chart.
 - ◆ Have your student make word cards. On the back of the card, your student must write the English word.
6. **READ** the book one more time WITH your student before tutoring time is up.

Attachment B

20 MINUTE LESSON #2

1. **READ** the book **WITH** your student.
2. **LISTEN** to your student read the book. Help your student with unknown words.
3. **VOCABULARY LESSON:**
 - ❖ Work with the vocabulary cards. You hold up the word and ask your student to pronounce the word and to tell you the English word.
 - ❖ If you have time, play a vocabulary game. Lay all the word cards on the table. Ask questions. Here are some examples:
 - a. What word means ____?
 - b. What word rhymes with ____?
 - c. What word is something you find ____? (For example: in the yard, on a stove, up in the sky, in a store, on a person.)
 - d. What word would you use to describe ____? (For example: a horse, a book, an apple)
 - ❖ If your student finds the right word, then your student gets to keep it. If not, YOU take that card. The one with the most cards wins the game. (Of course, you hope your student wins, right?)

READ the book one more time **WITH** your student