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# Learning Language is 'Hard Work'

Cheryl A. Hunter and A. Renee Gutierrez

## **Pre-Service Teacher Reflections upon Second Language Acquisition through Cultural Immersion**

In the United States, it is increasingly likely that elementary teachers will encounter students whose first language is not English. There are 10.9 million school-age children who speak a language other than English at home, an increase from 9 percent in 1979 to 21 percent in 2008 (National Center for Education Statistics 2010). Student ethnicity reflects similar change: “[b]etween 1990 and 2010, the percentage of public school students who were White decreased from 67 to 54 percent, and the percentage of those who were Hispanic increased from 12 percent (5.1 million students) to 23 percent (12.1 million students)” (2010). However, in contrast to these student trends, we find that White, non-Hispanic teachers constitute an overwhelming 83.1 percent majority of all public school teachers (National Center for Education Statistics 2007-2008).

Interestingly, there is no known national data on elementary teachers and their foreign language experiences and we lack available data on teachers’ second language abilities. Even elementary teachers with certifications as Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) are not required to have fluency in another language. TESOL instruction standards do insist that teacher candidates should know and understand their students’ backgrounds, and value their students’ home cultures (tesol.org), but they do not require teachers to have experienced foreign language learning, nor do they address how to change persistent attitudes that view other cultures as “deficient” beyond a clear stance that these attitudes are based on factual inaccuracies (tesol.org). Overall, American elementary teachers may only be able to draw on limited experiences of second language acquisition from high school or college foreign language classes. This limited experience could be a detriment in terms of teachers understanding the challenges of the language acquisition process and developing empathy toward linguistic difference.

This study provides a critical interpretation of literacy practices in a teacher education program and offers evidence that non-traditional experience, such as language immersion programs, can be of benefit to pre-service teachers as they learn about how to teach literacy. The purpose of this research was to examine if intensive language and cultural immersion would impact pre-service teacher perceptions of teaching young English learners. We chose to use critical ethnographic methods to explore educators’ perceptions of the foreign language acquisition process as it related to their

understanding of literacy pedagogy and English language learners (ELLs). The participants recognized significant difficulties inherent in the immersive process of foreign language and cultural learning.

Recent studies have shown that immersion study does not inherently accelerate language learning in the areas of grammar and phonological development but “naturalistic exposure does seem to impact significantly the learner’s sociolinguistic, fluency and lexical development” (Howard 2011). These findings are of particular interest to our research because we are interested in how pre-service teachers live out the cross-cultural learning that their ELL students might experience and what critical insights into their students’ learning paradigms might be provided that classroom based literacy methods courses may not. The goal of the research was not grammatical or phonological accuracy for the students but rather how the experience of linguistic and cultural immersion might impact their understanding of language acquisition as it applied to their teaching in the classroom.

## **Critical Literacy**

Drawing from social interaction theory, critical literacy assumes that norms surrounding language come from larger cultural norms and traditions constituted from the individual’s interactions. Norms about language are not value-neutral. They may reify misconceptions about what constitutes “being literate” and subsequently reinforce misunderstandings about students and parents not literate in English. Critical literacy sees education as a means for social change. Through education the individual comes to “share in the social consciousness;” changing individual behavior based on this social consciousness is “the only sure method of social reconstruction,” (Dewey, 1897:16). In short, critical literacy challenges teachers to think critically about the language process in their classroom thus shaping a different experience for themselves and their students.

Critical literacy coursework approaches language instruction by explicitly disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on socio-political issues, and supporting social justice (Glazier, 2007). It also challenges students with social positions of privilege to reflect on their different perspectives (Sleeter, 1995). However, the goal of critical literacy is to challenge all students—regardless of status—to address assumptions about what constitutes literacy and who is literate. Foss defines one element of critical literacy as “reading literature and [students’] own lives with an awareness of systems of meaning and power,” (Foss, 2002: 395). The “critical” component is aimed at facilitating “an initial understanding that [students’] different experiences are socially constructed and not just based on their individual actions and choices” (397). Recognizing social construction changes pre-service teachers’ perceptions of themselves and others; changed perspectives foster new attitudes and actions. This chain of events transforms the teacher’s perspective, impacting their work with all students, including linguistic

minority students. However, a critical literacy framework does not inform all literacy coursework. Likewise, not all pedagogical training specifically addresses English Language Learners (ELLs) and if so those methods may become an add-on in a traditional literacy methods course without being fully integrated into the course pedagogy.

