

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

Writing and Family Stories of Migration among Allophone Students :

“My languages”, An educational video

Françoise Armand et Élodie Combes

Student/researcher exchange

Researcher: Can you write in Russian ?

Boy: Yes.

Boy: Priviet.

Researcher: Priviet? That's in Russian?

Boy: Yes.

Researcher: What did you say to me?

Boy: Hello.

Researcher: Hello.

Action Research Project

As part of the Concerted Action research program on writing (MELS – FQRSC)

Writing and Family Stories of Migration among Allophone Students

Guergana(teacher): We started with the idea of writing a book, so seeing ourselves as writers.

Researchers: Michèle Vatz-Laaroussi, Université de Sherbrooke

Françoise Armand, Université de Montréal

Lilyane Rachédi, Université du Québec à Montréal

Marilyn Steinbach, Université de Sherbrooke

Angela Stoïca, teacher/researcher, CSPI

Magninin Koné, coordination assistant, Sherbrooke

Élodie Combes, research assistant, Montreal

Guergana: To get started, hello my dear friends, hello dear parents, hello dear guests. We have come together today to highlight an extraordinary work that my students accomplished as part of a research project on Writing and Family Stories.

February to June 2012

Montreal—Elementary School Welcoming Class

Guergana Boyadjieva, Welcoming class teacher,

Montreal School Board

Françoise Armand, Professor, Université de Montréal

Élodie Combes, research assistant, Montreal

Françoise Armand: The project that we are going to present to you is about writing and family stories (or one's family history), and more specifically on one of the workshops titled "My Languages", which was carried out in an elementary school Welcoming class. This participatory action research was born out of the interest in Quebec to foster the integration of recently arrived immigrant students and to support their learning of French as a second language. Learning a second language is a complex process that requires time, notably in the area of writing. How can we encourage this learning of writing in a second language? A number of researchers have highlighted the importance of incorporating what we call 'meaningful contexts'. In other words, these are contexts that value the authentic dimension of what writing is about, so where we talk about things that are near to the heart and address ourselves to real audiences.

Meaningful Contexts

As part of the action research project, we therefore made the choice to ask the students to recount their family histories, and we have brought their stories together in a book that has been launched.

Guergana Boyadjieva (Welcoming class teacher): I realized over the course of the project, just how important it is to write about topics that are meaningful for the students, as a means of motivating them to write more in their second language, in French. Throughout this project, my students transformed into writers and they wrote their first book, the book on their family, on their life, their history.

Françoise Armand: Each student illustrated the cover of their own book, with collaboration from the Art teacher, and relating to seven themes explored during the study: Who am I ?; My family; My countries; My languages; My journey; My family treasure; and a topic of choice.

During the different workshops, the students had the opportunity to express themselves both orally and in written form, in their mother language as well. This involves recalling that the mother language is a rich resource on which the students may draw to build their new knowledge. Constructivist models of language learning underscore the importance of what is already there, to prior forms of knowledge, on which the learner leans as they build new knowledge, without denying them cognitively. To prohibit the mother tongue from school, implicitly or explicitly, denies the children the ability to make linkages between their already-existing knowledge and learning of the second language.

Élodie Combes, Université de Montréal

Taking stock of one's pluri-linguistic repertoire was one of the themes addressed during the writing project, which was the topic "My languages."

April 2012

Topic: My Languages

Guergana Boyadjiéva, Welcoming class teacher

Élodie Combes, facilitator

Julie Rajotte, research assistant

Élodie Combes: When we write our family history, languages have a special place. During the three workshops dedicated to the topic "My languages," the students told their linguistic autobiography. In other words, they explained what were the languages that they knew, the languages in their surroundings and in their lives, basically all the languages that formed part of their identity.

(3:59)

My Languages Topic Workshops

Workshop 1: Draw a cartoon

Workshop 2: Write your linguistic autobiography

Workshop 3: Share your written product orally

Élodie Combes: With the first My Languages workshop, the students became familiar with the notions and vocabulary needed in order to speak about the languages that they know. They defined, together with the facilitator, notions of mother-language, second language, language of origin.

Facilitator: What is a mother-language?

Student (boy): It's the language we began to speak.

Student (girl): What we speak at home.

Facilitator: What we speak at home...

Student (boy): In our country.

Facilitator: Second language, what does that mean?

Student (boy): The second language.

Facilitator: The second language.

Student (girl): It's the second language that we learn, that we didn't know before.

Facilitator: That is a nice definition... Moldavian is the language that you learned at school, right? Ok, that's it, often we learn the second language at school.

(5:03)

Élodie Combes: Next, the facilitator invited them to create a sort of cartoon, in which the students are each their own main characters. They were asked to draw themselves in different contexts. At home and at school, in their home country. At home and at school, in Quebec.

My languages: [written] *at home in my home country / in school in my home country*

Élodie Combes: With each drawing, they portray themselves trying to speak with those around them, and they had to write some words in text bubbles, in whichever language(s) they would employ in those contexts.

