



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
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## **Becoming a "Gringo": Immigrants, Language Learning and Acculturation**

Curriculum Unit 98.05.09  
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### **Introduction**

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My continued interest and development as an individual and an immigrant have always focused on the experience of the immigrant and language learning. This curriculum will refer in particular to the experience of Spanish speaking immigrants and in a broader sense to other individuals who migrated to the New World.

The word "Gringo" is well known in all Latin America. It refers to United States citizens, or as they would be called in this country Yankees. Immigrants who have lived in the United States for long periods of time are referred to as Gringos when they return to their native Latin American country. This unit aims at reviewing what is the experience of language learning and acculturation in the United States of America.

Because of my interest in writing, both poetry and essays, the ability to express your thoughts and ideas seems of great importance. Actually, it is a life long pursuit. Recognizing the importance that language and culture play in the development of every individual it is language as the first mode of communication that molds us.

At the present time I teach a high school course titled Latin America, Art and Culture. It is important that students recognize their heritage be it Latino or Hispanic, Afro-American or any other. These students are part of a high school for the arts, which is encouraging them to become the artists of the future. Thus developing their ability to communicate in many different mediums is of primary importance.

In this classroom curriculum I intend to help students understand the development of language. This will include learning language development as children, the language development of others, working towards recognizing how a "voice" is created in the process of becoming a writer. To develop artistic abilities in any form, it is important to encourage these young minds to get in touch with many aspects of their personalities.

Because of my own background, and because a good number of my students are Puerto Rican or Latinos, I will emphasize the development of language of three writers who had Spanish as their primary language. We will explore what are the authors' circumstances in learning English, and their development as writers in the American (U.S.) literary world. These artists their images and stories will communicate what they experienced, and how they used it as an artist in their writing. To recollect their past, their joys and sorrows, but most of all

to know where they came from.

## FIRST SECTION

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The first exercise in this curriculum plan will be an inquiry for students in learning a second language or their personal experience when exposed to a second language, and its impact on their life. All students will have to answer the questionnaire as homework.

Discussion will be carried out in class after questionnaires have been completed on each one of the questions.

### QUESTIONNAIRE -

#### Your Personal Experience with a Second Language

Each student will answer each question. Be prepared to share and discuss in class.

1. Do you speak another language other than English? Write something about it, whether you do or don't. (Have you thought or wanted to learn a second language).
2. Your Parents or Grandparents do they or did they speak a second language at home? How do you feel about it?
3. Have you ever been in a gathering or situation where everyone else spoke a different language than your own? What were your feelings and reactions? Please explain as much as you can.
4. Have you had to be a translator for someone? What were some of your thoughts, fears or reactions? (For example, when traveling, at a friend's house, etc.)
5. Did you have to have someone translated for you? How did you feel? (Insecure? Suspicious? Happy?)

## Historical Perspective

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Even the very first immigrants to settle this continent must have had to learn at least the basics of the languages spoken by the natives of the land. The process beginning with Christopher Columbus on his arrival was one of trying to communicate with the natives he found. In his original writings he spoke of their kindness upon his arrival and how they communicated through signals and gestures. Thus began a long historical process for the newly arrived in a strange land to impose their new language upon the conquered people. It stands to reason that they needed to have learned at least some basics of the language spoken in order for them to succeed. They needed to communicate, in order to understand their dealings and colonize their subjects. Often history tells us about natives who were "the translators" guides or collaborators. These individuals were key in the success or failure of many a trip, or a colonizer.

One of the most famous examples of this type of situation is the part played by "La Malinche" (or Dona Marina as she was called by Cortes and his army) in the conquest of Mexico and the Aztecs. It is very interesting that

her story has become a very negative major story of a "Translator". Obviously, an extremely intelligent woman, who history tells us spoke more than one of the native languages in Mexico, she very quickly learns, Spanish the language of the newly arrived gods to the land. She becomes a major player in these historical events. Her language skills must have been exceptional. It would seem she was trying to help communication between two strong forces. She has been disgraced and blamed for the fall of the Aztec Empire.

## SECOND SECTION

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This exercise will be an inquiry by students in the learning of language and its impact. Students will read about "La Malinche-Translator," and her role during the conquest of Mexico. The students shall explore what reasons she might have had for carrying out her mission, stressing her language abilities as the central point

### *ASSIGNMENT*

Read the story about the translator "La Malinche" during the conquest of Mexico. Write an essay of one hundred and fifty words about the following:

1. Why would you have taken on the responsibility to translate for the conquistadors?
2. What would you have done?
3. Can you try to imagine and describe what her life was like at that point in time?