## **Current Literacy Methods for Young English Learners**

Current best practices from education research support the model of explicitly connecting language-acquisition knowledge to instruction for ELLs. Research recommends increased interaction, authentic learning, improved comprehensibility, and a positive learning environment (Slavin and Cheung, 2005). The well-known Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English focuses on four primary learning goals: communicate in English, learn content material, advance higher-level thinking skills, and master literacy skills (Genzuk, 2003). Together these methods suggest that ELLs need active and authentic learning experiences, oral and written language in context, lessons that build on prior knowledge, and an affirmative learning environment (Johannessen, 2007; Genzuk, 2003).

Likewise, the literature clearly supports building first language proficiency simultaneously with second language acquisition in ELLs (Slavin et al., 2010; Tabors, 2008). These students find greater success in English if they use their home language skills to help them in English reading comprehension (Restrepo and Gray, 2007). Research finds that using both native language and English simultaneously has positive effects on English literacy compared with English-only instruction (August, Shanahan, and Shanahan 2006) and ultimately concludes that simultaneous instruction is superior to an English-only approach. Elementary teachers typically acquire knowledge regarding the value of dual-language proficiency, though it is clear that most cannot offer native language support.

However, teaching literacy involves more than knowledge of how to use a particular literacy method or teach a literacy skill; it also requires interrogating assumptions about first and second language, the meaning of literacy, and considering assumptions about the child's home language. As a result, national teacher accreditation associations such as the National Association of the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) set professional standards that recognize the need to accept the legitimacy of children's home language, and to respect and value the home culture (NAEYC, 1995). Furthermore, NAEYC promotes professional development in the areas of culture, language and diversity and encourages the recruitment of educators trained in languages other than English (1995).

Thus, while teachers must know the strategies and best practices for students' linguistic development, they must also understand that assumptions about language literacy can create false beliefs about ELL children, their parents and their communities. Karabenick

and Noda (2004) found a significant percentage of teachers believed that use of a home language interfered with second language acquisition and while teachers agreed that diversity is enriching there was ambivalence in teachers' beliefs that different cultures can work and socialize together (Karabenick and Noda, 2004). Likewise, Restrepo suggests that education professionals often assume ELL parents are illiterate because they cannot communicate with them easily in spoken language (Restrepo and Gray, 2007). When working with linguistic minority students, teaching practices must be paired with a thoughtful process of challenging the teacher's assumptions, values, and beliefs (Bartolomé, 2004). In sum, effective educators must both learn the methods for teaching literacy and address their own assumptions and attitudes toward language.

What is missing from the literature is an examination of pre-service teacher assumptions of the language-acquisition process and their assumptions about the challenges facing linguistically and culturally diverse children. To examine these assumptions requires placing pre-service teachers in an experience that requires both language-acquisition and cultural-acquisition.

## **Methodology**

This research is primarily interested in the meaning of the linguistic and culturally immersive experience to pre-service teachers and if it resulted in any application to future teaching. Therefore, this study articulates the meanings and understandings of the language and cultural acquisition process that emerged through the participants' narrative in an attempt to explain patterns of activity, as opposed to simply describing it. For these reasons we chose a critical ethnographic methodology. We were hoping to explain what language and cultural immersion experiences might offer to the overall teaching of literacy as opposed to merely describing the immersion experience. Our research focus was on the experience of linguistic and cultural immersion and how the experience may impact teachers' reflection upon currently held assumptions; we did not focus on the language adoption process itself. We did not want to assume that the experience would necessarily impact the participants' assumptions about ELLs nor did we want to specifically orient their thinking toward this assumption; therefore we did not ask them to reflect about ELLs prior to their immersion experience.

This research is methodologically informed by the critical work of Carspecken and Habermas. The meaning an actor intends through their words or actions is not often easily accessible to the observer. Referring to Habermas's theory of communicative action, Carspecken explains, "all meaningful acts internally reference truth claims" (Carspecken, 1996, 72). Thus, a "truth claim" is less a notion of 'true' versus 'false' and more a condition of what the actor considers socially valid within a historic moment. Habermas argued that truth is about what conditions are necessary to win a consensus for 'truth' (Habermas, 1984). He assumes that all truth claims are potentially fallible and

uncertain, and that fallibility is potentiated when the cultural consensus no longer holds a truth to be true. Through articulating a participant's "truths," we produce a trustworthy account of the social processes within a research study (Carspecken, 1996; 58).

