

# **TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

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# **Pre-Service ELL Teachers Learning in Mexico: Negotiating Problems and Nurturing Possibilities**

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## **Guiding perspectives**

The summer study abroad in Mexico program for future teachers of ELLs discussed here originated in Utah, where serving large numbers of ELLs in the public school setting is a relatively new phenomenon. In recent years, the ELL student population has grown exponentially in Utah (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000; Hosp & Mulder, 2003). This is consistent with national trends. It has been reported that 19% of American school children speak a language other than English at home, with 28% of these students – 4.3% of all school children – reporting that they speak English with difficulty (NCES, 2006b; 2006c) and more than 8% of students in American schools receiving English language services (NCES 2001-2002).

Most teachers seeking an ESL endorsement have little experience working with ELLs, little experience learning a second language, and little experience working with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Just 26 % of all public school teachers and only 27% of teachers teaching ELLs feel well

prepared to meet the needs of students with limited English skills (NCES, 2001). Additionally, 90% of teachers in the United States are White (National Education Association, 2003) and 97% are estimated to be monolingual in English (Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996). Those who work with ELLs typically have little experience adapting to a new culture or learning a second language. Thus, while they may care deeply about their students and truly want to "help" them (Marx, 2006), they often have little empathetic knowledge of what the students are experiencing linguistically and culturally.

A strong body of literature calls for teacher education programs to develop rigorous inservice programs focusing on the acquisition of knowledge needed to live and work in a multicultural society (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Valdés, 1996; Valdés, 2001; Nieto, 2002; Valdés, Bunch, Snow, & Lee, 2005; Paris & Ball, 2009). Yet, effective educators of ELLs require more than a firm foundation in multicultural education; they also require a firm foundation in language-related knowledge and experiences and language-related attitudes and beliefs that can inform their development of language-related skills for teaching ELLs (Lucas & Grinberg, 2008). While students may have a firm grasp of the theories behind effective instruction of culturally and linguistically diverse students, most have little experience learning a second language and few substantial experiences with cultures other than their own.

### **Program structure**

Consistent with Lucas and Grinberg (2008) assertions about the need for opportunities to develop experience-based, language-related knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs, the authors developed a

summer study abroad program to work in tandem with the on-campus ELL program. In all, 38 students enrolled in the program: 10 students during the first year, 14 students during each of the second and third years. Cuernavaca, Mexico was chosen as the location for this experience because more than one third of recent immigrants to the US originate from Mexico (US Census Bureau, 2003a), ESL teachers in local schools close to the university work largely with children of Mexican origin, and Mexico's close proximity to the US made travel convenient and affordable for students. Students lived with Mexican host families, enrolled in Spanish language classes at the host institution, and took excursions to museums and historic sites in and around Cuernavaca and Mexico City. Students also completed requirements in Mexican bilingual schools, worked for a local non-governmental agency that served the indigenous poor in Cuernavaca. Additionally, the authors taught courses from the ESL endorsement program. In both courses, the study of the challenges and opportunities presented by the diverse populations that come together in today's classrooms was contextualized by students' and instructors' language acquisition and cultural experiences in this alternative learning space.

## **Method**

Action research was used to evaluate and refine the ESL study abroad program. Consistent with Whyte (1991) and Glesne (2006), data was collected and analyzed and informed the yearly changes to the program. The research question was: How can an ELL Mexico study abroad program assist ELL teachers in developing requisite understandings for the effective teaching of their ELL

students? Triangulation of the data (the inclusion of multiple perspectives and multiple expressions of understanding) was used to ensure the validity of this process. The multiple perspectives included student participants, university faculty participants (authors), teachers in the local Mexican school practicum settings, and the multiple expressions of knowledge and understanding that were gleaned from student responses on pre- and post-questionnaires, student journal entries, lesson plans and other student work.

## Findings

Each year, examination of the data revealed common threads of understanding. Student misconceptions, limited understandings, and persistent stereotypical assumptions and assertions were noted. The program was adjusted to strengthen connections between program elements and the cultural and linguistic experiences occurring in this alternative learning space. Two categories reflect the central goals of the program: (1) language-related knowledge and experience and (2) language-related beliefs and attitudes.

