

## COMPILATION: English language learners: allow discourse in foreign language

Date: Thu, 28 Nov 2002

From: Chris Horton <chrisahorton2@HOTMAIL.COM>

I start a new job on Monday. The students I will be teaching "Algebra I Support" to (Read: "Remedial Help for Students who Aren't Ready for Algebra but the Politicians Say they Have to Be") are predominantly Hispanic. When I form them into small discussion groups some will undoubtedly attempt to discuss the problem (or just "chill") in Spanish. My Spanish is too rudimentary for me to follow very well, although I should be able to pick up whether they are off topic.

My instinct is that I must vigorously require them to speak English so that:

1. I can monitor their conversation, understand their thinking and question them appropriately,
2. the class can arrive at a common vocabulary.

The objection is that what the students really think will only come out - in some cases - in Spanish.

What do you think?

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Date: Fri, 10 Jan 2003

From: "Melendez, Javier" <melendez@PHXHS.K12.AZ.US>

A few weeks ago Chris Horton posted a concern about working with ESL (English as a Second Language) students. I realize this is not a common problem for most high school physics teachers, but it's nonetheless an important issue. Some of us are required to teach lower level classes in addition to physics and encounter situations such as Chris'. I firmly believe that these lower level classes with populations such as those described below can become fertile grounds for recruiting future physics students.

First of all, I think it would be a mistake to frown upon or deny their use of Spanish in the case where it is their dominant language. This is not to say that they should be given free rein and not monitored. English under no circumstance should be eschewed. However, *their dominant language is the language in which their most meaningful dialogue takes place. This dialogue is crucial for them to make sense of the content.* At times students are ostensibly uninterested when in fact they are attempting to negotiate meaning. I would imagine this to be even more common when one is not fluent in the students' primary language. What they really think may in fact only come out in Spanish - this I believe is acceptable. Here we must remember that Modelers, or constructivists for that matter, largely believe that the instructor should serve as a facilitator in the learning process and that students to a large degree construct their own understanding.

While many are aware of the benefits of cooperative working environments and peer interaction, this is even more crucial for the English language learner. Do not be discouraged from continuing this practice because you feel they may be off task. *Provide them with cognitively challenging and authentic tasks.* The common perception that the science must be simplified or minimized is erroneous. *Context rich scenarios not only provide the impetus for learning the content but the language as well. In learning to "talk science" they will learn more English as well.*

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