Engaging Language Minority Students through the Multiple Intelligences in Ninth Grade English Classes

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Introduction

After my first quarter of full-time teaching, I had to face an unsettling truth about myself: I was becoming the English teacher I always dreaded having when I was a student in high school. Not only were many students disinterested in the material I taught, but I also found myself becoming thoroughly bored with my lessons before I was through presenting them to each of my five class sections. I asked myself over and over, "What can I do to engage my students more?" I love the subject of English, but I know that many students, especially some students that are not native speakers of English, are not nearly as passionate about the language and literature as I am. The challenge for me was to give each student a way to connect personally to the material we were studying. That "way to connect personally" led me to examine Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences.

Background

In 1983, Dr. Howard Gardner published *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. Since that time, teachers around the country have been studying and implementing his theory of multiple intelligences in their classrooms. I remember studying his theory several times in my undergraduate courses, but I never seriously considered how I might use it in my own teaching. In search of a way to engage my students in my lessons, I studied his theory again and discovered what more recent research has said about Gardner's work.

The most basic element of Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences is that "intelligence has more to do with the capacity for (1) solving problems and (2) fashioning products" than it does with achieving a score on a test that can be objectively measured (Armstrong 1). Contrary to more conservative thinking, intelligence is not necessarily the score someone earns on an IQ test or a variety of other standardized tests that are being used across the country to measure students' learning.

Gardner initially identified seven areas in which people could be classified as "intelligent":

Linguistic: intelligence using spoken and written words
Logical-Mathematical: intelligence using numbers and reasoning
Visual: intelligence of understanding pictures, images, and space
Musical: intelligence of understanding musical elements and forms
Bodily-Kinesthetic: intelligence of using the entire body

Interpersonal: intelligence of social understanding
Intrapersonal: intelligence of self-knowledge

Very recently, an eighth intelligence was added—the intelligence of understanding the natural world (Meye, 1997, p. 32). Because the research on this eighth intelligence is so new, I did not include it in my project this year. I hope to include it in my future teaching.

Gardner's theory means that all people can be intelligent in areas that tests in schools rarely address such as the areas of performance, the visual arts, athletics, and relationships. Teachers who only incorporate linguistic or logical-mathematical intelligences in their classrooms will not be able to fully engage students who have significantly developed other intelligences.

Gardner believes that every person has all eight of these intelligences, but that we develop each intelligence to different levels. Most of the intelligences do not operate in isolation; we use our intelligences together in complicated ways (Armstrong, 1994, p. 11). For example, when people act in plays, they must use their linguistic intelligence to speak, their visual intelligence to successfully position themselves on stage, their bodily-kinesthetic intelligence to move and gesture, their interpersonal intelligence to respond to other characters, and their intrapersonal intelligence to have enough self-confidence to act in front of an entire audience.

Most current research on Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences seems to indicate that his theory holds true today. Teachers have been very successful in encouraging students to learn by presenting lessons that incorporate all of the intelligences. By asking students to solve problems and create products rather than simply memorize facts for a test, teachers can give students authentic ways to demonstrate their true intelligences.

I strongly believe in Dr. Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences because I believe it provides every student with at least one way to connect to the material being presented. I am also a strong supporter of his theory because I believe it unifies all students in a culturally and linguistically diverse classroom. If students struggle with English class because they do not have prior knowledge that connects them to the material being studied, the teacher can give every student equal access to the material through the multiple intelligences, and students will have equal opportunities to show their true ability to learn.

Methods

After exploring some of the research done by other teachers who engage their students through lessons that focus on the multiple intelligences (MI), I felt ready to start my project by introducing the theory to my students. I began by asking my students how many of them thought they were "intelligent." As you might imagine, very few students had the confidence to raise their hands in front of their peers, especially because many of my students actually thought they were *not* intelligent. I quickly assured them that they were all intelligent in many different ways; I explained to them that I would be working on a project for the

rest of the year that would give them many opportunities to show me all of the ways they are intelligent. They were hooked.