### Year one

During year one, ten students enrolled in the study abroad program and one faculty member accompanied the students. The program consisted of an *ELL Instructional Strategies* course taught in English (3 semester credits/45 hours of instruction, including five hours of observational field trips to bilingual Mexican schools), a Spanish course (3 semester credits/45 hours of instruction), three weeks residing with a Mexican host family, and cultural excursions to pyramids and museums.

*Language related knowledge and experiences*

The *ELL Instructional Strategies* course was developed as a platform to review research examining theoretically and empirically supported practices for the effective education of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. During the first year, the course content was identical to the course taught in the on-campus version; the topics consisted of a brief study of second language acquisition, instructional strategies thought to be effective for ELLs, an overview of programs types, and strategies for effective parent and community involvement. Students also enrolled in Spanish classes and were immersed in a Spanish-speaking environment.

Students had ample and meaningful contact with people who speak languages other than English. Nevertheless, they drew conclusions that deviated from hoped-for understandings that they would need to provide effective education for their future ELLs. For example, many thought that grammar drills (like the ones they were experiencing in their Spanish course) were an essential way to teach English in an ELL classroom, and that English immersion programs (such as the one they were experiencing) were the most advantageous for ELLs to learn. Comments such as these were common:

I think it's too hard to learn all the rules at once. In my Spanish classes, if they had taught me the rules for regular and irregular verbs at once I would have gotten confused. Instead one week was spent on regular verbs and then I was tested and then the next week I was taught irregular verbs and then tested again. I feel that I understand the rules for both verbs because I mastered one before going on to the next.

These data exposed the need for a greater emphasis on distinguishing the experiences of an adult learner of a language in an intensive study abroad experience with that of an immigrant child learning a second language in a classroom context in which a child must also learn grade level academic content.

*Language-related attitudes and beliefs*

During the year one, students were excited about their increased cultural and linguistic competence. However, while learning Spanish and trying to navigate an unfamiliar culture, students felt frustration and exhaustion, and their experiences occasionally reified existing negative thoughts or stereotypes. Feelings of cultural superiority were evident.

I feel frustration in this culture. My frustration has been present since I arrived, but I've only just found words for my experience. I am a conscientious person - I am punctual, responsible, and dependable. I feel that this is incongruous with the general laissez-faire, laid-back Mexican disposition.

Another student commented:

[Mexico] taught me that you can be living a humble life and think that you have it all. It taught me that, due to a corrupt government, Mexico is filthy and does not have enough education and jobs.... I love the cleanliness of America. I love the safety and security that Social Security and insurance bring. I love that we are neurotic about having everyone in the car wear seatbelts. I love America. I'm grateful to Mexico for showing me things that I can work on myself, but I'm grateful for [the U.S.].

Students were also observed bragging about their ability to negotiate for the best prices on artisan goods. One student explained that she would purposely find those people who looked particularly “desperate” and offer them a fraction of the price that was asked, and when refused, would walk away until the seller would “cave in” and sell the item for far less than what it was worth. These unsettling events were discussed in class but continued to be an accepted form of interaction with some of the vendors. Students’ difficulty interpreting cultural conditions and events resulted in the decision to include the *Diversity in Education* course the following year.

In spite of these problems that required ongoing negotiation and led to plans to adjust the program, data also revealed possibilities that could be nurtured and built upon over time. The relationships students developed with their Mexican host families moderated culturally inappropriate interactions, increased students’ comfort and understanding of the community and culture, and decreased students’ sense of homesickness and distress. The more students were able to connect with their Mexican family and the more they were able to easily connect with other students from the program, the more easily they were able to adapt. As a result of these insights, gleaned from the data, a greater focus was placed on developing local support structures with people from Mexico each successive year and care was taken to ensure home placements that allowed students more ready access to one another.

### Year two

During year two, the number of faculty participants was increased from one to two. Thus, two university courses could be offered: *ELL Instructional Strategies* and *Diversity in Education*.