Any assumption that a teacher may hold about teaching literacy or about an English learner is a truth claim, it is a belief that he/she considers socially valid at the moment. As a critical study, we were interested in exploring the language immersion process as a different socially constructed way to learn about literacy and what meanings participants derived from this particular literacy learning experience. Therefore we designed our study to examine the truth claims about literacy and culture within an experience where the pre-service teacher was learning to be literate and navigate a different culture through immersion. This is distinct from learning how to teach literacy (in a methods course or in an English language classroom); participants inhabited cultural difference as opposed to studying about it in a highly controlled academic setting.

Critical researchers, like many others, recognize the need for researcher reflexivity, which requires the researcher to make explicit her/his assumptions and potential biases in an attempt to set these aside to better approach the analysis process. All researchers, regardless of methodological approach, bring value orientations to their research domain; therefore researchers identify their research value orientations as a means of keeping potential bias in check and as a way of keeping the process transparent and open to dialogue, demonstrating that research value orientations do not "construct" the object of study (Carspecken, 1996: 6). Backgrounded assumptions and disciplinary perspectives alert researchers to certain possibilities and processes in their data, shaping topics and research emphases (Charmaz, 2006). These backgrounded perspectives are recognized, articulated and evaluated in order to provide transparency in the research process and address potential researcher bias. This is a conscious effort by the researcher to refrain from personal persuasion in the investigation (Crotty, 1998).

Our specific epistemological assumptions that helped organize the study design derived from the authors' experiences teaching multicultural education and diversity courses, literacy and reading methods courses, and foreign language coursework. We have studied and travelled abroad to multiple countries over several decades. One author is a near-native speaker and the other monolingual with foreign language experience. We have also written grants for incorporating foreign language into the curriculum for education majors at colleges where there is no requirement for foreign language. The principal author has taught elementary literacy methods including state-required phonics-only courses and worked to include more content on ELL into the coursework. We assume that intercultural language and cultural immersion experiences have the potential to help all students better understand the experiences of others and have constantly kept this assumption in mind during all stages of analysis.

We explored the importance of this question first with a small population to determine if an intensive immersive language and cultural experience would render significant reflections and applications regarding the teaching of literacy in an elementary classroom. We defined an “intensive immersive language experience” as near total linguistic and cultural immersion where the student spends 90-100 percent of his/her time interacting in the foreign culture (with foreign language speakers and not interacting in English) over the course of a month. We include cultural immersion as integral to foreign language because we believe that a particular language cannot be studied in isolation of the culture, as language is a symbolic meaning system arising from its particular culture. We did, however, believe that adult students could be interested in language learning in and of itself, so our participants studied language several hours a day in one-on-one classes. Furthermore, we were interested in the cultural reflections and insights on learning culture that students might offer.

Secondly, we believe that the longer a student experiences foreign language and cultural immersion the greater the depth of student reflection and the greater the opportunity to observe student interactions during the experience. Therefore we decided on a four-week immersion experience to gather a significant depth of student reflections and observational data.

The questions that guided the research were: what does a linguistic and cultural immersive experience provide students in terms of their learning about how to teach literacy; what assumptions, beliefs, values are embedded within their reflections during a linguistically and culturally immersive experience; what connections do they make to their future teaching or their future students; and how do they relate this experience to previous literacy learning experiences (such as in literacy methods courses or other classroom language experiences).

We solicited student interest at a Midwest college. It is a small liberal arts institution in that it has about 1200 students, is predominantly White, and draws its students largely from the surrounding areas within the state. In the student body as a whole, 26.5 percent of students study abroad over the course of their academic careers. Over the past three years an average of 11 students graduated each May with an Education major, majority of whom are White and female. Of that cohort, an average of fewer than two per year study abroad, and those who do, generally attend college-led trips of three weeks or less. Most of those classes visit English-speaking countries, but even travel to countries like China include a week or less of homestay. In short, Education students make up less than one percent of all students who study abroad, and when they do study abroad, it is often in an English bubble with their peers.

For our research, we initially targeted all elementary education majors who completed coursework in literacy methods and were prepared to student teach. We chose this site

because the majority of the potential participants matched the overall demographic of American elementary teachers: female, White, middle-class, monolingual, and trained in a traditional teacher education program. While the population of students shared the previous attributes, they were also diverse in personality, foreign language experience, parental education level, and location of parental home.