I initially explained the seven intelligences to my students by asking them simple questions about each intelligence. “How many of you know how to talk?” “How many of you can add and subtract?” “How many of you can walk across the classroom by yourself?” As I continued asking questions and explaining each intelligence, they began to see how they were intelligent in different ways. Once they understood the basic meaning of each intelligence, they were ready to complete the MI Brain Map and the MI Survey (Appendices 1 and 2). The MI Brain Map gives students a chance to predict which of their intelligences are stronger than others, but it also prompts them to include all the intelligences in their own personal diagram so that they begin to believe they do possess all the intelligences. Then, they completed the MI Survey. Before handing out the surveys, I reminded students that the results of it were only meant to provide a “snapshot” of their intelligences on that particular day, but that we all have the ability to strengthen each intelligence (McKenzie, 2000). After the students finished, we discussed the results before I collected the surveys and recorded each student’s profile to be used for my lesson planning.

Once I had introduced my students to Gardner’s theory and convinced them that they were all intelligent in many different ways, I was ready to plan engaging lessons that incorporated all of their intelligences. Unfortunately, I did not have a repertoire of MI activities to start using on a daily basis. From my research, I did have some ideas of activities that I could use, but I did not know if my students would be interested in them. I solved my dilemma by simply explaining to my students that I wanted to plan lessons using MI activities, but I wanted their input as I did so. I asked them to write a brief essay that detailed what would occur in an “Ideal English Class.” After encouraging them to include in their essays activities from each of the seven different intelligences, I also gave them the option of explaining what activities they would *not* want to do in English class. Their essays helped me more with my planning than any of my research had done. I grouped their suggestions into categories for each of the intelligences, and that began our repertoire of activities that we would continue adding to and using for the rest of the year (Figure 1). With these essays from my students detailing the activities they would find engaging in my class, I felt equipped to start planning lessons that incorporated the multiple intelligences in as many ways as possible.

Figure 1—Class Repertoire of Multiple Intelligences Activities

XIII. Linguistic
Brainstorming
Choral Reading
Creating Books on Tape
Crossword Puzzles
Debates
Internet Research
Journal Writing
Large and Small Group Discussions
Lectures
Oral Presentations
Publishing Poetry Book
Reading Aloud
Reading Silently
Reading: novels, poetry, short stories, plays, newspaper articles, etc.
Writing Circles
Writing: letters, essays, short stories, poetry, newspaper articles, etc.

IX. Logical-Mathematical
Analogies
Attribute Webs
Calculating Desired, Actual, and Necessary Grades
Socratic Seminars
Venn Diagrams
Word Puzzles

X. Visual
3-D Models
Essay Designs
Graphic Organizers
Illustrated Vocabulary Cards
Maps
Painting, Collages, and other Visual Arts
Scale Drawings
Videos and Movies

Bodily-Kinesthetic
Classroom Theater
Competitive Games
Dramatic Presentations
Entire Body Warm-Ups
Stations
Tableau

Musical
Mood Music
Original Raps
Original Songs
Playing Recorded Music
Rhythm in Poetry

Interpersonal
Board Games
Cooperative Groups
Cross-Level Tutoring
Peer Critiquing
Peer Teaching
Think-Pair-Share

Intrapersonal
Goal Setting
Homework Options
Independent Reading
Individualized Projects
Journal Reflections
One-Minute Reflections
Self-Analysis
Self-Paced Instruction

My initial notion that I could include all seven intelligences in each lesson I planned quickly faded away. I realized I could not just include MI activities for the sake of including each intelligence on a daily basis. I might be able to engage all my students if I had seven different activities each day, but the activities would be meaningless unless I could tie them to my objective for each lesson. On many occasions, I could not find a way to connect all the intelligences to the objectives I had set forth.

I did more research to learn how other teachers planned their MI lessons, and I found several helpful solutions. Thomas Armstrong, the director of

Armstrong Creative Training in California, suggests that a teacher state his or her objective(s) for the day, week, month, or unit, and then ask "Key MI Questions" for each intelligence that would relate to that stated objective (Armstrong, 1994, p. 58). For each objective I wanted to teach, I would ask questions such as, "How can I bring in music?", "How can I have students work in partners or groups?", "How can I encourage students to reflect on this?", and "How can I bring in critical thinking skills?" As I asked myself these questions, I would brainstorm activities that would relate to my objective and select the most appropriate activities for each lesson. I learned that if I used most of the intelligences for each objective over a period of two or three days, I could engage all of my students at least several times during the study of that objective. No student was constantly enthralled with each activity, but interest from my students improved dramatically from their disinterest at the beginning of the year.

