ALBION COLLEGE

Language is not a Barrier: Using First and Second Languages to Build Relationships in an ESL Classroom

Sondra Lee Sewell

Context

I've been completing my student teaching experience at Coldwater High School in the Coldwater Community Schools district. I teach general English for 10th grade as well as English as a Second Language (ESL) to grades 9-12. I have 120 students among all six of my classes.

For this project, I will be focusing on my first hour class, ELA 1, which is designed for beginner English Learners. There are 17 students in this class: 12 speak Arabic as their home language and 5 speak Spanish; 7 of these students arrived prior to my start date.

KEEP
PUSHING

HOPE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

My Idea

- I implemented a new routine called **“Question of the Day”** by asking students a new question about themselves each day.
- Students wrote their responses in their home languages, translated their responses into English, and then wrote and spoke their responses in English (i.e., ideally they don’t have to worry about expressing themselves first or only in English).
- I analyzed both the **time it took individual students to complete the writing routine** and the **content of the students’ responses**.

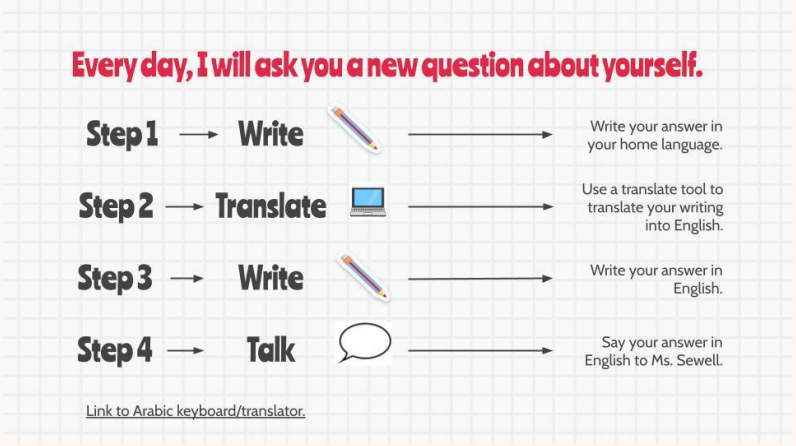
Situations & Question

Two situations:

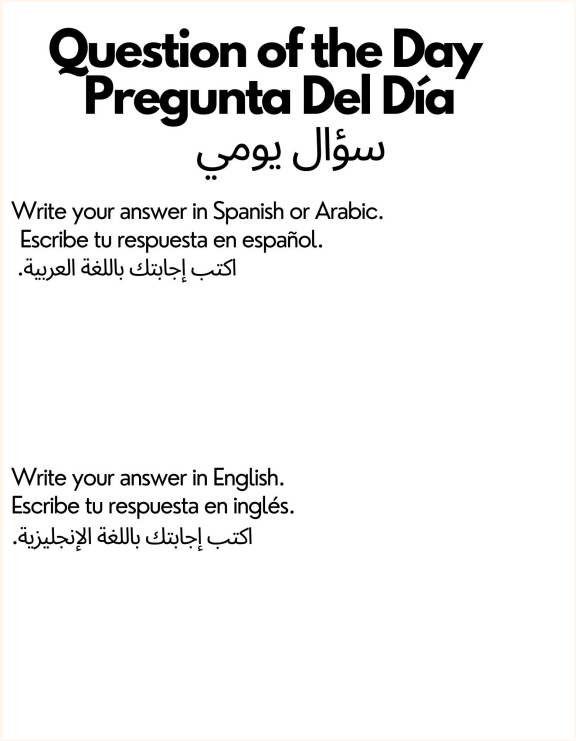
1. I didn't know the beginner English Learners as personally as I knew the advanced English Learners or native-English students.
2. There were no routines established in the ELA 1 class.

One question:
How can I establish an effective routine that allows me to learn about beginner English learners on a more personal level without requiring them to be proficient in English or me to be proficient in their home language?

The introduction slide to the Question of the Day.



These are the instructions I showed students.



This is where the students write responses.