We consider the recruitment process for our study to have generated an interesting finding in and of itself. Our original goal was recruitment of five students, and we secured grant funding to offset costs of language courses and in-country expenses. But we were surprised at the lack of interest we found: seven of the nine solicited pre-service teachers had no desire to attend a four-week language and cultural immersion summer experience. Instead, only two students (out of a total of nine that were solicited) expressed interest, perhaps reflecting the attitudes notes in the research presented in the introduction to this article. We recognize the small number of participants as a limitation of the study. However, it offered an opportunity to examine in much greater depth (through direct observation, extensive writing, and interviewing) an understanding of how a second language and culturally immersive experience could impact pre-service teacher perceptions of teaching literacy to English learners.

Our participants, Sara and Melanie (pseudonyms) shared significant traits: both were third-year education students, aged 21; both enrolled in a liberal arts college in the Midwest; both are first-generation college students. With GPAs above 3.5, both had completed teaching foundations coursework and teaching methods coursework for literacy, math, science, and social studies. Participants passed the required Praxis exams and were cleared to student teach the following year. They expressed interest in participating based upon a desire to teach future ELLs and to have more linguistic and culturally diverse experiences.

Our participants differed in several respects. Melanie, who tended towards introversion, took four years of Spanish in high school but had not taken college-level Spanish courses. She grew up in a small rural town close to her College. She did not have a passport nor had she experience in travel outside the US. Sara, on the other hand, was an extrovert who had taken American Sign Language in high school, but had no other foreign language education. She grew up in a large urban area several hours away from her College, and had travelled to London and Paris for one-week vacations.

The principal investigator had extensive travel experiences but no prior Spanish language abilities. She travelled with the participants and shared in all the language and cultural experiences as a participant observer. A small town in Costa Rica was chosen as the site based on ease of travel to country and within country, cost of travel relative to other locations, and relative isolation from English speakers. Participants were intentionally isolated from each other as much as possible during the experience. Participants lived in



separate homestays with Costa Rican families and took language classes independently each weekday morning for 4 hours. Weekends were unscheduled for the students and they spent all their time with their host families. We specifically did not ask students to reflect upon their experiences with ELLs and any language or cultural assumptions prior to the immersion experience because we did not want to bias the data by orienting the students to the specific research question. Students were told they were participating in a language and cultural immersion experience and we were interested how they might use the experience in the future. We recognized the need to draw on both narrative reflections by the participants and observations of the students during the experience. Participants wrote pre- and post-immersion open-ended journals. During immersion we collected open-ended daily journal writings, observational data, and conducted open-ended interviews. Students were asked to journal about their daily thoughts and experiences. Interviews followed up with questions based on reading the journals to solicit further information and clarify perceptions. Observations and interviews were transcribed and qualitative software was used to code and organize themes. Themes were collated into categories representing a final assertion of participants' understanding and assumptions about learning and teaching literacy.

## **Findings**

Our analysis showed that the language and cultural immersion experience revealed two key assumptions pre-service teachers made about the complexities of language acquisition. First, the participants had radically underestimated the cognitive workload required to understand and speak a second language; each subsequently recognized her learning deficits and articulated the emotional challenges inherent in acquiring a new language. Second, as a result of the challenge of language acquisition, participants felt emotional isolation in and from the host culture.

### **Participant Realizations of the Workload Required for Language Acquisition**

To begin the analysis, participants underestimated the cognitive workload involved in acquiring a second language. Participants pre-immersion journals lacked any reference to being involved in pre-trip language preparation and focused primarily on travel related concerns, such as clothing, health, or cultural attractions. Sara, without any prior Spanish, never mentioned any consideration of language preparation. Melanie, with some language experience, describes her previous Spanish classroom learning but does not make reference to any review or practice prior to leaving. Participant journals described the excitement of learning the language in country and how they “planned to use (their) Spanish” upon return, one noting “I have a friend who speaks Spanish so I plan to keep up my Spanish when I get back.” However, neither recognized the need to prepare or

practice language ahead of time because they assumed learning the language would be easy.