Armstrong's suggestions helped me include MI activities in a meaningful manner, but I still felt as though I needed a better way to organize my lessons. I wanted to be able to track how frequently I used each intelligence in my units of study, and I also wanted to record how effective the different activities were in engaging my students. Fortunately, I happened to find an article written by Veronica Borruso Emig, a respected social studies teacher from Pennsylvania, who successfully uses a "Multiple Intelligences Inventory" to organize her MI lessons. Emig says, "I try to fill [the Multiple Intelligences Inventory] in as I develop each unit…I can quickly plot the status of my lessons and assignments, knowing if I've neglected an intelligence. I can also record what I think are the strengths and weaknesses of my instruction and assessment" (Emig, 1997, p. 48). I modified an example of her inventory, and then I started to use inventories to plan the activities for my lessons (Figure 2). When I finished a lesson, I would go back to the inventory and write notes about which activities successfully engaged my students and what improvements I could make the next time I used activities that were not as engaging.

As I continued throughout the school year, I became much more comfortable using MI activities in my lesson plans. I would be lying if I said planning MI lessons was easy—I quickly learned that if I tried to plan a MI lesson at the last minute, it would probably fail. MI lessons require a significant amount of forethought; otherwise, trying to find the meaning in a MI activity becomes difficult. It is easy to play games, listen to music, or have class discussions, but it can be very challenging to connect these MI activities to the set objective of a lesson if they are not carefully planned out ahead of time. With each passing quarter, my students and I were able to add more ideas to our class repertoire of MI activities, and students were more anxious to start each unit because they anticipated engaging activities that would make English connect to them in a personal way.

Figure 2—Multiple Intelligences Inventory

Course: English 9
Unit: *The Odyssey* and Your Life Journey
Lesson: (two days) Students will answer the question, "What is the best advice for a lifelong journey?"

INTELLIGENCE	ACTIVITY USED	COMMENTS
Linguistic (Day 2)	Students will brainstorm what is the most valuable advice elders can give to youth for their "life journeys" after listening to a rap and analyzing a cartoon.	Students were eager to share their opinions. They needed little prompting to get started, and they were quick to build on each other's ideas.
Logical-Mathematical (Day 1)	Students will participate in a Socratic Seminar after brainstorming advice from elders. The initial questions will lead them to answer the essential question: "How can you prepare for your life journey?"	Students were not very sure of themselves in the beginning. It would have helped to give students time to take notes on the questions before asking them to discuss with the group.
Visual (Day 1)	Students will interpret the meaning of a Zippy the Pinhead cartoon in which Zippy tries to demonstrate how to stay on track with life.	Students really enjoyed talking about the cartoon. Although it took them awhile to grasp the meaning of the cartoon, they could easily relate the cartoon to Odysseus' failures.
Musical (Day 1)	Students will listen to Baz Luhrmann's rap "Everybody's Free (To Wear Sunscreen)" and try to understand his main points as he gives advice to the graduating class of 1999.	Students mocked the rap at first, but as they listened a second time, they appreciated the lyrics much more and were eager to discuss what they thought were Luhrmann's main points.
Bodily-Kinesthetic	None.	None.
Interpersonal (Day 2)	Students will cooperate in the Seminar to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to hear what opinions others are trying to share.	Students asked, "When can we do this again?" Many students who usually resist participating in class involved themselves in the Seminar with the encouragement of their classmates.
Intrapersonal (Day 2)	After the Seminar, students will reflect on what they learned. They will then write a letter to themselves offering advice for the next year, the next five years, and the next twenty years.	Some students wrote very brief letters, showing that they did not internalize as much as I had hoped. However, most students incorporated the ideas discussed. More structure needed here.

