

Silenced Narratives: What a Second/Foreign Language Can't Embody

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As teachers of English as a second/foreign language, we are constantly faced with the dilemma of how much of the first language we should allow in the classroom. Thus, even though most of us (80%) tend to allow the use of the native language, as Roberts Auerbach's (1993) investigation revealed, we still feel guilty about such practice due to the widespread assumption that proficiency is acquired with an English-only approach. The last time I taught my college's intermediate EFL composition course, I found myself climbing on the English-only bandwagon. I decided ahead of time that students would not fall back on their Spanish, specifically during class discussions of their peer-written essays. I was totally convinced then that I had to and could get them to stay in English simply by encouraging them to take their time to put their thoughts in order and, if they could not find the words in English for an idea they wanted to express, to try to work around it using other words and expressions.

At the beginning, this approach seemed to work. Every time students asked me the dreaded question, "¿En español?" (In Spanish?), I would remind them of the strategy and sometimes would throw in a little speech on the benefits of using only English. But after a while, students developed their own strategy to satisfy my constant request and at the same time get their message across. They would begin expressing their ideas in English, then they would quickly change to Spanish before I could even begin to consider telling them to "say it in English," and then just as quickly change to English. Eventually this situation would cause laughter since we were all aware of the trick that was being pulled off. Toward the second half of the semester I realized that more often than not I was yielding to their "¿En español?" request. So much so that some students were getting away with saying everything in Spanish. At that point I started getting a little bit frustrated because I could not at least explain to myself why a growing number of students kept drifting towards Spanish in spite of my constant "broken record" exhortation.

As a matter of meaningful coincidence, or synchronicity, as Jung (1965) would call it, I came across Spellmeyer's (1993) views on language which began to shed light on my question:

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Because words have the potential to conceal as well as disclose, any struggle over language at the same time entails a struggle over worlds fought on the deepest levels of the self--that part of the self most intimately connected with other selves and with history. To silence any person, to prohibit his speech or discredit his manner of speaking, is therefore to silence much more than the person, not only everyone from whom the person learned his words, but also everything these words have made real....(pp. 268-269)

Could it be, I asked myself, that those students who insisted on expressing themselves in Spanish were actually fighting a force (namely me) that was, even if unintentionally, silencing them and their worlds? And what about those students who didn't speak at all? Had they given up on a language that could not "embody" their experiences, could not make them become real and meaningful? As I reflected on these questions I came to realize that I already knew the answers, and in fact, had known them all along. After all, hadn't I myself as an EFL learner been in similar situations before? Hadn't I at times burst out in Spanish both with my students in class and with my bilingual colleagues in the English department? I had to admit that in fact I already knew from my very own experience of that internal "struggle over language and worlds."

Feeling the need to explore the matter further, I began to pay close attention to those moments when my students would insist on using Spanish. I wanted to identify (confirm?) what it was that was triggering their use of their mother tongue. More specifically, I wanted to investigate (corroborate?) the possibility that students were actually refusing to use English when what they had to share with the class was very close to their own world and experiences. Since we were approaching the end of the semester, and the chances for observing the behavior became fewer, I developed a questionnaire asking students to describe in detail (and in Spanish) any story or anecdote that they remembered (a) telling in their own language because they felt English would fall short, or (b) keeping to themselves because they had to speak English. What I was able to gather from both the observations and the questionnaire was a world of narratives that unfortunately was being "silenced" because of the inescapable fact that the vehicle of expression was not the students' own language. Let me share with you some of those narratives that exemplify the great loss I now believe can result from an English-only approach. (I have included my own approximate translation to the students' original Spanish version.) I will then present other arguments from research, and finally, some suggestions for classroom practice.

Some Silenced Narratives

Pedro, a third-year Economics major who was never hesitant about expressing himself in English, wrote this in the questionnaire:

Once we were discussing parents' relationships with their children. I wanted to talk about the loss of my father, not in the physical sense, but in the sense that I lost him as a friend and companion. In class it was very hard to express that because I had to use a different language and also because it dealt with something that touched me deeply. Also, the same thing happened when we were discussing domestic violence and child abuse.

Ricardo, who wrote a passionate essay on the elderly, when asked in class by one of his peers why he had chosen that particular topic, began (in English) by saying:

I think older people deserve more love and more respect. We young people, we don't give it to them.

