

Teaching Note

Engagement, Literacy Skills, and ESL Immigrant College Students

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Introduction

Most teachers believe in the maxim that students who are engaged will learn. This article presents an engaging immigrant-based lesson that I created and used to teach a combined reading and writing course in the spring 2019 semester at a community college in the United States. My students' proficiencies in reading and writing English are at the low-intermediate level.

The goal of the course is to improve the 14 students' reading and writing proficiencies in English and their critical thinking skills. The lesson includes the use of four poster boards with engaging questions about the lesson. Teachers should include in their preparation time for this 55-minute lesson the time needed to create the posters and put them on the four corners of the classroom. An alternative for this lesson is for the teacher during the class session preceding the lesson to ask students to form groups to think of possible questions for each poster board.

Background Schema

The immigration theme enabled students to use their background schema to understand the concepts of immigration, departure, loss and hope. They brought to the lesson an understanding of what it means to immigrate to the United States. The students understood the motivations pushing immigrants to immigrate and the challenges inherent in the difficult process of immigration.

The Course Textbook

This curriculum was based on Liliana Velásquez's book *Dreams and Nightmares: I Fled Alone to the United States When I was Fourteen* (2017), an account of Liliana Velásquez's immigration to the United States from Guatemala. Liliana Velásquez fled violence by her mother and in her town to find a new life in the United States. This engaging book made the students reflect on their own journeys to the United States.

Here is an activity used to deepen students' understanding of the textbook and their abilities to think critically about the immigration-related topics raised in it.

“Four Corners” American Dream Activity

The communicative activity “Four Corners” provided an opportunity for the students to discuss their thoughts about the concept of the American Dream as it relates to immigration. Students discussed four thought-provoking questions to promote their ability to think and write critically about the American Dream. A question was posted on poster board in each corner of the classroom. The students discussed each question for 15 minutes in groups before a volunteer student said “Change!”. Then, each group rotated to the next corner to discuss the next posted question. The entire class continued this rotation until every group had discussed each of the four questions.

The students were engaged throughout the Four Corners activity as evidenced by their high participation levels. Their engagement continued to the subsequent activity when each group shared with the class its answers to the four questions. (Thanks to Leslie Kirshner-Morris for introducing me to the Four Corners activity.)

Table 2 provides the four engaging questions used in the activity:

Corners	Questions
1	What does the term “American Dream” mean to you?
2	What is your American Dream?
3	Who are people who have achieved the American Dream?
4	What will you do to make your American Dream come true?

Table 2: “Four Corners” American Dream Questions

Conclusion

Engagement is the first step to improving ESL college students’ abilities to read and write in English. Immigrant-based lessons engage ESL immigrant college students because of their life experiences, identity and cultural awareness. The Four Corners activity promotes ESL immigrant college students’ abilities to think critically and discuss in English their thoughts about immigration. The use of an exciting book that centers on an immigrant’s experiences traveling to the United States engages students in the lesson. The combined use of these activities was effective in promoting my students’ engagement in their ESL Reading/Writing class.

References

Velásquez, L. (2017). *Dreams and nightmares: I fled alone to the United States when I*

was fourteen. Anderson, South Carolina: Parlor Press.

Author

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