Summary of Findings

When I made the decision to start using the theory of multiple intelligences as a way to engage the students in my classes, I wanted to find a means for measuring whether or not my research had an impact on my students' learning. I selected ten language minority students who seemed extremely disinterested in the first quarter of the school year and had not received a passing grade for that quarter. I wanted to see whether or not they became more engaged in my classes and how this impacted their academic achievement. Additionally, I decided to ask my classes for their reactions to the multiple intelligences activities we used throughout the year.

During the fourth quarter, I carefully studied the progress of the ten students I had identified as my target students. In terms of class participation, all ten of the students had participated much more when we did activities that reflected their strongest intelligences. At times they needed more encouragement than other students did, but they appeared to be more engaged than they had been at the beginning of the year. Eight of the ten students also had improved attendance and improved grades. Among these eight students, there were fewer tardies and fewer unexcused absences than they had during the first quarter. The most significant data that seemed to suggest MI lessons made a difference in students' learning were the grades these eight students earned during the second, third, and fourth quarters. After receiving grades less than 66% the first quarter, two students moderately improved their grades to the 67-70% range, three students significantly improved their grades to the 71-79% range, and three students dramatically improved their grades to the 80-89% range. I can only make guesses as to why the other two targeted students did not make improvements beyond more class participation. I believe that both of these students have very low self-esteem and never "bought into" the MI theory during the year. I also believe they both have serious problems outside of school that may be a hindrance to their school performance because they are failing all of their courses.

In order to collect more data from my other students regarding how successfully I engaged their interest during the year, I gave them a survey. On the survey, they rated how much they "liked" or "disliked" the MI activities on our class repertoire. The results were very encouraging. 85% of my students had many more activities that they liked than they disliked, and they had positive feedback to my question: "Do you have any suggestions for how I can 'liven up' my teaching for next year?" Some of responses were, "*Nope. You are great the way you are!*", "*I think you are a good teacher so just keep up your good work*," and "*Overall it was really fun*."

I talked to some of the students that had more activities they disliked rather than liked, and they had varying reasons for why I had failed to engage them this year. A common reason was that they just "hated" English, and they were not ever going to like it. Some of the suggestions I received from these students were, "*No homework. No summer reading", "Give us less homework,"* and *"Talk less because you are boring when you talk too much*." I can change some of these things, but I will have to try even harder to reach out to these

students who resist most of my efforts to make my activities as engaging as possible.

One student's response on the survey made me feel so positive about all of my research this year. She wrote, "*We did so many fun things in this class. We acted, did projects, went to plays, read plays, and watched movies. In this class it was kind of like we had no boundaries to learning. All of the other classes were teaching by the SOL's [Virginia's Standardized Tests] so that made everything a bore. But in English class we always had fun."* This response and the responses from almost all of my students helped me reach the conclusion that using the theory of multiple intelligences makes it possible for me to engage most of my students most of the time. I cannot say that the theory of multiple intelligences is the only way or the best way to help all of my students connect to the subject of English. However, I feel confident that if I continue working on my methods, I may be able to reach more of the resistant students in the future.

Implications for the Future

Next year, I will continue using Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences in my classes because I believe my research this year can be beneficial to my future students. I will try to incorporate the multiple intelligences into my entire curriculum. For each lesson that I plan, I will try to include activities that use at least four intelligences on a daily basis. Additionally, as I create homework assignments and long-term projects, I will try to extend the options available for students to use their multiple intelligences. Finally, I will try to make my assessments more reflective of the multiple intelligences so that all of my students' grades accurately reflect all of their intelligences. Students will take a more active role by evaluating the MI activities frequently and designing their own assignments and projects using each of the intelligences.

In the future, I will also strive to identify more quickly students who may be resisting my attempts to engage them through the multiple intelligences. I did recognize toward the end of the year that two of my ten targeted students were not benefiting from the MI activities as much as most other students were, but I did not have enough time at that point to correct the situation. This was a very frustrating situation for me.

I will continue to read the research of other teachers that use the theory of multiple intelligences in their classrooms. I want to learn from their successes so that I can tailor their research to fit my teaching methods. I also look forward to seeing how Dr. Gardner changes his theory as educators do more research. I believe that Dr. Gardner's theory will be essential to improving education throughout our nation. As more teachers understand the engaging power of multiple intelligence instruction, more students will have the opportunity to demonstrate all of their true intelligences.

References

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