Complicating matters, some students had taken one, or both classes in the past but still wanted to enroll in the program. Being mindful of these administrative realities, students were given the option of taking both university courses, one university course and Spanish, or just Spanish. All students, no matter which options they chose, stayed with families, and attended cultural excursions and field trips to bilingual schools.

According to data obtained in year one, the *ELL Instructional Strategies* course was revised to include a greater emphasis on second language acquisition, and students were asked to make explicit comparisons between the experiences of immigrant students in instructional environments in U.S. K-12 classrooms and their experiences learning Spanish in Mexico. The number of visits to bilingual schools in Mexico was increased to strengthen our students' understanding of the contrasts between adult and child learning. In order to address deficit thinking, stereotyping, or the perpetuation of feelings of cultural superiority, the second class, *Diversity in Education*, was implemented and content was shaped with the intention of fostering deeper understanding of both cultural differences and global political and economic dynamics.

Finally, realizing the importance of the experiences with Mexican host families, students were placed with families that were known to have excellent relationships with students. Additionally, in response to students' feelings of frustration and homesickness, arrangements were made for them to be placed in groups within neighborhoods. Data from year two provided important insights about the adjustments that had been made.

*Language-related knowledge and experience*

Perhaps the most important revelation gained from year two data analysis was an understanding of the serious consequences of allowing some students to opt out of their Spanish coursework. This confirmed the importance of one of the core components of the program: formal experiences in language acquisition. Students who took only the university courses, but not the Spanish courses, tended to struggle the most as they negotiated the linguistic and cultural community in Cuernavaca. These students were overly reliant upon a few peers with greater cultural and linguistic competence, rarely venturing out on their own. They tended to socialize only within their group. They frequented international franchise restaurants instead of choosing establishments in the local Mexican culture. It became increasingly clear that if students were to make the most of their study abroad experiences, they needed to study Spanish and experience the challenges and benefits of acquiring a second language.

The *ESL Instructional Strategies* course content was more targeted; for example, students were asked to make specific observations in their journal (e.g., "What connections have you made between the frustration and exhilarations you've experienced as a Spanish learner and the experiences of the ELLs you have observed in your practicum courses?"). Some student responses were brief and reflected minimal depth of thought:

My mama was very patient with me and let me try to use Spanish on my own. It really helped me to see how important it is to let your ELL students practice their English, and the importance of creating a risk-free environment.

Responses to prompts ranged from such relatively simple observations to surprisingly reflective analyses.

Some students continued to believe, contrary to course teachings, that learners' first language interfered with their learning of another language. Some clung to the belief that teaching grammatical rules one at a time, as you would teach an adult learner of a foreign language, is helpful to young ELLs. Most students did, however, recognize the benefit of using students' first language to assist their understanding of academic content. Students began to observe the central concepts of ELL instruction and strategies that their Spanish teachers or familia used that helped them understand the concepts. Comments that described how they would apply language-related instructional strategies such as this began to appear in their journals and questionnaires: "Music is such a great tool for learning. It is enjoyable, teaches vocabulary, etc. I'm really eager to us it in my classroom."

Data also revealed that when students failed to develop their second language skills as quickly as they had expected, they felt "stupid" because they could not fully articulate their ideas in Spanish. They were beginning to understand the complicated nature of acquiring another language. Others arrived at this conclusion when trying to explain English to others:

There was a young boy in front of me that was completing his English homework. I asked if I could correct it. He let me correct it and I found several mistakes. I was able to teach him about words like clean, cleaner, cleanest and happy, happier and happiest. It made me realize that some of the language I know is only how it sounds. For example, one of his words was "beautiful." He had written beautiful, beautifuler, beautifulest. Upon

reading his answers, I knew I couldn't explain why except it didn't sound right. I've really realized how difficult 2<sup>nd</sup> language acquisition is for me and my students.

