Diversity Plan

Christopher Spackman

Ohio Dominican University

Diversity Plan

Goal 1 : Learn Arabic

Many of the ELL students in Columbus speak Arabic as their native language or as a second language. Although many speak Somali as a first language, Arabic is more widely used around the world and is not limited to one or two countries or cultures. The final reason for choosing Arabic over Somali is the fact that Arabic is an official language in Somalia.

Also, although the number of Spanish speaking ELL students is not insignificant, there are far more teachers in Columbus who speak Spanish, than speak Arabic. If I learn Arabic, I may be the only teacher in the school with that knowledge. Thus, learning Arabic will be a better use of time and effort for me and my school. Learning Spanish may be an appropriate goal for a future plan.

Being able to speak even a little of a language the students already understand should increase the effectiveness of my instruction through building relationships with the students. Learning their language shows the students that I respect them, their language, and their culture. It will also facilitate some communication with students and their parents or guardians. I decided on a self-study approach, using Rosetta Stone™ software or similar, rather than college classes because I feel that in the beginning showing progress, even slow progress, to the students will be more beneficial for building relationships with all of the students. They will see me struggle with a language somewhat as they do. Summer classes would give me a head start and I would miss that window of opportunity to use total beginner status to help create relationships. Non-Arabic speaking students may also respond to my efforts and I intend to encourage all of my students to teach me and the class words and phrases from their native languages as time and situation permit.

An important measure of success will be my ability to use Arabic with students and their parents or guardians to accomplish classroom and school related tasks, in addition to building relationships with the students. For example, translating school information into Arabic for parents, either by myself or together with students, would be a practical positive outcome of my language learning.

In the first year, I intend to master the level 1 Rosetta Stone™ (or similar) lessons, studying for about one hour per day. Within four years I intend to master the first three levels, including reading and writing. After the first year, I will, if time permits, take college or other professional development classes on Arabic language and culture. I have confidence that I can accomplish these goals. I have already acquired Japanese to a high level of fluency so I am not worried about learning another language that is totally different from English.

Goal 2 : Web Browser and Office Suite in Students' Languages

My second goal is to make localized versions of a web browser and an office suit available in my students' native languages at school. Ideally, I would like to also make web-based applications (such as the grade book applications that are accessed through a web browser) available in my students' native languages at school. This would be a huge undertaking and would not be practical to attempt in my first years as an ESL teacher. Information Technology (IT) decisions affect and are affected by much more than just the classroom or the students, so I believe it would be a difficult task to convince IT decision makers and the vendors they deal with to make such a large and potentially expensive change. Therefore, I have limited my goal for this diversity plan to just making a web browser and an office suit available in the students' languages. This is, I feel, a goal that can be accomplished in less than five years.

Computer skills are highly important in today's world but even native speakers can be confused by computing terms. Formatting a hard drive and formatting a document, for example, are two entirely different actions that use the same English word. A word that an ELL may not even know. Providing ELL students the chance to use commonly used software in their native languages would likely greatly reduce the stress they may feel using computers and give them a much better chance to develop the computer skills that they need. From my own experience, it is easier to figure out, for example, menu items in a second language when you already know what the items mean in your native language.

Of course, student use of native language software is totally optional. Each student can use any available language that he or she wants to. The problem I wish to address is that right now, the ESL students do not have a choice because only English is available.

Goal #2 involves changing the user interface for the web browser and the office suite of programs from English to a language that students are more familiar with. To accomplish this goal, I will have to deal with school administrators, the IT department, and possibly vendors. Fonts, which are needed to display languages on the screen, are data, not programs, and I do not anticipate much difficulty getting permission to add relevant fonts to school computers, if necessary. Software that is already installed on individual computers can often be switched to a different language just by installing a language pack, which is a collection of files that contain translations of the interface entries. Installing these, when available, is relatively risk-free and should not be a difficult issue to address. Microsoft, for example, makes several language packs available for newer versions of MS Office but possibly only in languages for which MS does not already provide a full edition of MS Office. If language packs are available and IT permission is granted, goal #2 could be achieved in as little as six months to a year.

If language packs are not available for all of the languages in my classroom however, I will recruit students and members of the relevant communities (prominent professionals, past graduates of the school, parents, etc), to assist in creating those language packs which are not available. Community involvement is usually good on general principle, but in this case will also ensure that translations are as accurate as possible.

If the above is not possible, other software would need to be substituted for the original. Fortunately, there is a wide variety of Free Software available that has already been translated into many languages. The Mozilla Firefox web browser could substitute for MS Internet Explorer and OpenOffice or Google Documents could be used in place of MS Office or other office software the schools are using. The three alternatives listed all support multiple languages easily and are freely available and widely used. Firefox and OpenOffice are drop-in replacements for existing software. Google Documents is web-based so would not even need to be installed – students could begin using it immediately.

Because school IT regulations rightly prohibit the installation of unauthorized software on school machines, it may be necessary to run Firefox or OpenOffice from USB drives, in "portable" mode. This just means that the program is not installed on the machine but can still be accessed and used. Portable mode is very convenient and it would even be possible for students to carry their own USB drives with their localized software, and be able to use it on any computer at school, at a library, or at home, without having to install anything. At school I would view this option as a temporary expedient while we waited for IT approval for installation of localized versions of the appropriate software. Getting permission to install new software may be time-consuming but can be done.

During the first year, as another step to help students use the computers more effectively, my students and I will create posters showing the menus for common programs in English with the students' native languages along side the English. The posters will be hung on the walls near the computers. We will also make letter-sized sheets with English and one other language for each student to keep and use for reference.

I would consider goal #2 achieved if my students have access to a web browser and an office suit in their native languages. In the first year, "access" may involve running these programs in portable mode, off of a USB drive. In the case of the office suit, Google Documents (or similar) would also be acceptable in the first year. By the fourth year however, my students will be able to use these or similar programs directly on the computers in the school.

The worst-case scenario would be that IT decrees that no extra software may be used and that running portable software from USB sticks is also forbidden. In such a case, the posters and reference sheets we created will be the main product of this goal. However, by raising awareness of the issues and the effects of mono-lingual computing on affected students and their parents / guardians, I hope to start a conversation with school and district officials. Once they are aware of the problem and see some of the solutions, they may be willing to move forward and eventually address the issue.

Links to Software and Websites

Google Documents : http://docs.google.com

Mozilla Firefox : http://www.mozilla.com/en-US/products

OpenOffice : http://www.openoffice.org

Rosetta Stone Language Learning Software : http://www.rosettastone.com