## **Inadequate Language Preparation**

Upon arrival in Costa Rica, Sara spent her first hours visually upset when her bags did not arrive. She verbally described the “inconvenience” and “frustration” that the airline had “lost her luggage.” She talked about being angry at the airline and focused on not having items that she needed. However, in her first journal entry she does not frame her lost luggage in terms of anger and inconvenience as she did outwardly. She writes:

*The longer and longer I stood there [at the luggage carousel] the more nervous I got, because if my bag wasn't there then I would have to talk to someone. I hate talking to people in those kinds of situations especially if they are more likely to not know English.*

The normal frustration of a missing bag was compounded by the language difference. Publically she said she was “frustrated” but privately she admits she was “nervous” and “anxious” because of the language difference, not just inconvenience of missing bags. She specifically addresses a point when she realized that she “would have to talk to someone” who might not “know English.” The need to prepare linguistically ahead of time did not become a realization until she had landed in a foreign country. As she processed this, her journal’s focus turns to her lack of preparation. She continues:

*Before we left on this trip my dad encouraged me to watch movies in Spanish and to practice phrases and I had every intention of doing so but like most things in my life I was always going to do it later until later was no longer an option [ . . .]. I banked instead on what I remembered from 8th grade, what is common knowledge from TV shows and the like, and Melanie’s help. [I] never got to it. This must mean that at some level it wasn't high enough on my priority list.*

Within the first day of the immersive experience, Sara becomes aware that her lack of preparation was a naiveté in her understanding of the effort required to learn and speak a language.

Melanie, on the other hand, overestimated her Spanish abilities. In the first pre-travel meeting with the principle investigator, Melanie spoke at length about her previous high school language experience and remarked that she received “A’s.” “I considered being a Spanish major,” Melanie explained. Later, she described that her Spanish should put her “ahead” of others in the group. On a separate occasion, Melanie commented that the experience would be a “good refresher” for her language skills. Once in-country, however, Melanie’s journals reflected a shift in the perception of her language abilities. She writes:

*I don't think I counted on the language barrier being as difficult as it is. I felt more confident in my speech before I got here.*

*I wasn't prepared for the language barrier. I thought I would pick it up faster. I was hoping that I would actually be able to have full conversations with my family, but it's still just bits and pieces.*

Melanie assumed that her prior knowledge of classroom Spanish would allow her to converse freely. She assumed that her four-year experience in the high school foreign language classroom was equivalent to achieving conversational Spanish. She held this assumption until she was immersed in an experience that forced her to shift her previous perceptions about her language abilities.

Both Sara and Melanie had no prior conceptualizations of the level of difficulty in actually learning to be fluent in another language. With no prior experience in learning to converse solely in another language the participants had a false sense of the ease of learning language, which led both of them to forgo language preparation before the trip. They both underestimated the difficult task of day-to-day communication for a second language learners: this assumption was not challenged until the immersion experience actually began.

## **Expecting Greater Fluency during Immersion**

During their daily “study sessions” in the school lobby, participants would talk to each other in English about difficulties such as homework, understanding different accents, the speed of conversation and their perceived lack of progress. These conversations were often marked by a tone of complaint directed outwardly, in terms of the teacher talking too quickly or with different accents, but inwardly they were expressed from a “what’s wrong with me” perspective.

In conversations with the participant observer each week, the participants posed questions of why they were still struggling. Even after hearing the suggestion that struggle was “natural,” their ingrained expectations that language learning is easy overrode the constant reality of their experience. Ultimately, the participant “study session” conversations focused on reactions to language learning as opposed to actually practicing the language. They rarely helped each other with their homework. Instead, conversation would stop while they silently wrote out homework and they rarely practiced the language homework with each other.

In journals, participants commented how they expected to either be “farther along” or to have “picked it up” more quickly. Each week, they expressed disappointment in their skills, criticizing their ability even though they readily admitted they were getting “better” at communicating. The continual written self-critique demonstrates their deeply

ingrained assumption that learning a language should be easy. In one journal entry, Sara explained how she was “displacing [her] frustration with [herself] for not picking the language up with ease and grace... constantly stumbling through [her] sentences.” Sara blames herself for not learning more readily and is seemingly unaware of the significant challenges of language acquisition. She then internalizes the blame to explain why she continues to have difficulty: it is her fault. She becomes frustrated with herself for her lack of “grace.” She writes:

*The discouraging feeling often leads to thoughts like “this is just too hard,” which leads to resisting the language, and in a sense it’s like giving up on the ability to learn.*