### *Language-related attitudes and beliefs*

Students who chose not to take the *Diversity in Education* course were less able to process the way their socio-political positionality might be affecting their cultural and linguistic experiences. Student members of the dominant religion participated in activities sponsored by U.S. missionaries, a context that was supportive and familiar. Some were even observed attempting to "educate" Mexican people whom they encountered about the general tenets of their evangelical church.

Feelings of cultural superiority continued to be a strong theme, but for those who enrolled in *Diversity in Education*, those feelings were mitigated by content and conversations that were a part of the class. Early journal entries indicated that they first questioned and were resistant to the ideas presented in the class.

The most interesting point today was how white, straight males [are assumed] to be the model human being. They are most "privileged." ... so [A] and I starting talking about reverse discrimination. The Math Engineering Science Achievement (MESA) [targeting] everyone but white males, and scholarships for only African Americans, and workplaces requiring a certain # of workers who are minorities, even if that makes an uneven ratio to what ratio they represent in the world.

Ongoing review of the data informed ongoing instruction and the misperceptions underpinning claims of reverse discrimination were addressed during class. Class conversations coupled with poverty observed in Mexico created an ongoing source of productive dissonance and

analysis for students. As time passed, however, students began to question their relative economic advantage with regard to buying items from Mexican vendors.

I also wonder about bargaining and how to know where to draw the line. We have kind of trained ourselves to ignore those around us and walk by as though we are unaware of their existence of their needs ... In some ways I think we do it because we can. We have the power to ignore what is going on – to choose not to see the vendors and the things that they have for sale. I was just thinking of the power that we have over them. They depend on us as buyers to provide them with enough money to eat at night. When we refuse to pay very much for something, are we hurting them or helping them?

Such comments indicated that students were looking beneath the surface of their experiences and considering their economical and political connections to people in other countries.

### Year three

During the third year, the duration of the ELL study abroad program was extended to four weeks, giving students more time to process and understand the complexities of second language acquisition and cultural adaptation. All students were required to take Spanish. Students were firmly encouraged to take two ELL pre-requisite courses prior to going to Mexico: *Educational Linguistics* and *Second Language Acquisition*. Information provided during pre-trip orientations was made more explicit to avoid inappropriate interactions with the people we encountered. The content of the *Diversity in Education* coursework was adjusted to include more attention to white privilege, neo-colonialism, global economic policy, and models of cultural understanding.

Students' involvement in Mexican bilingual school classrooms was increased from 5 to 15 hours and students spent their time in one school, working with one teacher instead of observing in a variety of schools and classrooms. Students gathered and delivered supplies and volunteered their time in a local non-governmental, non-profit organization that serves the needs of poor indigenous children who spend their days selling goods on the street. Third year data provided further insights about the evolving program.

*Language-related knowledge and experience*

The increasingly targeted learning experiences of the *ELL Instructional Strategies* course helped students make more regular and extensive connections between the course content, their Spanish classes, and their future teaching practices.

I think that comprehensible input should be thought of in terms not only with language and language acquisition, but in all subjects ... Something that was significant to me in my Spanish class today was that I really felt that my maestro notices my understanding and really makes an effort to help me understand better. I was beginning to get a little frustrated in the class ... He noticed and slowed down and even reviewed the conjugation I was unfamiliar with and always encouraged me to ask many questions. This is a class atmosphere I would like to create in my classroom, where students are free to ask questions and that will adapt for the needs of the students before the students get too frustrated and stop trying.

Journal entries provided evidence that students were able to think metacognitively about their experiences. On the street, when students were using Spanish for conventional purposes, they experienced the frustration with the language students had experienced the year before.

They told about how their “brain wanted to shut off,” they were “overwhelmed,” and they “did not feel that they could join in,” even when encouraged by their Mexican familia and friends. Despite these frustrations, they were able to reflect insightfully about what was happening to them. By and large, they were impressed by the patience demonstrated by those they encountered and often expressed the idea that the same courtesy would not likely be demonstrated in the US to immigrants who do not speak English.

