



Interdistrict Collaboration to Promote Second Language Acquisition via Spoken Word Poetry and Visual Art

Beverley Fisher ¹, Rochelle Marcus ², Amy Nocton ³

RHAM High School ¹, Mansfield Middle School ², RHAM High School ³ (United States of America)

Abstract

This paper and presentation will outline how a high school Spanish teacher, middle school English language arts teacher, and a high school art teacher developed and implemented a successful interdistrict art and language collaboration. The project immersed students in various levels of expression and translation across districts, grade levels, disciplines, genres, and media. Inspired by her success using blogging and translation as a means of language acquisition in her high school Spanish class, Ms. Nocton reached out to Ms. Marcus to include her 8th grade English language arts students from a nearby district. Ms. Marcus' students had been successfully exploring, writing, and performing spoken word poetry. The idea Ms. Nocton and Ms. Marcus developed required the middle school students to share their poetry with Ms. Nocton's Spanish students, who then translated the work and posted on their class blog both the written poems as well as audio files of the spoken poems, in both English and Spanish. A further component of the collaboration involved art teacher Beverly Fisher, whose high school art students created visual art interpretations of the poems. Ultimately, the multifaceted collaboration demonstrates the interrelatedness of spoken, written, and visual expression; the varied means and methods of translation; and the relationships between and among print, digital, vocal, and plastic art expression. This paper and presentation will outline how the students and teachers collaborated to bring this project to fruition, the benefits reaped, and the insights students and teachers gained into their own learning and teaching as a result of working together.

Process for Rochelle Marcus' work with English language Middle School classroom

I have incorporated the spoken word poetry unit into my eighth grade language arts classes for as long as I've taught eighth grade at Mansfield Middle School, at least six years. Throughout each academic year, eighth grade students learn and write several different modes or genres, from narrative to expository to argumentative, and also including personal essay, researched-based debates, and poetry. Each type of writing is aligned with the Connecticut Core Standards which are based on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS or United States federal education standards) and are considered essential to the development of student writing abilities in eighth grade.

In the spoken word poetry unit, students must write at least one spoken word poem, perform that poem, and then analyze the poem in an essay that explains choices made by the student when writing the poem. These assignments are a culmination of the academic year's learning about writing and the writing process. Students are required to use their understanding of language, text structure, voice, fluency, conventions, and other writing skills in order to accomplish these tasks. Quite a few of the Common Core State Standards are relevant here as well, particularly those that have to do with revision, audience, the use of technology and the use of voice.

For this year's unit, I added another layer having recognized how my students learn to use language and express themselves in writing and performance through nuance, figurative language, cliché, and other language uses particular to English or whichever language is used to write the original piece. The last of the standards that relate to this unit deal with aspects of linguistics and require the students to reflect on word choice and subtleties in language.

Following conversations with Amy Nocton, a high school world language teacher, we decided to see if those nuances and poetic meanings could translate to Spanish. When she asked students to participate, I did the same. I sent home permission slips so that my eighth grade students could collaborate with the high school students, and many students were interested and received permission from their parents or guardians. Once my students realized that there would be high school students reading their poems in



order to translate them, they put intense effort into their drafts, revision, and editing. Upon completion of the poems, I shared three poems with Ms. Nocton so that her students could begin translating them. In future years, we'd like to continue this collaboration in order to facilitate language learning especially concerning nuance and poetic meanings. The unit benefitted both sets of students, encouraging the eighth grade students to carefully consider the words used in their poetry, especially for English figures of speech and uses of rhyme since those could change when translated to Spanish. We look forward to increasing improvement in the translation skills and language acquisition for Spanish students as well.

Process for Amy Nocton's work with Early College Experience/Advanced Placement High School Spanish classroom and Beverley Fisher's Advanced Placement Art students

As a language teacher, I am always looking for new ways to encourage my students to stretch their imagination and to apply their skills in new ways. This practice requires me to be aware of developing pedagogies and recent research. In March 2015, I attended a conference on First Year Writing Programs at the University of Connecticut where I was fortunate to present at a workshop with a graduate student, Ruth Zenaida Yuste Alonso, whose presentation, "Translating Images: Fostering Writing in the Foreign Language Classroom through Image Analysis," provided the initial inspiration for collaborating with both Rochelle Marcus of Mansfield Middle School and Beverley Fisher of RHAM High School.

Ms. Yuste Alonso outlined how she had been applying techniques learned from Professor Jorge Vega to foster communication in the language classroom. Ms. Yuste Alonso shared how she uses image analysis to create a safe environment where language students learned to describe what they were seeing in paintings or photos in increasingly complex ways as they learned a new language. Students would self-select images that appealed to them and, over the course of the semester, would move from relating the most obvious elements of the image: color, shapes, content, to more sophisticated thoughts about what was happening in the image and imagining why. The role of the instructors was to delve even deeper as the students' levels of language acquisition improved and to ask the students to make inferences and conjectures about what may have happened prior to and after the image was captured.

While I had worked with images in my classroom prior to this presentation, I had never thought about having students do anything more than recount what they were seeing in the images in a superficial way; though I had had my upper-level Spanish students do gothic readings of images (after a unit on Romanticism), I hadn't thought to push lower level students to imagine the deeper meanings of the images we examined. My upper-level students relished the challenge of interpreting photos in sophisticated ways and were equally delighted to post their musings to our class blog, which made me think that it would be exciting to collaborate with one of the art teachers at our school.