ROUND 1

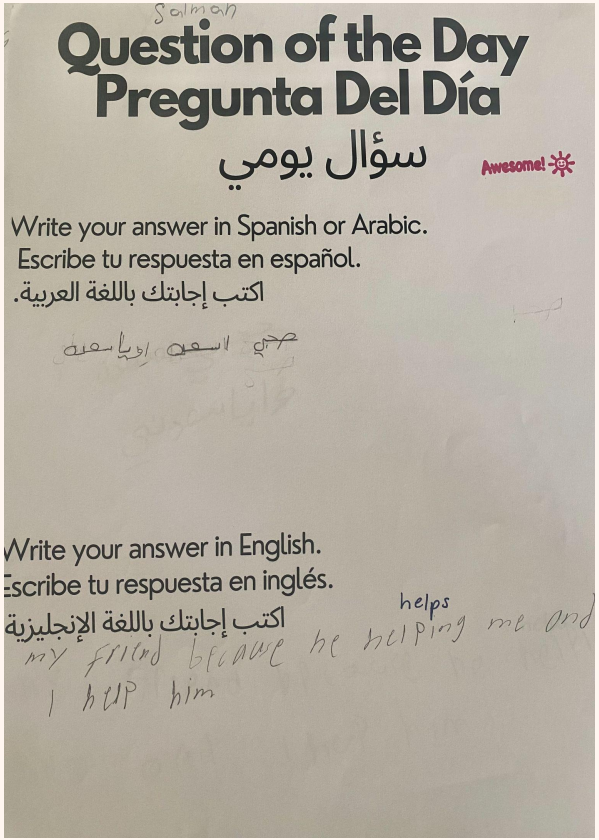
Initial Enactment

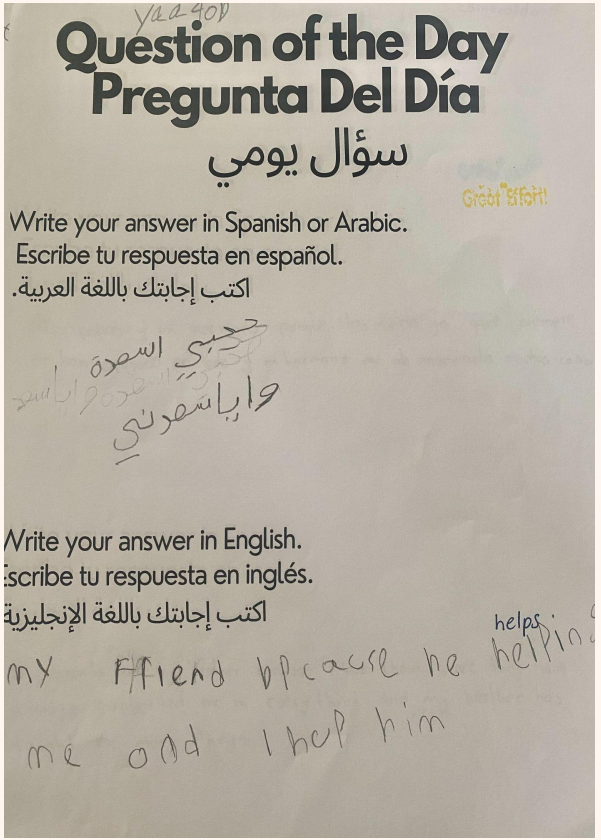
First Question of the Day

Who is the most important person in your life? Why?

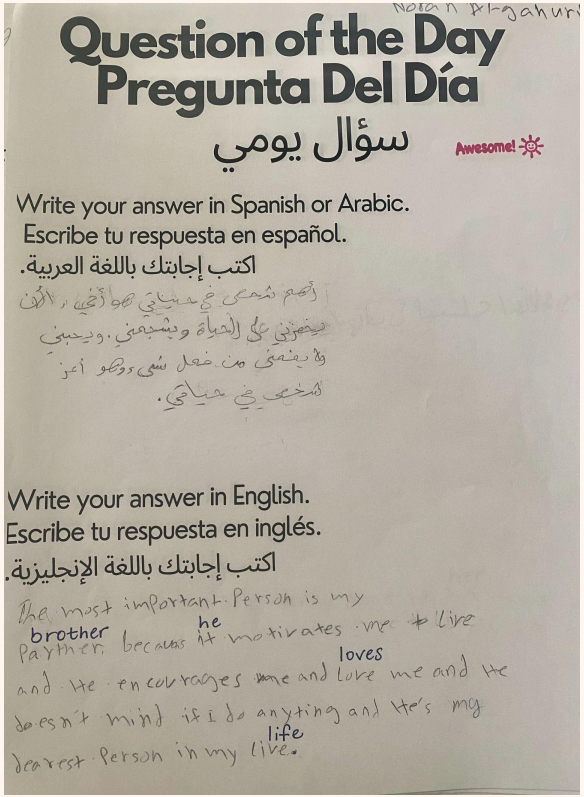
Round 1: Initial Enactment

- I started by introducing the new routine. I told the students that we will be doing it every day at the beginning of class.
- I told the students that we are starting this routine so I can get to know them better and so they can practice their writing.
- I recorded the amount of time the routine took (timer) and the depth of personal knowledge the students' responses indicated (content analysis).
- I monitored the students' progress and their responses as they worked; I helped them when they needed it.
- I invited students to share out their answers to the whole class at the end.