*Now after taking classes for two weeks I realize I was not open to the language at all. I really wasn’t taking advantage of opportunities to speak it, practice it, or to struggle through it. I was resistant because it was difficult and made me feel stupid. I didn’t expect to be an expert overnight but I think that I did expect to be able to pick it up quicker and with more grace.*

Here Sara begins to elaborate on her thoughts of “this is just too hard” as a sign that she was “resisting the language.” Sara’s assumption that learning should be “easier” come into direct conflict with her actual experience. She internalizes a feeling of being “stupid” because of her difficulties. At the end of her experience Sara rewrites her assumption that language learning is easy:

*Many times I remember feeling like this just wasn’t something I could do and wasn’t like I expected- it wasn’t fun like I expected... it was actually work. That sounds funny to say out loud, that I didn’t think learning a new language would be hard, but it’s true. I think I had a fantastical idea that learning through immersion meant just talking and magically picking it up quickly just by listening and talking.*

In Melanie’s last entries she continued to write about her frustrations about not being more fluent and expecting to be “farther along” in her own language development. While earlier journal entries suggest that Melanie was becoming aware that learning a new language is difficult, she never fully accepted that she could not speak more fluently. The following three quotes transpire over the course of the four-week experience:

*So I thought I might be a little better at understanding the people and perhaps even talking to them, having had one week of classes and living with a family. It did not really work that way. It felt like they expected me to know more, but I didn’t.*

*I think I just thought I would be able to speak to my family a little easier. Here we are, in the middle of week two, and I don’t feel like it’s exactly getting better.*

*I just thought four years of Spanish classes would have done more for me. Honestly, I retained a lot of the vocabulary and I was surprised at how much came back to me, but I think I just thought that I would get a lot farther in three weeks.*

Melanie draws upon her previous language experiences in high school to support her notion that she “should” be doing “better.” These previous high school language

experiences appear to give Melanie a false notion of the ease of becoming fluent in conversational language, which reinforced the notion that she had no need to prepare for immersion.

## **Isolation and Limitations from Intercultural Communication**

Participants explain the experience of being English-speakers in a Spanish-speaking world as isolating in a variety of ways. The stresses from intercultural communication follow a ladder progression. They begin with feelings of isolation resulting from language processing time, which lead to self-imposed isolation. This isolation in turn leads to a strain in interpersonal relationships and subsequently results in an overall emotional toll from the process.

### **Isolation Imposed by Processing Time**

Participants recognize the time-consuming nature of listening in Spanish, translating to English, forming a response in English, translating that into Spanish, and expressing it orally. Melanie notices the processing time more than Sara does, perhaps in part because Sara has so little language that her ability to communicate is severely limited. The transparent processing of an English conversation suddenly becomes startlingly evident: the participants cannot process the second language in real time. They can no longer listen and simultaneously formulate an answer, nor can they listen and subsequently extemporize a response in Spanish. Melanie explains:

*It is both tiring and annoying to have to think so much before you talk. It's funny though because it's something you don't even think much about when speaking your own language. The processing ... takes a very long time!*

*I catch bits and pieces; usually about the only thing I can do is laugh or smile. I usually only have enough time to process some of the information I am hearing, and rarely have time to actually think of something to say in return. [ . . . ] In a way, I do feel like I'm missing out on the conversation.*

Prior to coming, Melanie thought communication might be easier for her because of her high school Spanish. Her comment made clear that she had never had an extended experience with native speakers requiring deeper communication in Spanish. Her lack of ability leaves her isolated from her host family, resulting in “missing out.” Melanie catches those “bits and pieces” that aid her in understanding what is being said. However, it is not a lack of understanding that she describes, but rather missing out on the social element of communication, the natural flow of the conversation itself.

Participants also added significant processing time to accommodate new linguistic thought-processes. The participants adapt to the lack of vocabulary with circumlocution, talking around words that they do not know, but often fail to communicate because the circumlocution repeatedly leads to another circumlocution. This time-consuming process further isolates them: it takes longer, and even with ample time to speak, they cannot fully express themselves. Melanie explains:

*It's like talking in a roundabout way. I have to flip through all the different ways to say one thing until I can find a way to say it in Spanish. And sometimes it takes three or four flips, which takes some time.*

*It's weird to sit there and have things running through your mind that you want to say, but to not be able to find the words.*

Because speaking in the foreign language is time consuming and mentally difficult, both participants express eagerness to communicate in their native language. Even though Sara didn't mention the additional processing time required by Spanish, she notes the absence of struggle when she speaks English. Both participants describe the ease of processing in English and how they appreciate the comfort of easily connecting with others. Sara states:

*Having someone with you that speaks English is nice because you don't have to struggle through every single conversation you have, you always have someone you can talk naturally to in your native comfortable tongue.*

*Spending time with other English speakers is "safe" because it is easy and comfortable; it is not a scary, nerve-wracking experience that takes herculean efforts with little immediate reward.*

### **Self-Imposed Isolation to Counter Stress**

Participants did not anticipate the "struggle" inherent in foreign language communication nor its significant impact on their personal interactions with others. In their writings they describe how they isolate themselves from others as a way to mitigate some of the stress of trying to communicate. They either pull back into an English environment, or remove themselves by withdrawing into solitary isolation. Both express their need to withdraw, but each uses a different mechanism. Early in the trip, Sara isolates herself by spending hours drawing. She writes:

*I also will spend time drawing pictures to label and call it homework or practicing but I am not memorizing anything. When I am feeling over overwhelmed with the language I can partner with something that is fun and relaxing to me by drawing.*

She recognizes that she resorts to drawing when she is overwhelmed, but does not articulate it as a means of eliminating interactions in Spanish. She 'partners' with art,

replacing the complicated foreign cultural negotiations with the silent companions of paper and pen. Melanie is not as introspective about her self-imposed isolation:

*I was studying in my room tonight because sometimes it gets a little loud down in the kitchen...and sometimes I just need a little bit of private time...*

Melanie excuses herself from the “loud” kitchen, failing to recognize that it would benefit her skill development more than the quiet upstairs.

She retreats to her bedroom to avoid the intensity of the language experience. Both Melanie and Sara isolate themselves from Spanish by “studying” in the company of other English speakers. “Study sessions” that initially take place over the lunch hour gradually become longer and longer, sometimes extending throughout the afternoon. On several occasions the school lobby area closed early and both participants verbally complained about their lack of access. It becomes apparent that participants wanted more and more time to talk in English. Sara explains:

*At the time I was spending a lot of time after class up in the guest house “studying” which really means spending hours doing only my homework and talking [in English] a lot.*

Because the intention for the study was to achieve an intensive immersion, spending 90 percent or more of their time with Spanish speakers, the principle investigator asked participants to separate after the lunch hour. Participants do not initially respond positively to this. They say that the time they spend “studying” is very important because the amount of homework and they were learning from each other during this time. Their resistance to separation is evidence that they are struggling with language and are using avoidance to mitigate the stress of communication. They isolate themselves either physically, such as retreating to a private space; or linguistically, being with only English speakers.

## **Resulting Stress on Relationships**

Avoidance and the resulting isolation impact the participants’ relationships with others during their immersion experience. They realize that the language barrier requires them to not only work extremely hard but also takes a toll on how they could communicate and thus interact with their host family. Melanie expresses frustration when the communication breaks down to a point when both parties have to disengage:

*And it’s absolutely frustrating at times. Because both parties try so hard to act things out, use gestures, explain things in round-about ways, and sometimes, it just doesn’t work and we both say, “Lo siento.”*

Melanie describes the conversation ending in a way that was not satisfying for either party; it ends with an apology because of her lack of communication abilities. The

apology and subsequent disappointment Melanie describes result from her inability to communicate. Likewise, Sara's language inabilities prevent her from immediately engaging her family to build relationships. She explains:

*The first couple of days were way more bumpy and awkward than they would have been if I knew the language. If I knew the language I could ask them questions, tell them about myself and immediately start to build a relationship or friendship with them.*

Both participants describe how their lack of language abilities created a barrier for building deeper relationships with native speakers. Journal entries further demonstrate their desire to communicate by expressing a wish to magically resolve the communication difficulties that obstruct relationships with their families:

*This thought keeps occurring to me: I just wish I could snap my fingers and, just for one minute, we could all speak the same language. I wish either I could speak Spanish really well or they knew some more English (Melanie).*

*Unfortunately I am not like Ella Enchanted (She could pick up languages quickly and speak them with very little accent) . . . I think I had a fantastical idea that learning through immersion meant just talking and magically picking it up quickly just by listening and talking). In my fantastical ideas about this experience there was no homework and lots of talking and games [ . . . ] (Sara)*

Melanie desires a magical solution to make the connections that are obstructed by her weak language skills. Sara's desire to "learn magically" resonates with the participants' expectation that there is a real life analog to a fairy tale gift for absorbing languages. Her implicit assumption is that learning a new language should be fun, an undertaking that does not require work or serious study.