## Modern Language Practices In the United States

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For newly arrived immigrants no matter from what distant lands there has always been the issue of language learning when arriving at their new destination and future home.

Thus the stage is set for what are the practices that have developed in the New World and in more recent history of language acquisition, acculturation and its importance and impact on society in the United States.

Historically, if we are to look at the immigrants who have come, one of the requirements for acculturation upon arrival was taking the native language and setting it aside. You ate it, or buried it if you wanted to really be accepted as a new American or Gringo.

The very first who experienced this trauma were the African slaves. They were captured and brought over to the new continent. Because of their circumstances, slaves were even forbidden to speak to one another, and they must have had great difficulty in communicating with their captors. Their lives were totally cut-off from their culture and language. We shall review the historical account of the Amistad, right here in New Haven and the issues of language that existed in relationship to it. In this process it will be important to recognize the language and cultural experiences of the African in their migration experience under the worst of conditions.

We will review the Afro-American experience in the Caribbean and Brazil. How their culture and "voice" has come down and became part of the life and language today. In some ways similar, in that they were brought

over as slaves, but they have had a very different and important influence in the cultures of these countries.

It is important to look at other cultures that immigrated in large numbers to the United States and review their experiences.

The Irish that had a very large migration to the United States in the mid-eighteen hundreds spoke English with a very special and peculiar accent, (although in Ireland they have their own language, which they have maintained in spite of English colonization). Nevertheless, part of their acculturation in the New World was losing their Irish accent, because they were made to believe they could not be understood, even though they were speaking English.

On the other hand, the next heavy migration was Italian. The children of these new families especially, were clearly the targets of this unspoken policy by schools, teachers and society. They were made to feel that once you were on this new ground; another language had no place in the life of their group of immigrants, where children were trying to become accepted. In addition, punishment was used to discourage any practice, even under the most necessary conditions, i.e. translating for parents. It is a sad and long history of isolation for the individual.

Today among second or third generation Italians there is a real sense of loss because they did not keep Italian as part of their growing up experience. Many acknowledge the loss they feel at not having been able to communicate with their grandparents, losing part of their history and heritage.

The Chinese were also a large group of immigrants. They maintained their language in a very private and intimate way. Their tradition I believe helped them to keep it that way. They created strong private enclaves, where they maintained those traditions that were of great importance to them. Of course, their experience was very different from those of African descent; they were not brought over as slaves, but practically as indentured workers for the heavy work of the railroads. The possibilities for independence were different, and indeed it took years to be able to do it, but it was the goal for most of those who came over. Thus those who were able to be independent created their own communities, maintained their language and culture.

There was a segment of Spanish speaking people that were here in the United States, in the Southwest especially long before it was populated by pioneers going west. They have maintained in spite of great difficulty and oppression their mother tongue as part of their acculturation process. Until quite recently, the cultural experience has been one of strong resistance to forget or "bury" their language heritage. They have carried this historical perspective by also insisting that their children maintain Spanish, and thus have a bilingual existence. In fact, there are Spanish speaking people in New Mexico who still speak a language that goes back to the colonial era.

It has been a challenging phenomenon for the United States culture and education system. Latinos have been the lonely voice in this great melting pot. To insist that acculturation was possible without losing your first language. A strong influence in encouraging a culture that is much more accepting of bilinguals has been the insistence in speaking Spanish, back to the colonial area in the Southwest in States like California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, in addition to the migration from Latin-America in the last forty years.

That a bilingual individual is not less of a person, but in fact, that an individual is richer for having a second language and the ability to communicate with much larger audiences, needs to be recognized in United States culture today. There are many things to be gained, like not losing the closeness of family, the cultural experience of understanding music and writings in not one but two languages.

The math theory that two is more than one somehow has been lost in the language/cultural debate!

## **THIRD SECTION**

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This segment of the curriculum will include the Afro-American experience in relation to language. There will be a review on how the African culture and "voice" has influenced Latin America.

The class will visit the Amistad monument on the New Haven Green, next to City Hall. The story will be reviewed. In addition, we will see a documentary done here in New Haven, prior to the film that was done in 1997.

The new section of this unit will be on Haiti, a Latin American country. We will review and study its development with a heavy emphasis on the culture of the African slave. A review of Haitian music and art will be presented.

