

Melissa Ferro
Personal Reflection
EDUC 994: Advanced Internship
Spring 2008

Teaching EDRD 620 in the spring 2008 semester has afforded me not only the opportunity to grow as a teacher, but also the opportunity to explore a new direction for my doctoral dissertation. Pre-service teacher training has been a growing interest of mine throughout my doctoral program. But because my initial interest in the program had been in conducting intervention studies with beginning level language learners, I was still uncertain as to the direction I would take with my dissertation research as this semester began. Although I could clearly see the intersection of instructional technology and pre-service teacher training, I was not certain that this intersection would allow me to focus on my passion for addressing the cognitive, linguistic, and cultural needs of today's language learners. As a result of my experiences teaching EDRD 620 and taking EDUC 874-The Achievement Gap in the same semester, I am now seeing a clearer path to my dissertation research.

The work of Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri (2002) studied the importance of empowering language minority student populations by helping them to develop strong literacy skills in both their heritage language and in English. Although their work focused on two special groups of English language learners, I began to wonder where these same ESL students might "fit" in today's world language classrooms. And, when I think about the content of the EDRD 620 course, I wondered how I might convey the importance of literacy development at a time when the field of world language education is so focused on speaking and listening skills. I also wondered, what might be the role of technology?

One of the projects that I introduced this semester was a WebQuest that I developed in EDIT 725- Technology and Diversity. The purpose of the project was to allow students to explore the major course topics while considering the diverse needs of today's language learners. The WebQuest is available at www.mason.gmu.edu/~mferro/edrd620webquest/index . In order to demonstrate how an instructor can assess student background knowledge as well as their current learning goals, I conducted a needs analysis with the students during the first class meeting. Based on the information they provided on the needs analysis, I made recommendations to each student as to the course topics they might want to explore for the WebQuest. These included:

- Standards of Foreign/World Languages (National and VA State)
- Research on Reading and Writing Strategies in World Languages
- Technology-Wikis, Blogs, and Multimedia for World Language Learning
- Performance-based Assessments

The PowerPoint presentations demonstrated that the pre-service teachers in EDRD 620 had a growing knowledge of the course topics. However, many of the students were not sure how to apply these topics to learner diversity. Since this project came at the beginning of the course, we had not yet covered socio-cultural theory and how today's language learners bring what Moll & González (2004) describe as different funds of knowledge. I should also mention that many in the class were international students who had just started the CIFL program as a Chinese Cohort through the program with Dongfang.

In order to guide the students to develop a new perspective of learner diversity, I looked for opportunities to create open discussions during my presentations on the course topics. For example, we discussed how educational opportunities are not always equitable across socioeconomic classes. We read Armstrong's (2004) article *Making the Words Roar* that calls for the use of Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences to help cognitively diverse learners

develop literacy skills. And, we discussed the importance of valuing language variation and cultural differences in the world language classroom. In the last class meeting, we watched a WGBH video that illustrated how a Russian teacher was able to use the funds of knowledge that her native Russian students brought to a classroom that also included non-native language learners. The students in EDRD 620 worked in small groups to discuss the video in relation to one of the course readings on the development of identity in second language writing (Vollmer, 2002). I asked the students to discuss the following questions:

Based on the Vollmer article and the WGBH video:

1. How do you define “identity”?
2. How can studying a second language help our students to express and explore new identities?
3. Why is this important to both non-native speakers of the language AND heritage language learners?
4. How did Jane Shuffleton (in the WGBH video) accomplish this in her lesson?

After we shared answers and ideas, I ended the course with the following quote by Haim Ginott (1972) in his book, *Between a Teacher and Child*:

I have come to a frightening conclusion.
I am the decisive element in the classroom.
It is my personal approach that creates the climate.
It is my daily mood that makes the weather.
As a teacher I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous.
I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration.
I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal.
In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis
will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanized or de-humanized.

I believe that ending the course with this quote gave the EDRD 620 students food for thought, not only as they continue through the licensure program, but also as they establish their own classrooms once they are licensed.

In addition to gaining a clearer path towards my dissertation, teaching EDRD 620 was also my first experience at graduate level teaching. I soon found how different this was

compared to teaching beginning level Spanish courses at the undergraduate level. In addition to the having 7 students in GMU's CIFL program, I had the unique opportunity of having 14 international students from China who are seeking licensure in the new Chinese Language Licensure Program. I will readily admit that the task of meeting the needs of these diverse students was rather daunting. I looked forward to the mid-point of the semester in order to gather feedback from the students.

The mid-term projects showed that the students were grasping the course content as they prepared lessons that highlighted the teaching of reading and writing in world languages. One area that I thought the students could improve upon was the connections that they were making to the course readings. I felt that their use of reading and writing strategies in their projects could have been better supported by drawing upon the readings we had discussed in class. To gather the students' opinions, I asked the following questions at the mid-point of the semester:

1. What is working well in the course?
2. What would you like the instructor to change during the second half of the semester?
3. What have you done well up to this point?
4. What could you improve in the second half of the course?

The majority of the students said that they very much enjoyed the personal experiences and the teacher-made materials that I shared with them from my own teaching. They asked that I try to end our class sessions early and to give them less homework. They said that they felt that their classroom participation was good, but that they could better prepare for class by completing the reading assignments on time.

To address the students' responses, I had an open forum discussion. We agreed that the weekly reading assignments could be better distributed as some of the articles were longer and more difficult to read. I reviewed the reading assignments for the rest of the semester and reduced the required readings by two articles. To help students make connections to the course

readings, I asked that they do short reflections after every other class. However, I soon found that trying to assign work that is not printed on the course syllabus was very difficult. While some students prepared these assignments, others simply did not do them even if after receiving reminder emails with explicit instructions. My frustration grew for a few weeks until I realized that the best way to have students complete the reflections was to give them the time during class. I discussed this with the students as I shared with them my own teaching reflections for the course. Unfortunately, there were only a few weeks left to the semester to do so. Although this experience was frustrating, I believe that my openness with the students about my own teaching reflections served as a good model for them to use in their future teaching.

Overall, my experiences teaching this course were very positive. I would like the opportunity to teach it again next spring. There are several things that I would like to do that I believe would improve the course. First, I would revise the course reader to include articles on heritage language learners, funds of knowledge, and using technology to enhance second language reading and writing. Second, I would adjust the syllabus so that the reading load was more evenly distributed according to the due dates of the course projects. Lastly, I would include a few questions for reflection on the syllabus that students would either submit in class or perhaps post electronically on the course Blackboard site.

References

- Armstrong, T. (2004). Making the words roar. *Educational Leadership*. 61 (6), 78-81.
- Freeman, Y.S., Freeman, D.E., & S. Mercuri (2002). *Closing the achievement gap: How to reach limited-formal-schooling and long-term English learners*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.
- Ginott, H.G. (1972). *Teacher and child*. New York: The MacMillan Company.

Moll, L.C., & González, N. (2004). Engaging life: A funds of knowledge approach to multicultural education. In J. A. Banks and C. A. McGee Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (pp. 699-715). CA: John Wiley and Sons.

Vollmer, Greta. (Spring, 2002). Sociocultural perspectives on second language writing. ERIC. Vol 25, No.2.