Beverly Fisher is a creative, exceptional art teacher who challenges her students to produce outstanding art. She is also a reflective teacher who values collaboration and connecting art to other subject areas. Of equal importance, Ms. Fisher studies Italian in her free time. Thus, she appreciates the difficulties we all encounter when operating in another language and how intimidating it can be for a novice language learner to feel comfortable speaking a new language.

I approached Ms. Fisher about creating artwork to accompany some of the writing that my students had been doing for our blog *Perdidos en sus pensamientos* or *Lost in your, his, her, their thoughts* (<https://theunnamedspanishblog.wordpress.com/>). I began blogging with my students in the spring of 2013, but the blog didn't really take off until the academic year 2014-2015. While many language teachers in the United States discourage students from translating their work, especially from a student's native language into the non-native language, I am discovering that students working in the reverse are becoming more metacognitive about their own language learning processes and are embracing how slippery the art of translation, in any form, is. Knowing this, I felt that it could be really exciting to have art students then translate words into art. Furthermore, I decided to contact a talented middle school, eighth grade English Language Arts teacher to collaborate, too. I had been casually chatting with a friend, Rochelle Marcus, from Mansfield Middle School, the school my son attends, and was very impressed with the work she was doing with her students and spoken word poetry.

Ms. Marcus was quick to embrace the project. The poems we received from her students were excellent, and my students puzzled over them together to best translate the eighth graders' work. I asked my students to reflect on the process and here are some of their comments:



“Translating helps my overall comprehension. My family is friends with a pilot who flies to many different countries and speaks Spanish, and he told me the key to his success in school was that he translated Spanish to English while everyone else focused on translating English to Spanish. [While working with the poems], I liked working with the more informal language, and translating other people’s work and using the blog helped me to understand the similarities and differences between Spanish and English better.” [1]

“Through working on my writing this year, I have surprised myself. Although my Spanish is nowhere near perfect, I have gained confidence. It is the best feeling when you can translate something (using just your brain) from one language to the other. Sometimes, however, I feel as if some things get lost in translation (no pun intended). English and Spanish don’t line up exactly. This gets frustrating sometimes. So, I’ve been altering my sentences slightly to try and revamp the sentences (I add words, change words, etc.). I feel like I’ve learned more about Spanish through translating. I have also learned more about my writing style in general as well, and working with the poetry reinforced this.” [2]

“The experience of translating has been very interesting. The biggest hassle has been trying to make what I say sound as pretty in the language I translate it to. Usually I start in Spanish and then translate to English and then the English looks rough and crude in comparison. When I start in English and go to Spanish, I have a hard time trying to get the same feel out of it. That is the biggest lesson I have learned—that it is not the individual words which make up a piece, but the feeling of it. Translating the same poem into different languages speaks to the universality of human emotion. The same hurt can be understood and sympathized with in any language.” [3]

“Translating gives us the opportunity to look at the words [written] and truly evaluate what is trying to be said. I think that is cool because it gives the ability to look at words from different perspectives. Certain words have certain connotations so when translating the poems the feelings of some of the original words don’t always transfer. Translating the poems gave us the opportunity to look into the feelings of the words and gave me a greater appreciation for words themselves.” [4]

“I enjoyed translating the poems because poems give so much creative freedom and I liked being able to see how well we could capture a middle scholar’s voice in another language, especially since they used slang and modern English while we have been working on modernizing the more traditional Spanish we have learned thus far.” [5]

“It can be hard to directly translate a phrase from Spanish to English or English to Spanish. When translating my work from Spanish to English, I usually find it sounds more sophisticated in Spanish than in English. Translating the poems let me use all of the grammar and vocabulary that I have learned the past five years and also let me learn more about the language and how to write poems in Spanish.” [6]

“Expressing myself has become better with translating. Writing in Spanish has given me another perspective to take on my writing. It shows a difference between English and Spanish and I love that there is a difference. It is unique and colourful to be able to use two languages for different tones and perspectives and I loved seeing this in the poems we translated.” [7]

Once the students had painstakingly translated the poetry into Spanish, they were required to voice record the poems. This endeavour proved to be more nerve-wracking for the students. Students rehearsed the poems numerous times prior to producing something they felt comfortable posting to the blog. The final step will be to have the art students interpret the poems in a visual art form this upcoming fall and post the work to the blog.

After the poems are translated into visual art forms, I decided that I would have the incoming class look at the artwork and match it to the poems as an introductory exercise for one of the year’s culminating projects. I am excited to see how this work plays out in the long run.

Finally, one of the discoveries my students and I made through this project of melding spoken word poetry, translation and the plastic arts, is how much their writing improved over the course of the year as they engaged in the writing process, translation, and reflection. Students kept portfolios and reviewed their work in the spring. All of them proudly reported that the number of grammatical and structural writing “errors” (for lack of a better term) diminished significantly over the course of the year, and most, if not all, felt that it was because they were granted so much freedom to express themselves, create, translate, and revise their work which is why they felt emboldened and empowered to carefully translate someone else’s work into a language that is not their mother tongue, and then let the combined efforts of spoken word, written word and visual art to be published for others to see and celebrate.



Reference

- [1] Matt Cryer
- [2] Karly Mulligan
- [3] Shannon Moquin
- [4] May Sciano
- [5] Samantha Marinelli
- [6] Nicole Parenchuck
- [7] Delaney Rhoades