The class will also be introduced to Brazil, and the importance of African rhythms introduced by the African slaves, and included up to today in the music of today. In addition, we will review other African influences in the life and culture of Brazil.

## **FOURTH SECTION**

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This segment of the curriculum will include becoming familiar with maps, both the United States as well as the countries in what is called Latin America.

A. The class will be studying the Spanish-speaking people in the areas of the United States before the pioneers (immigrants) moved west, or the war with Mexico.

B. Review of modern day geographical areas and states where there are large segments of Hispanic population with special emphasis on issues of bilingual education, migration, and citizenship.

C. A review of immigration from different Latin American groups to the United States. With special emphasis on the impact of Spanish as a language in United States culture.

## **Development of Latino Literature**

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During the sixties and seventies in the United States it was almost impossible to find a Latin-American section in a bookstore. You could only find a few of the best Latin-American authors in college bookstores. This was due to the fact that was required reading for Spanish majors, and most of the literature offered was the established and very traditional writers, the great majority from Spain. Writers from the New World (The Americas) were disregarded in Spanish Literature courses. Not until Garcia Marquez became a major literary figure by winning the Nobel Prize for literature in the sixties, did Latin American authors become important as

important literary figures.

Translation of major works was non-existent, because United States publishers did not consider this genre popular enough; thus it was almost to get great works of literature translated into English. There were no Latino writers to be found in the mainstream of literary writers among the shelves of your popular bookstore, or for that matter in your local library.

As a result of the civil rights movement, the consciousness of minority writers emerged. The cultural and literary landscape changed for the better. A body of literature has now been created on the experience and writings of Latino writers. This "phenomenon" if we were to call it that, begins in the late seventies and gathers strength in the eighties. Although the voices of these immigrant writers even today are still considered fringe literature in the United States literary world.

After reading the recent literature of Latino writers who have been published by major publishers, and have been noticed by academics, it is important to recognize how important for most of these writers is the process of acculturation that is embedded in their writings. Whether autobiographical in many ways, or observatory in others, the process is nevertheless crucial for the artist to emerge. The interest in literary circles of these new writers has certainly been a welcome change.

Great debate has surfaced about the language learning process. The issue of bilingual education rages on, for and against its merits. But this is the first time that there is such a debate in the United States culture and education as to the merits or disadvantages of using two languages.

The most drastic and severe debate is in California. Which is one of the original areas of the United States where the Spanish language was native. Even its name so indicates it. Although there has been bilingual education in California for the past twenty-five years, the movement is to extinguish bilingualism.

The writers we are going to read and study had as their first language Spanish. English was not their primary language and they had a major obstacle to overcome. Language is an important part of their acculturation experience. Language skills were introduced at different stages. For all of them it is a metamorphosis in their language experience.

The process of acculturation, I believe, is very important for students to become part of their new environment and culture. It is of special importance for the learning process, whether it is the culture of school and learning, or whether it is the larger society in which students live.

Artists must step apart from their culture and look at it with a special interest. It is important for the artist to recognize many things about the environment in which he lives, in order to create a new and different scenery of that reality.

By reading these authors, discussing their views recognizing the ability to laugh at many of their experiences, the process of learning a new language. Students will gain an understanding of how these artists were able to find a voice to speak about their struggles. Their voices give us a new and different outlook on the Latino culture in the United States.

With this debate in mind, the first author we will study will be Richard Rodriguez, the son of Mexican parents, who lived in California, He does not speak English by the time he enters grade school. He attends a private Catholic school. His parents are expected to talk to him in English at home even though their English is very

minimal. Imagine that translation experience! It must have been one of the children who had to serve as translators when the nuns came over to his house. The results are that he understands that giving up Spanish is also giving up his intimate feelings about his family. He totally abandons his "familial language," and gives it up completely. He then makes it his life to excel in English. In the process he becomes an introvert. He even becomes the expert opponent of bilingual education. In his autobiographical book, *Hunger of Memory*, he reviews and acknowledges his experiences in learning English as a second language and how it has affected his whole life.

## FIFTH SECTION

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This segment of the curriculum will review the author Richard Rodriguez, I believe that by doing Mr. Rodriguez first it gives the students the most intense look at language learning, and its impact on an individual. Students will read a specific chapter that is most relevant and poignant. Reading all of *Hunger for Memory* would be too difficult for this particular student population.