I realized that it is terrible how we treat Mexicans in the United States. I have heard so many negative comments and overall there are so many negative views towards Mexicans in the United States. When, down here, they are so open and kind and willing to help whenever ... And how we speak English here, and they help us with as much English as we know. But, in the United States if someone asks something in Spanish, they could tend to get ignored or looked down upon (although I do not know if we as US citizens are looked down upon here). It just seems that they have much more respect in general than US citizens do to Mexicans.

### *Language-related attitudes and beliefs*

Involving students with the local NGO that served poor indigenous children was a powerful addition to the third year of the program and contributed greatly to more nuanced thought about immigration, poverty, and collective action. In the third year students expressed more personal commitment to addressing the inequities they studied in the *Diversity in Education* class and observed in Mexico; some suggested a sense of duty to facilitate change.



Especially after visiting [the school the NGO sponsors] on Saturday, I've been doing a lot of thinking about what I can do specifically to help with the many, many, many problems our world and societies are facing. Extreme poverty is rampant. True, I've seen it first-hand in some instances, and my family has nearly been there. But somehow it still manages to seem disconnected from the "world" I live in ... After so many examples of the hardships people face, I feel a little guilty. Not in the sense that I've done anything wrong, but that with as many blessings and privileges that I have (and often take for granted), what am I doing to make things better? Yes, I know I will teach about diversity and multicultural education in my future classrooms. I will help make students aware of the problems the world faces due to bigotry and greed. However, we all learn better by example. So, what else, specifically, can I do to fix things? Go paint a community center... Donate a few things... I feel like I'm treating some minor symptoms of a major disease, and treating them hardly at all. No, I alone cannot combat the disease, but I know there is more I can do. So I will just have to figure out what.

The *Diversity in Education* course more explicitly challenged students' preconceived attitudes and beliefs about working with immigrant children by providing a global understanding of immigration policies then tying it to the education of ELLs. This expanded content was not lost on the students.

It made me think about when we talked about the policies of NAFTA and how the US is taking advantage of people, making them work [more for less]. Not only does it affect the adults, but the children, as well, who are forced to work so they can have money enough for food. I have also noticed, by watching the news, how much they focus on



politics and other issues that occur in the US. In the states there may be a section in the news devoted to world-wide events, but there is more focus here on the US. We must have a big influence on what happens here.

Such journal entries suggested that the nurturing of possibilities was contributing to students' increased interest in global connections and inequities. These deeper insights suggested that students would respond more empathetically to the ELL students they will be teaching.

### **Implications for ELL teacher education programs**

A study abroad program designed to benefit future teachers of ELLs can be beneficial if critical learning experiences are intentionally developed throughout. Taking Spanish classes in Mexico without including comprehensive coursework designed to challenge and engage student thinking is likely to fall short of helping teachers make those critical connections between theory and practice. In fact, such experiences can easily be counter-productive, reifying stereotypes and misunderstandings. It is impossible to overstate the importance of steadily monitoring and adjusting such programs, based on systematically collected data.

An ELL study abroad program can be implemented in tandem with a university ELL endorsement program or with a well-developed professional development program to enhance ELL teacher knowledge and effectiveness. In addition to Spanish classes and strong family placements, the most effective program would contain the following features:

- Prerequisite coursework in first and second language acquisition and development.

- Rigorous content readings designed to connect experiences with research pertaining to the cultural and linguistic variables associated with educating ELLs.
- Balanced experiences in Mexico including cultural excursions, field experiences at local schools and work with local community support organizations.
- Guided support allowing students opportunities to debrief experiences as they unfold; encouraging students to think metacognitively about their linguistic experiences in relation to own language, culture, and beliefs.
- Supportive learning environment where students can confront and overcome deficit views of other languages, cultures, and beliefs, and understand the way power and privilege influence cross-cultural experiences.

Language and culture cannot be disentangled; meaningful attention to both is required to provide students the opportunity to make connections between coursework and future teaching practice. This research highlights the effectiveness of using a study-abroad immersion program to educate preservice teachers to work empathetically and effectively with English language learners in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways. The ongoing data collection and analysis informed the navigation of problems and nurturing of possibilities as ELL pre-service teachers developed requisite understandings for the effective teaching of their ELL students.

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