

Sample Syllabus 2004

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Rationale:

Bilingualism with a Global Perspective

This course is designed to introduce student to the diverse range of linguistic and cultural experiences that we find in today's rapidly changing global environment. It represents a shift in thinking from traditional models of bilingualism and bilingual education, since we find that with dramatic increases in both urbanization and transnational immigration, a growing number of people are not only bilingual, but must speak several different languages in order to work, survive and raise their families in a world of increasing cultural complexity.

My approach combines both theoretical and practical issues in the study of multilingualism, bilingualism and and bilingual education. That is, provide students with a solid background in theories of language acquisition and change, including classic approaches and more recent developments in sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics. But the theoretical material is integrated into a historical overview. We trace the phenomena of bilingualism and multilingualism as they merge in various societies around the world, concentrating on the modern era – roughly, 1,500 to the present. By providing a linguistic map of the world, I try to challenge the notion that bilingualism is an isolated phenomenon. Students begin to understand that it is the norm in many places.

We also look at the role of immigration particularly “new immigration” (1980 to the present) as it affects language acquisition. Throughout, we look how language reflects broader issues of power and inequality, particularly in discussing the relationship between majority and minority languages in a given society.

But what makes my course especially unique is that I ask students to draw upon their own personal and familiar experiences surrounding language and language acquisition. I do this for several reasons. One is that I feel an experiential approach allows students a more profound understanding of theoretical and historical concepts. But I also do this because, given the cultural and linguistic diversity of the student body attending and enrolled in this class is so diverse. My students have a wealth of insight to offer each other. Most of my students are immigrants or the children of immigrants. Most are bilingual or multilingual, and have rich – if sometimes painful – personal experiences with language education and acquisition. Because my students come from such diverse range of backgrounds – East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian, Eastern European, African, and Central & South American – I structure classroom discussions, field trips and written assignments to take advantage of this unique learning opportunity. I ask students to write family language stories and autobiographical essays. By articulating their personal experiences, they are able to more fully grasp some of the abstract concepts in the readings. Conversely, sometimes the ideas presented in readings give students useful insights into their own experience.

Within the broad scope of the course, we concentrate on linguistic diversity in the contemporary urban environment. So the class is in some sense an exploration in urban cultural studies. I try to give students firsthand exposure to different language and cultural communities, so we visit ethnic neighborhoods and attend cultural events (such as concerts or performances) conducted in languages other than English. I have also found the use of media, particularly film, to be uniquely effective teaching tool. The languages of film and TV are able to bridge many cultural differences; all of my students, regardless of their ethnic background, find film and TV very appealing. I use excerpts of films, particularly independent productions that deal with issues of immigration, bilingualism, language acquisition, and cross-cultural experiences and so on.

Sometimes by showing a film, the theory explains itself through the images and narratives. We look at the experiences of immigrants not only in the U.S., but also in many European countries.

One of my goals is to create the possibilities for cross-cultural exchange and learning. Students not only reflect upon their own background, but they begin to understand other people's experiences. This does not come about automatically, however, but calls upon my pedagogical skills. I also use my own experiences as an immigrant and multilingual person. Based on their autobiographical and family history writing, once students understand their own individual experiences, they can expand outward from that base. They realize that there are many similarities between themselves and students from other backgrounds – that in fact, there are more similarities than differences. They develop a sense of solidarity with each other, and a respect for other languages and cultures.

However, I should make clear that my approach in no way undermines the importance of learning the majority language of any given society. We talk about the idea of additive bilingualism, which promotes the idea of learning a new language, while maintaining the native language. The acquisition of a second language or third language does not subtract from an immigrant's linguistic repertoire, but enriches it.

Teaching and learning are part of the same process. This course has evolved through my experiences at different universities; my own thinking and pedagogy have been constantly enriched by my students' ideas, and life stories, which are the stories of many groups of peoples around the world. In this way, my course also serves to document these narratives, which might otherwise go unrecorded.

Required Text

Grosjean Francis, *Life with Two Languages: An Introduction to Bilingualism*. Harvard University Press (1989).

Further information by request