Facilitator [in class] : Manuel at home in his home country

So, how it worked to carry out the activity, the facilitator would themselves produce a cartoon on the chalkboard, drawing on the autobiography of Manuel, so here we took inspiration from the activity Elodil (www.elodil.com), a linguistic autobiography of a Montreal Spanish-speaker.

With the second meeting for the My Languages workshop, the students started to write their linguistic autobiographies. Before jumping into the writing, we once again read a linguistic autobiography, of Brijita, which is found on the Elodil website. In order to plan the writing of the linguistic autobiography, we proposed to the students a planning outline. On this outline, there were three spaces where they could note down keywords related to each language. So, what is the name of that language? Where do I speak it? Where did I learn it? With whom do I speak it? How do I feel when I speak that language? How do I feel when I write in that language? There was a space for each language.

For those students who most needed support during writing, there were also sentence structures available, sentence starters. For instance: *When I write in this language, I feel...* Keeping a perspective of differentiation, some students who were at the very start of their learning to write needed for the teacher to sit next to them and listen to them, and the teacher would transcribe what the student would say, who would then be able to copy what they said into their text in order to feel as though they too would have their own book.

Right after this second workshop, in which they wrote their linguistic autobiographies, the students reviewed their texts with the help of the teacher, then they participated in the third workshop. This third workshop focused on reading their texts, to share their text with their friends, but also with parents who were invited by the teacher.

Student [Andrei]: I am nine years old and come from Moldavia. Today, I would like to read my text “My Languages”. My mother languages are Moldavian and Romanian. My second language is English (...) I feel good when I speak Romanian because I grew up with it and I feel very tired when I speak French.

[clapping].

Student [Leila, 9 years old]: I speak three languages that I like, I know English, French, but above all Arabic, which is my mother language. I learned the alphabet in daycare.

Natalia, Antonina’s mother: My mother language is Russian. As I live in Ukraine, where we learn how to speak Ukrainian in daycare and in school, and when we decided to move to Quebec, of course I started to learn French.

(8:21)

Françoise Armand: Over the course of the project, we were able to observe the different dimensions of impact of this intervention, relating to learning to write, and more broadly with regards to integration of Allophone students into Quebec schools. These different dimensions observed were

1. Becoming engaged with writing

2. Opening up to linguistic diversity

3. Becoming aware of one’s linguistic and familial background

4. Function in the transfer between languages and develop meta-linguistic skills

5. Value and learn the common French language

Therefore, one of the key contributions of this study is fundamentally the fact that the students are more engaged in tasks of writing production. They have become aware of the writing process, for memories, for keeping a record. I write to share, with my peers, my teacher, my family. I write also to be connected to my emotions and to express myself. The family history is also an emotional place, that we can take advantage of at school in a positive and warming way. This engagement with a writing task is also important because of the realization of an emphasis on what is a written product. We saw children who were very serious about the writing assignment, who would take advantage of reference tools, who were more attentive to reviewing their text. This engagement is translated by a big investment in the task itself.

We also observed their pride. The reality of having a real audience, in a meaningful context, made them proud. *We write because we want to be read*, which is very different from *We write in order to complete a school assignment*.

Élodie Combes: When the teacher opens the door of their class to the mother languages of their students, the students become more curious, they are interested in understanding, to learn about the languages of their friends, and they are also more aware of the linguistic diversity surrounding them.

As facilitator: Mom and Dad both speak Spanish, together. So that means that they also speak...

Student (boy): Spanish....

Students all together: Hola! Como esta! Hola !

Student (girl): [as teacher writes this on chalkboard] But why are you putting an “i”?

Facilitator: It’s not an “I”. [as teacher mark a point and a vertical line above it, like this] What is this?

Student (boy): It’s an exclamation point...

Facilitator: It’s an exclamation point ?

Student (girl): We put it both in front of and after the word when we exclaim something. At the beginning.

Françoise Armand: The students had the opportunity, as we’ve indicated, to use their mother languages, which allowed us to observe that it let them share knowledge and abilities that they already had, which made them feel more competent and more recognized in an expertise acquired before attending Quebec schooling. This fostered their engagement, once again, with regards to the writing assignment.

Teacher: But how do you say it? Tell it to me in Arabic...

Student: [*speaking in Arabic*] In my home, I speak in Arabic.

Teacher: Can you repeat that?

Student: [*speaking in Arabic*] In my home, I speak in Arabic.

Teacher: Ah, so you say that to...

Student [Lotfi, 9 years old]: To my mom.

Teacher: And how does she respond to you? What does she say to you? Does she ask you how it went at school?

Student [Lotfi, 9 years old]: Yes.

Teacher: That you worked hard at school? Does she ask you in French or in Arabic?

Student [Lotfi, 9 years old]: In French and sometimes in Arabic.

Teacher: So can you draw your mom answering you? Ok, go ahead, with a text bubble, and you write in French when she speaks to you in French, but when she speaks to you in Arabic, try to write in Arabic. But we will put you in a team with someone who speaks Arabic, to help you write that in Arabic, ok?

(12:04)

Françoise Armand: By legitimizing the mother language in the engagement of Allophone students, gives them permission to go back and forth between their languages, to compare them, to analyze them, to become aware of similarities and differences. In this way, they develop meta-linguistic skills, an ability to observe language, and this is a very previous resource on which the teacher will be able to draw.

