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The First Day of School in a Dual Language Classroom
Cheryl Urow, 2014

It's the beginning of a new school year and the possibilities are limitless. This will be the year that you finally implement writer's workshop! This will be the year that all your students will read on or above grade level…in both languages! This is the year your newsletter will go home every single week! Yes, this will be the year.

Whatever your classroom goals this year, it's important to share these goals and expectations with your students from the first moment they enter your room. Of course, this advice works for all teachers. But as a dual language teacher, your goals go beyond writer's workshop and newsletters – you have the added responsibility of teaching language and content simultaneously. And while all teachers want their students to read at or above grade level, your students need to have this ability in two languages. Given this additional responsibility, how does a dual language teacher establish classroom expectations and routines on the first day of school that promote the successful learning of language and content? Below are a few suggestions for the first day of school.

Conduct all initial interactions with your students in Spanish

One of the biggest challenges faced by the dual language teacher is getting students to use Spanish for academic and social communication. The power of English in the United States is such that all children in dual language programs – even those children who enter the program as monolingual Spanish speakers – quickly turn to English as the language of choice, thus further decreasing use of Spanish in the classroom. In order to raise the status of Spanish - and in this way encourage increased student use of Spanish both in and outside the classroom - the dual language teacher must begin the school year by greeting all students in Spanish, and maintaining the use of Spanish during initial introductions. Any kind of introductory games or activities should be done in Spanish. Even in Kindergarten, it is important that the teacher maintain the use of Spanish from the beginning of the year, in order to clearly establish the expectation that Spanish is to be used for social and academic communication in the dual language classroom.

In programs where the two languages are separated by teacher, it can be beneficial to have a combined group to begin the first day of school with the Spanish medium teacher. Basic introductions and expectations can happen as both the Spanish medium teacher and the English-speaking teacher team-teach in Spanish. If the English medium teacher cannot speak Spanish, he or she can still support the Spanish medium teacher in establishing routines and expectations, while at the same time modeling interest in learning Spanish.

Establish clear routines for the three linguistic spaces: Spanish, the Bridge, and English

It is important for students to understand when and where each language will be used, and when the languages will be used together. Some teachers don a scarf when it is Spanish time, and take the scarf off for English time and for the Bridge. Other teachers

have an image on the bulletin board – one side says "Español" and the other side says "English", and other indicates "Bridge". This "Bridge" sign can be especially helpful to distinguish between random code-switching and flip flopping, and the purposeful, planned, and strategic use of both languages. Other teachers designate one area of the room for Spanish, and another area for English, and a third area for the Bridge. In programs that separate language by teacher, the Spanish medium teacher needs to clearly set the expectation that English will not be used in his or her classroom except during the Bridge.

Whatever your organization, clearly communicate this to the students on the first day of school, and make sure to use the system consistently throughout the school year.

Carefully plan your own use of language

While language mixing, or code-switching, is common among bilinguals in social settings and among children who are in the process of learning a second language, it is not appropriate for the teacher in a dual language classroom. The dual language teacher must take the time to plan out his or her language use and be very careful not to use English during Spanish instructional time. This may mean that there are instances when the teacher will model circumlocution, the use of sentence prompts (see below) or the use of bilingual dictionaries.

Give students tools for using each language.

Introduce students to phrases helpful to maintaining the language of instruction, and post these prompts throughout the room. For example, teach students how to use, "Como se dice…?" and "Que quiere decir…?" In addition, show students where the bilingual dictionaries are stored, and how to use them. These same sentence prompts should be provided and practiced in English as well.

Establish clear routines for collaboration and organize instruction to build independence.

Key to the success of dual language classrooms are the student-student interactions, and clear guidelines for how these interactions will take place need to be established from the first day of the new school year. For example, rather than focusing on individual students answering questions posed by the teacher, encourage students to collaborate with their small group before responding to the teacher. This will give second language learners the opportunity to ask for and get the language they need to answer the question in the target language and will also serve to raise the status of the Spanish-speaking students.

Establishing clear expectations for collaboration within the classroom will also encourage students to look to each other for support and guidance, both with language and with content, rather than always looking to the teacher. This independence - where students are taught how to use classroom resources to answer their own questions and revise their own work – is critical to the success of dual language classrooms. The structures that help to establish this independence need to implemented and practiced on the first day of school.

The first day of school is exciting and full of potential. Make sure to take advantage of this by clearly communicating your expectations – including use of Spanish and English.