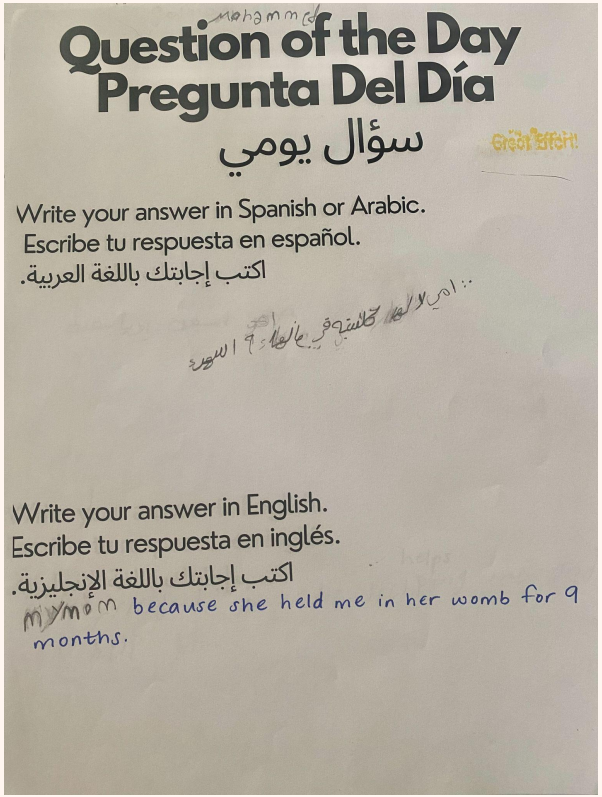




Two identical responses from friends sitting next to each other.



Longest response (36 words): several descriptions and insight into what this student values in her family relationships.



Shortest response (2 words): answered first part of question in English; after a bilingual peer translated, I learned he wrote “because she held me in her womb for 9 months.”

Round 1: Analysis of Evidence

Time:

- Routine took 34 minutes (instructions and sharing responses)
- Many students spent up to 10 minutes translating the Question of the Day.

Content:

- A pair of two students had identical responses.
- Responses ranged from 2 to 36 words.
- Every student had a relevant answer to the prompt; I learned something new about each student.
- Students mispronounced most of the words; students struggled when listening to peers.
    - The students' lack of familiarity with the words in their responses affirmed that the same relationship-building couldn't have occurred in an English-only environment.

Next steps:

- Translate the Question of the Day into Spanish and Arabic.
- Emphasize students writing their own responses..
- Change whole-class sharing to teacher-student sharing.

ROUND 2

Revised Enactment

Second Question of the Day

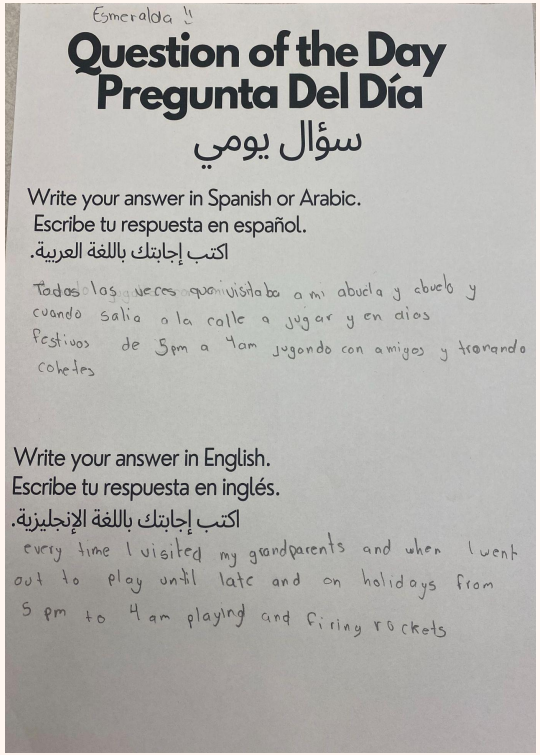
What is your favorite memory?

¿Cuál es tu memoria favorita?