Facilitator: What is the difference between your country and Quebec?

Student [Paul, 9 years old]: When we say something, it is the same thing, but when we write, it is not the same thing.

Facilitator: What is different?

Student [Paul, 9 years old]: “Banane” in Russian is also “banane”, but we don’t write it that way.

Facilitator: Oh, they aren’t the same letters?

Student [Paul, 9 years old]: Yes.

Facilitator: What have you written there in those first text bubbles?

Student [Manuel, 8 years old]: I wrote, I asked Dad: “What is the biggest country?”

Facilitator [clarifying]: What is the biggest country?

Student [Manuel, 8 years old]: No... The biggest planet ?

Facilitator: And what does he respond?

Student [Manuel, 8 years old]: I don't know how to say it in French.

Facilitator: You can say it in your language.

Student [Manuel, 8 years old, in Spanish]: Jupiter .

Facilitator: Oh ! It is a "true friend" : you say it the same way in French, "Jupiter".

Student [Manuel, 8 years old, repeating in French]: Jupiter.

Facilitator: And there you write in which language?

Student [Manuel, 8 years old]: Spanish.

Facilitator: Can you read in Spanish?

Student [Manuel, 8 years old]: Yes. [Reading in Spanish] Hello Dad, what is the biggest planet? –The Biggest planet is Jupiter.

Élodie Combes: In a project such as this, in which the teacher opens up to the personal stories of the students, we should mention that the stories are reconstructed during the project itself, and that history is also embedded in the present and the future. In this context, it's an opportunity for the student to develop a feeling of belonging within their Quebec school. The students become aware of the complexity of their pluri-linguistic abilities, the wealth of these abilities, in which French (their schooling language, the language for communicating in public spaces in Quebec) fully has its place.

Student [reading his text]: I learned French in school. I like to speak in French and in Arabic. My favourite language is French.

June 2012, Book Launch

Students volunteer to orally share excerpts from their books. Among those invited are several mothers of students who read what they wrote as part of the project.

(14:32)

Guergana Boyadjieva: Congratulations. I would like to thank you very much for your work. You are truly extraordinary. We will introduce to everyone what you have done. I think we deserve a big round of applause for the work accomplished.

Student [boy]: It's my family book.

Facilitator: It's your book, but who has wrote this book?

Student [boy]: It's me, of course!

Student [girl, Katerina, 10 years old]: I present to you my book. [applause] This is Chapter 4, My Languages. [Reading in Russian] I know three languages: Russian, Tartar ("tatarski"), and French. When my cousins ask me to say words in French in our village, I tell them: [Reading in French] "How are you?". That's all.

Antonina's Mother: She has expanded more her language, because before she expressed herself briefly, in a very simple way, she looked for simple words, the sentences were very short. She wanted to speak better and to say more, so she would go to the dictionary to look up the specific words.

In conclusion, this process of writing one's family history in a Welcoming class gives meaning to writing and to school lessons for recently arrived immigrant Allophone students, and more broadly it fosters the successful integration of these students in Quebec schools.

Becoming engaged with writing

Opening up to linguistic diversity

Becoming aware of one's linguistic and familial background

Functioning in the transfer between languages and developing meta-linguistic skills

Valuing and learning the common French language

Fin (French). Fine (Italian). The End.

Pseudonyms were used in order to protect the anonymity of participants in this project.

The production of this educational video was made possible thanks to financial support from the Ministry of Education, Leisure and Sport

And the Quebec Research Fund for Society and Culture, Concerted Action – Research on Writing Program (2010-2013)

As well as the Director of Cultural Community Services (MELS)

Educational Video Production:

Direction: Élodie Combes, Françoise Armand

Production: Françoise Armand, Élodie Combes

Camera: Joëlle Rouleau

Sound recording: Julie Rajotte

Image & sound editing, mixing: Joëlle Rouleau

Research assistant: Julie Rajotte

Production: Françoise Armand, Michèle Vatz-Laaroussi

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Action Research Project: Writing and Family Stories of Migration among Allophone Students

An action research project on promoting written skills among recently arrived immigrant and refugee Allophone students in primary and secondary schools in Quebec (Canada).

Michèle Vatz-Laaroussi, Université de Sherbrooke

Françoise Armand, Université de Montréal

Lilyane Rachédi, Université du Québec à Montréal

Marilyn Steinbach, Université de Sherbrooke

Angela Stoïca, teacher/researcher, CSPI (Pointe-de-l'Île School Board)

Magninin Koné, coordination assistant, Sherbrooke

Élodie Combes, research assistant, Montreal

Acknowledgements: Thank you very much to Julianne Pidduck for lending equipment, making it possible to put together this educational video.

A big thank you goes to Guergana Boyadjieva, Welcoming class teacher who carried out this project in her class.

We would also like to thank the administration of the Louis-Dupire School (Montreal School Board), the Art teachers and language support teachers, as well as the school's teaching council.

Finally, this educational video would not have been possible without the participation, engagement and enthusiasm of the students and their families. We would like to thank them all very warmly for their involvement.