Suddenly he stopped and in an obviously emotional tone asked me, "How should I say this?" Sensing his need for expressing himself in Spanish, I said to him, "Why don't you just say it as you feel it." He then proceeded to open a little window to his world in the language that could allow him to do just that, his mother tongue:

I live with my grandmother, and I can say that the elderly have a lot to offer. All we have to do is to really care for them, to express to them our love. I spend most of my time with older folks and I can tell you that they have more to offer than we do. That's why I'd rather be with them than with people my age. I like to be with them and show them my respect and my appreciation.

Ismael, who would never take the initiative to speak in class, expressed this in the questionnaire:

English definitely kept me from speaking in class on many occasions. But at one point, we were talking about abortion and someone commented that it should be acceptable in cases of rape or when the mother's own life is in danger. I remember that I told this story (and I said it in Spanish because I considered it important and interesting for the class) about this buddy of mine who was conceived as a result of a rape, and he tells me that he now feels that his mother doesn't really love him, although she says that she does. It's really sad! And his father visits him from time to time.

The last two of these narratives led to very engaging class discussions, a lot of which sprouted spontaneously all around the room. And even though they took place mostly in Spanish, they were very rewarding to us all adding to the special bond we had already been developing as a class. Pedro's narrative, however, along with who knows how many others, was unfortunately lost.

The Case Against English Only

Phillipson (1992), almost echoing Spellmeyer's argument on language, says that "the ethos of monolingualism implies the rejection of the experiences of other languages, meaning the exclusion of the (learner's) most intense existential experience" (as cited in Roberts Auerbach, p.16). In other words, if we deny our students the opportunity to express themselves in their native tongue, as I tried to do myself, we are actually preventing them from voicing those narratives whose significance in the students' own lives demands that they be heard. Not only that, we are also denying ourselves the chance to get to know and understand our students a little better, and denying everyone in class the chance to become enriched by those personal stories that could only become embodied through the student's own language.

Another argument against allowing only the second/foreign language in the classroom is the fact that it is based on the erroneous assumption we practitioners tend to make that students will learn English only if they are forced to use it. Research, however, suggests that such "rationale...is neither conclusive nor pedagogically sound" (Roberts Auerbach, p. 15).

What I observed in the classroom experience I have described supports the above claims, but some of my student's comments in the questionnaire are actually the most convincing argument.

The course taught me different things. First, that learning English can be a pleasant experience. Second, that in terms of writing and vocabulary, I'm not doing as badly as I used to think. And finally, the course helped me to put into practice what I know and to try to think in English. Once I tried to say something in English and then I asked you, "How should I say this?", and you answered "Say it as you feel it." I decided to say it in Spanish because it's the way I think, act, and, above all, love. The times I had to say something in English, I didn't feel pressured because you don't pressure. You give us the confidence and motivation to do it.

Suggestions for Classroom Practice

I am now strongly convinced that we should allow students to voice their narratives in their native tongue when they have the need to do so, and in the process we should not feel guilty about it. Here are some activities I have begun to try in one way or another which help to dissipate the guilt since they use the students' narratives as a point of departure towards the use and development of English.

When teachers and students share the same first language

1. After students have told a narrative in L1 class, have them write it in English as homework or as part of a *Writing Portfolio* or *Dialogue Journal*.
2. Have students write a narrative essay in English based on one of the narratives they told in L1 and then have them share it with the rest of the class.
3. Have students act out in English some of the narratives told in L1 in class trying to depict the situation and attempting to solve conflicts or deal with unfinished business. You could have them videotape themselves and then present the video in class for discussion.

When they don't all share the same first language

1. Allow students to share their stories in their L1 with their language group, and then the whole group tries to piece the story together collaboratively in English for the rest of the class.
2. Have students in the same language group develop a video in English on any of their "silenced narratives." They then present it to the rest of the class for discussion of content, language use, and possibly performance and technical production.
3. Put students in small groups (4-5) making sure all language groups are represented. Have each member share his/her narrative in English, helping each other to articulate their ideas. Each group can then choose their favorite narrative to retell to the whole class collaboratively.
4. Variation on No. 3: students choose a letter (A, B, C, D). Student A tells his/her narrative to student B. Student B then retells it to student C who in turn retells it to student D. All students listen to help along with language and content. Then student B tells his/her narrative to student C and the cycle repeats itself.
5. As homework, have students write any of the narratives they have heard in the third person.

These few activities serve to show that the students' use of their mother tongue can actually be a useful and powerful tool rather than a hindrance in second/foreign language development. More importantly, they illustrate how we as teachers can promote the respect and appreciation that other "languages and worlds" rightfully deserve by allowing them to surface and be heard. In a world where old walls are crumbling down and the spirit of multiculturalism is beginning to prevail, the rippling effects of such classroom practice can be a contributing factor in improving relations among individuals and peoples alike.

References

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