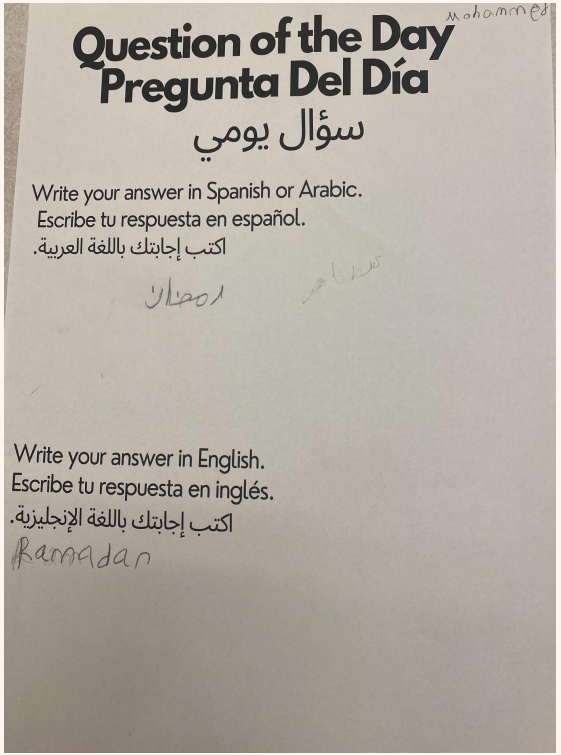
ماهي ذكراك المفضلة؟

Round 2: Revised Enactment

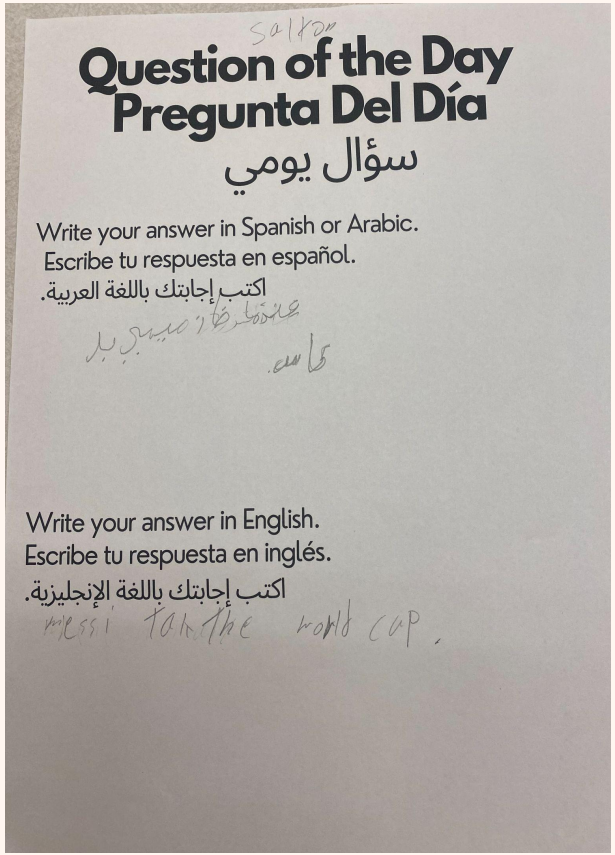
- I translated the Question of the Day into Arabic and Spanish.
- I emphasized students writing their own answers so that I can learn more about them.
- I decided to eliminate whole-class sharing and incorporate one-on-one (student to teacher) sharing into my monitoring.