The class will read Richard Rodriguez' chapter Aria on his experience on language learning, from *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*.

The students will keep the following questions in mind as they read this chapter for discussion and have written notes to be turned in.

1. What are the feelings the young boy has about language and what it means?
2. What is your opinion on what his parents did? Do you think it was a good or bad idea? Would you do it any differently?
3. What does the author say about bilingual education?

## SIXTH SECTION

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The second writer students will be reading is Gloria Anzaldua a Chicana writer from South Texas, who has very interesting points in regards to language, and different types of language.

I believe this would be a very good exposure for students to begin to recognize the differences that exist under different cultural situations. The reading will be the chapter "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," from *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.

The students will keep the following questions in mind as they read this chapter for discussion, and have written notes to be turned in.

1. What does this author say about language, where and how we use it?
2. What does she say about Chicanos?
3. How is music important in learning about language and its use?

## SEVENTH SECTION

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The third writer is Judith Ortiz-Cofer and her book is *An Island Like You -- Stories of the Barrio*. She is a Puerto Rican who lived in the New York area. Her language experience is colored by the fact that she is sent back to Puerto Rico. She must spend time with her grandparents and because of those circumstances she has to maintain, improve and practice her Spanish. Her writings are well-suited for high school students and have a strong flavor of Caribbean humor.

The students will keep the following questions in mind as they read this chapter for discussion, and have written notes to be turned in.

1. What are the main differences between this writer and the previous one?
2. How does language affect this writer's stories?
3. Can you explain how you can relate or not relate to the stories in this book?

## EIGHT SECTION

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Based on the readings, students will be assigned to write a short story about an aspect of their life, which involved a memory of language learning.

1. An event in which language played an important part?(For example, a parent read a story; a grandparent told a family history).
2. If a student is bilingual, a memory about learning or hearing the new language?
3. Perhaps another student could write about Ebonics?

## REAL LIFE EXPERIENCE

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After having read and discussed many issues about language learning, it is important for students to find out for themselves about the experience of language learning. Students will have the opportunity to talk with and interview individuals that have had gone through the experience of learning another language and how it felt to have to do so.

One of the aims of the curriculum is to involve the students in becoming familiar with the process of learning a second language. The process will be to have them make an inquiry, become familiar with the process and write about it for class.

Many of the students being Puerto Rican or Latinos would have the opportunity to remember about their own language development. They would need to find out from their parents about their language learning, and how it has related to their lives at home and at school.

For those students who have someone who has had to learn English in their own family they would interview



them, find out about their immigrant experience and how language affected their cultural experience.

In the case of students who cannot do either of these two options above, they will interview either another student or someone they know who is willing to share their language and acculturation experience.

## **NINTH SECTION**

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Students will be conducting an interview for the purpose of investigating and learning about language learning.

Each student will do the following questionnaire with an individual regarding the process of learning a new language.

1. At what age did you have to learn a "new" language?
2. How difficult did you find learning this language and why?  
A. Very difficult B. Easy C. I'm still learning
3. How long was it before you could talk and say what you wanted?
4. How did you feel when you first were in a gathering where no one spoke your language?
5. How frustrated were you without knowing the language?
6. Did you have to have someone translate for you? How did you feel? (Uneasy? Suspicious? Happy?)
7. What was an important event that you can remember about learning the "new language"?
8. Do you feel you can be a translator for someone now?
9. Are you willing to do it for someone if they need your assistance? Why? Or why not?
10. What is your experience once you were able to speak a second language?
11. How do you feel about people speaking two or more languages?

## **Conclusion**

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Through the study of something that is different and foreign to us, we begin to be able to understand it. We also are able to empathize with the difficulties encountered by those who may have a language deficiency. Be it because they are learning English as a second language, or there may be other individuals who have speech impediments for many reasons, illness or accidents. Becoming aware of language and its importance can only help these young people deal with awkward situations and hopefully be a bridge for many.

One of the aims of this process is to have students understand the part language plays in acculturation. But also to recognize for example, how Latinos have influenced culture in the United States. Language plays an important part, be it through music, foods, or other things.

The secondary aim of this curriculum is to help high school students understand better the process of learning a language. How it can be a very important influence in their lives. Making language a central piece in their learning, and understanding its importance, will make a difference in their approach to creativity, in writing, in artistic endeavors of any kind.

Last but not least is the understanding how language influences our culture and these students, as the future artists in our environment will be able to communicate to a larger audience.

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