

ENGLISH FOR (VERY) SPECIFIC PURPOSES

An ESL Course For Spanish Speaking Agricultural Workers in the Niagara Region

By Donna Pearce, Brock University

BACKGROUND

- Last year, more than 18000 workers came to work on Canadian farms as part of the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP)
- Of these workers, more than 3000 are working on farms in the Niagara region
- The majority of these workers come from either the Caribbean or Mexico
- Although the SAWP is not without its problems, it provides Mexicans with a legal means to enter and work in Canada and the opportunity to earn significantly more than they could in their home country
- Nevertheless, such opportunity comes at a price, since they must spend 6 to 8 months of the year thousands of miles away from the people they love, in communities that are often not as welcoming as they could be
- One key factor contributing to these workers isolation is their limited, or in some cases, non-existent, proficiency in English
- In recent years, the demographics of workers in the Niagara region have shifted, such that now only 33% are native English speakers, while 67% speak Spanish as their first language (L1) (Raper, 2017, personal communication). Hence, the need for language education for this population is increasing on an annual basis
- In the past, several attempts had been made to offer ESL classes to the Mexican migrant workers in Niagara. However, since these classes used a traditional grammar-based, monolingual English approach, anecdotal evidence from the workers showed that they felt their needs were not being met and ultimately, the classes were deemed a failure
- Such failure is not surprising, and is supported by the research of Pauwels (2014), who found that teachers who were unaware of learners' linguistic repertoires tended to view their plurilingualism as an annoyance, rather than an advantage
- Enter Brock University, and its experiential learning course SPAN 3F80/4F80, Im/migrant and Community Outreach Internship
- In 2016, as part of this course, I designed an ESL program to meet the specific needs of the Spanish speaking SAWP workers in the Niagara region. This population presented me with some unique challenges, as well as some distinct advantages

CHALLENGES

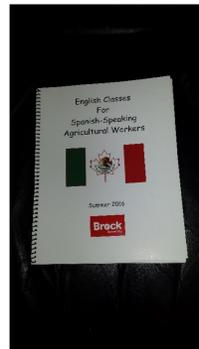
- Limited time frame: One 1.5 hour class/week in each of two centres for approximately ten weeks
- A range of proficiency levels, from beginner to advanced, in one classroom
- Staggered start times; some workers begin arriving in Canada as early as February, but arrivals are spaced out over the growing season, depending on the crops of the farms where the workers are employed
- Some of the students were not literate in their L1 (Spanish)
- Extremely limited access to supportive materials and input in English
- Limited transportation options meant we had to bring our classes to the students, rather than vice versa

ADVANTAGES

- Students who were highly motivated and hungry to learn
- Many rode miles on their bikes after long days working in the fields just to attend the classes

SOLUTIONS

- A fully bilingual Spanish-English course design; in this way, we utilized the students' L1 knowledge to facilitate their L2 acquisition
- Use of English in the classroom gradually increased as the students became more proficient in the language
- A team teaching approach, pairing a Spanish/English bilingual with a TESL trained teacher in the same classroom
- Five "stand alone" thematically designed workshops that focused on the communicative tasks that the students needed to accomplish, such as grocery shopping, going to the doctor, sending money home etc.
- The cycle of workshops was repeated twice to accommodate later arriving students, or to provide additional practice for those in attendance from the beginning
- A strong focus on oral communication, but each workshop also contained a "real world" reading and writing task using realia, such as doctor registration forms and Western Union money transfer documents
- Teachers were trained in techniques to scaffold low literate students, using verbal explanations, gestures, pictures etc.
- Classroom space was donated by two local churches in Beamsville and Virgil
- Each student received a "school bag" containing the course book, a notebook, pen, pencil and eraser, all of which were donated



ESL Coursebook



"School Bag"

SAMPLE LESSON

Weekly Shopping

Every Saturday, I do my grocery shopping. I go to Valu-mart in Virgil. I buy all the food my family needs for the week. I start with fruit and vegetables. I always buy apples, pears, plums, bananas and grapes. Sometimes, I also buy strawberries or melon. My favourite fruit is pineapple, so I buy that too. Every week, I buy broccoli, lettuce, carrots and cauliflower. I want to make guacamole, so I buy avocado, tomatoes, onion and jalapeños. Next, I go to the meat department. I buy chicken, hamburger and pork chops. Finally, I buy milk, eggs, cheese and bread. I go to the cashier, pay for my groceries and take my groceries home. Now it is time to cook.

Now it's your turn - tell me about your grocery shopping. You can use the sentences below to help you and you can add any information you would like.

Every _____, I do my grocery shopping. I go to _____ in _____. I buy the food I need for the week. I start with _____, I always buy _____, _____ and _____. Sometimes, I also buy _____. My favourite _____ is _____, so I buy that too. I want to make _____, so for this I buy _____, _____ and _____.

Then I go to the meat department. I buy _____ and _____. Finally, I buy _____, _____ and _____.

I go to the cashier to pay for my groceries and collect my PC points. Then I take my groceries home.

RELEVANT RESEARCH: ADVANTAGES OF A PLURILINGUAL APPROACH

- A plurilingual approach in the classroom is grounded in three theoretical perspectives, namely engaging prior understandings, interdependence across languages and multilingualism as a qualitatively different system from monolingualism (Cummins, 2007)
- Such an approach provides positive effects on motivation and self-esteem (Bernaus, Moore & Azevedo, 2007; Corcoll, 2003)
- Use of learners' L1 mediates and facilitates the process of subsequent language acquisition (Payant, 2015)
- Learners' awareness of their individual plurilingualism is viewed as an asset for communication (Marshall & Moore, 2013; Prasad, 2014)
- Anecdotal evidence from our class members reported "increased motivation", "improved self-esteem" and a change in self-image, from "just a worker" to "a student", "a learner" and "an educated person"

Our 2016 Classes

On the left is the



class in Beams-

ville and on the

right is the class



in Virgil

REFERENCES

- Bernaus, M., Moore, E. & Azevedo, A.C. (2007). Affective factors influencing plurilingual students' acquisition of Catalan in a Catalan-Spanish bilingual context. *The Modern Language Journal*, 91, 235-246.
- Corcoll, C. (2013). Developing children's language awareness: Switching codes in the language classroom. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 10(1), 27-45.
- Cummins, J. (2007). Rethinking monolingual instructional strategies in multilingual classrooms. *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 10(2), 221-240.
- Marshall, S. & Moore, D. (2013). 2B or not 2B plurilingual: Navigating languages, literacies and plurilingual competence in post secondary education in Canada. *TESOL Quarterly*, 47(3), 472-499.
- Pauwels, A. (2014). The teaching of languages at university in the context of super-diversity. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 11(3), 307-319.
- Payant, C. (2015). Plurilingual learners' beliefs and practices toward native and non-native language mediation during learner-learner interaction. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 71(2), 1-25.
- Prasad, G. (2014). Children as co-ethnographers of their plurilingual literacy practices: An exploratory case study. *Language and Literacy*, 15(3), 4-30.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

- Brock University
- St. Alban's Church, Beamsville
- Cornerstone Community Church, Niagara-on-the-Lake
- Workers from the SAWP