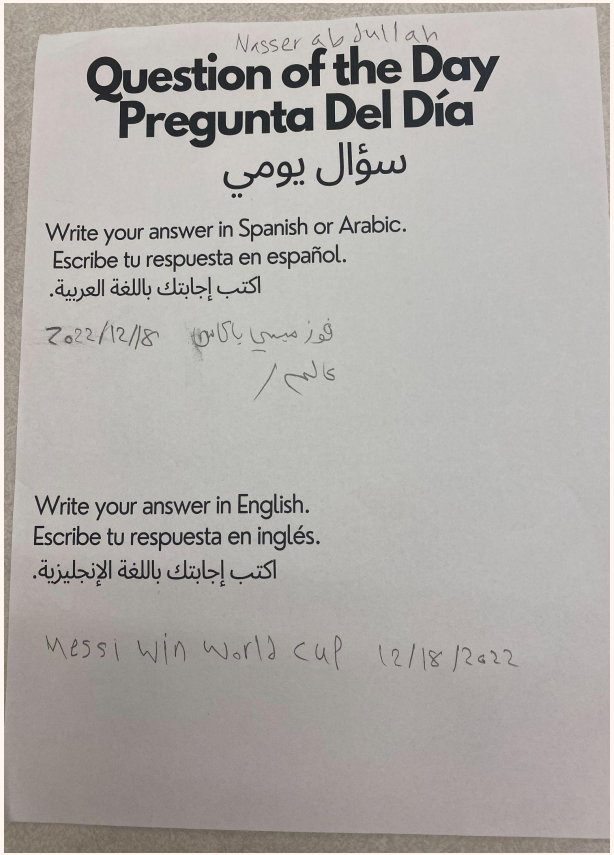


Longest response (36 words): I learned that this student values time spent with her family on holidays. I also learned from a follow-up conversation that her grandparents live in Mexico.



The shortest response (1 word). I learned that the student celebrates and enjoys Ramadan, but a specific memory is not described.





I was able to ask the students what they were doing and who they were with when this happened. The students were able to practice past tense, and Nasser (right) was able to practice saying the date, which students usually struggle with.

Round 2: Analysis of Evidence

Time:

- Routine took 26 minutes (8 minutes less than the first trial).
- Students didn't spend any time translating the question, but many sat for 5-10 minutes talking to their classmates before they began writing.

Content:

- Length of the responses ranged from 1 word to 26 words.
- No identical responses.
- Every student answered the prompt correctly; I learned something new about each student.
- Having students read to me individually allowed me to help them one-on-one with pronunciation and ask follow-up questions.

Next steps:

- Set a timer.
- Give expectations for structure of response (e.g. sentence stems).

ROUND 3

Revised Enactment

Third Question of the Day

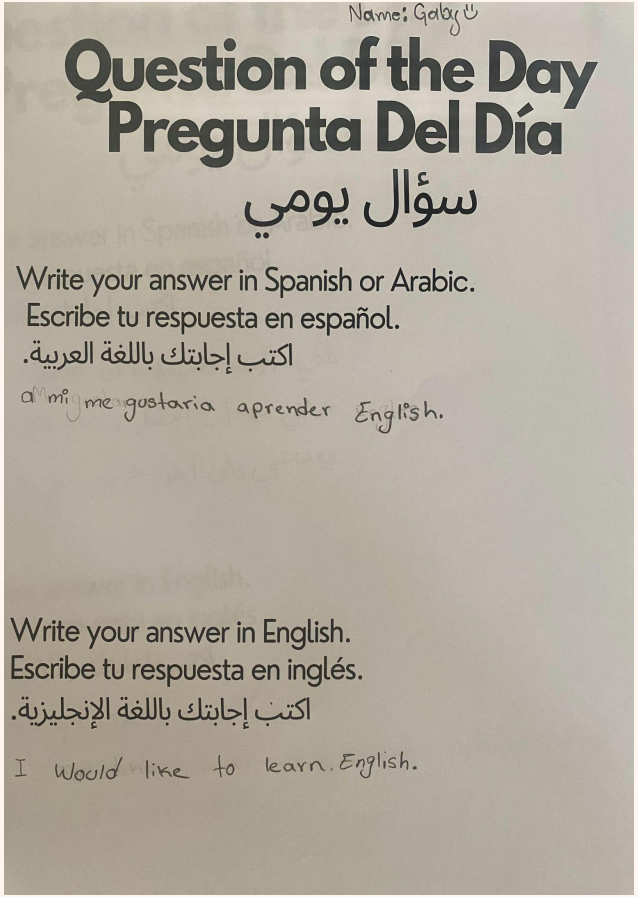
What is one thing you really want to do in your lifetime?

¿Qué es una cosa que realmente quieres hacer en tu vida?

ما هو الشيء الوحيد الذي تريد أن تفعله حقًا في حياتك؟

Round 3: Revised Enactment

- I set a timer for 15 minutes and observed the number of students sitting but not writing.
  - I chose 15 minutes because it was around the time the routine took for students who started writing within 1-2 minutes.
- I provided students with a sentence stem to help them begin writing sooner and give them more guidance.
  - I want to _____.
- I continued with student-to-teacher sharing.


Name: Galaxy

Question of the Day
Pregunta Del Día
سؤال يومي

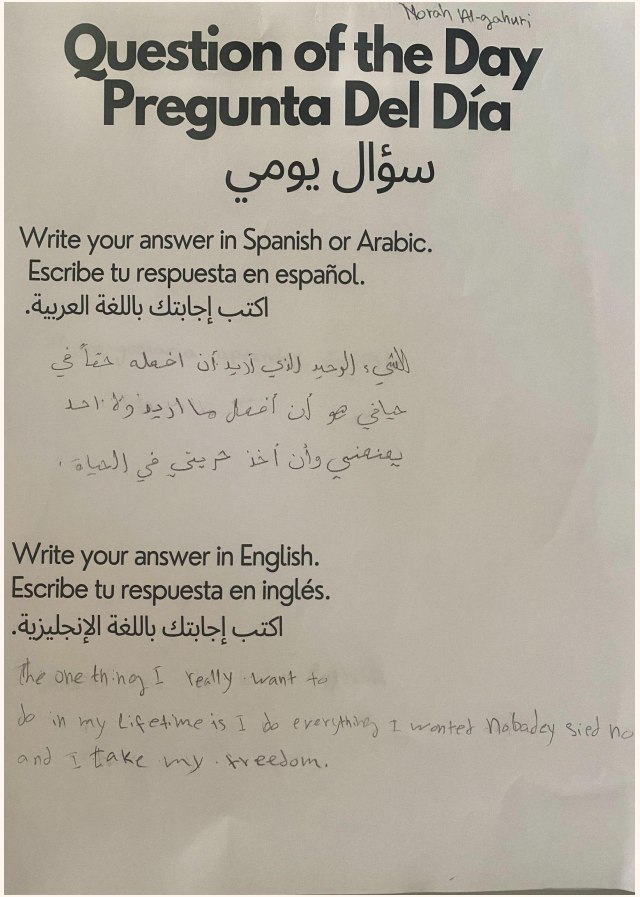
Write your answer in Spanish or Arabic.
Escribe tu respuesta en español.
.اكتب إجابتك باللغة العربية

a mi me gustaria aprender English.

Write your answer in English.
Escribe tu respuesta en inglés.
.اكتب إجابتك باللغة الإنجليزية

I would like to learn English.

The shortest response (6 words). This student produced a complex sentence with a specific subject, a complex predicate, and a direct object. This is a big improvement from the one-word response from the second trial!


Norah Al-ghamdi

Question of the Day
Pregunta Del Día
سؤال يومي

Write your answer in Spanish or Arabic.
Escribe tu respuesta en español.
.اكتب إجابتك باللغة العربية

الشيء الوحيد الذي أريد أن أفعله حقاً في
حياتي هو أن أفعل ما أريد ولا أحد
يمنعني وأن آخذ حريتي في الحياة.

Write your answer in English.
Escribe tu respuesta en inglés.
.اكتب إجابتك باللغة الإنجليزية

the one thing I really want to
do in my lifetime is I do everything I wanted Nobody sied no
and I take my freedom.

The longest response (25 words). This student used the sentence stem as a starting point but expanded her response in a passionate tone.

Round 3: Analysis of Evidence

Time:

- Routine took 15 minutes (11 minutes less than the second trial).

Content:

- All students wrote at least one complete sentence.
- Length of the writing ranged from 6 to 25 words.
- Every student wrote a relevant response to the prompt; I learned something new about each student through their response.
- The quality of the responses did not decrease with the time limit.

Findings

Question:
How can I establish a writing routine that allows me to learn about beginner English learners on a more personal level without requiring them to be proficient in English or me to be proficient in their home language?

Answer:
The routine should include a clear purpose and content, a time limit that frames enough time to write a response if started within 1-2 minutes, expectations and support for language structure, the opportunity for the students to use their home language, and one-on-one teacher-student support.

Related Reflections

- I started using Arabic and Spanish in everyday instruction with سؤال يومي and pregunta del día (“daily question”). From there, the students were excited to help me expand my vocabulary.
- There was an increase in student-initiated conversations, especially in Arabic and Spanish during passing periods. Students were more comfortable taking risks.
- Use of the students’ home language redistributed power and showed that I honor them. It added excitement and laughter to the class environment.

Sources

- Google Translate
- Gate2Home Arabic Virtual Keyboard and Translation
- Iesha Shahbain

Acknowledgements

- My amazing students
- My fantastic mentor teachers, Stephanie Spolyar and Arielle Norris
- Dr. Kyle Shanton, Dr. Suellyn Henke, and Dr. Betty Okwako-Riekkola
- Karen Hoaglin
- Suzanne Mrozinski
- Fritz Shurmur Center for Teacher Development
- My friends, family, and classmates

Questions?