## **Emotional Load Resulting from Isolation**

The isolation from the participants' lack of communication is described in their journals with emotionally charged self-evaluations. Infantilization and disenfranchisement follow their inability to communicate. Melanie most clearly articulates the notion of infantilization, being forced into a very young child's role, and her subsequent feelings of being discounted by others:

*It just makes me feel weird to not be able to participate. It's almost like being a little kid standing in the middle of an "adult" conversation and not being able to participate and maybe only being able to pick out certain things they are saying. I guess it just makes you feel left out.*

*During class, I find myself saying, "No sé" or "No importa" because sometimes I just can't find the right words.*



Likewise, Sara expressed her resistance to the language as a result of the stress of constant intercultural negotiation and/or isolation. She wrote:

*Some days I have also just been really tired and thus resistant to language and class in general, I would rather have been taking a nap in the sun. I saw how easy it is to get frustrated with learning a new language and begin to resist it or push it away. I experienced firsthand the frustration of not being able to communicate or be understood and how frustrating and lonely it can be... I was forced to either use [Spanish] and try to soak up the language or be lonely and isolated.*

Sara's exhaustion arises from the difficulty of the constant processing and negotiation required to interact in a new culture and a new language. She describes being uncomfortable in her environment no matter what she does: participating leads to frustration, but withdrawal leads to the discomfort of isolation. The immersive experience reveals that participants experience a linguistic isolation and voluntarily retreat as they react to the stressful immersion experience. Both participants express the emotional cost of their immersion: they find they are infantilized, frustrated, or uncomfortably isolated.

## **Discussion**

Pre-service teachers' assumptions about language and language learning have important implications as these individuals enter classrooms where they will teach ELLs. Our study reveals three areas that may impact teaching praxis: the assumption that language learning is easy, lack of understanding of the emotional component of language immersion, and the assumption that the foreign language classroom is adequate preparation for teachers of ELLs. This study supports the need for critical literacy methods, especially those that challenge pre-service teacher's viewpoints and positions of privilege. Most importantly, this study supports the argument that foreign language coursework is not enough to prepare future teachers. In-depth and immersive experiences would benefit pre-services teachers greatly because it forces a lived-experience that can be used to challenge previously held assumptions about the literacy acquisition process and the experience of being a new language-learner.

The participants' expectation that greater fluency in the language would have occurred in just a few weeks represents important assumptions about language acquisition. Participants held on tightly to the "language learning should be easy" assumption throughout the experience: at no point did they resign themselves to the fact that language learning is hard work and takes considerable amounts of time. Participants assumed they could "get by" with the limited language skills that they had or even rely on another person's knowledge of English (in a foreign country). They had a deeply ingrained notion that learning a foreign language "would be easier." This notion represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the complexity and difficulty in learning a second

language and a strong resistance from participants to changing that belief. Even though they are teacher-educators specifically trained in how to teach language skills to children, they themselves were unprepared for the cognitive workload required for learning a language, and resisted accepting the difficulty of the task.

It is important to consider the ramifications of teachers who assume that learning a language is easier than it actually is, and to recognize how that can be carried forward into their communications with parents or communities of ELLs. This “truth” may interfere with classroom praxis if teachers believe that their students should be learning faster or more easily. This particular insight also helps explain why teachers may consider ELL parents to be illiterate: if it is indeed easy to learn a language and the parents have not done so, it suggests either a character flaw on their part or that they have never learned to read or write in any language.

Likewise, the emotions associated with immersion and foreign language learning could also have a potential impact on classroom teaching. Participants discovered that learning a language is not simply grammar and rules: it is also personal and emotional. The participants had “feelings” toward the language itself and were resistant to it when they had to struggle. Participants were excited about the proposed immersion experience but once in-country expressed reservations about their skills and clearly struggled throughout the immersion experience.

It is vitally important for any classroom teacher to recognize that emotions affect the language-learning environment. Teachers should strive to include assignments that make their ELLs want to communicate, and be sensitive to an ELL’s occasional withdrawal from the new language. Teachers need to be mindful of the stress of communicating predominantly in a foreign language all the time, and to recognize that their ELLs may need to isolate themselves when they were overwhelmed, but that they need tools or connections to help more quickly move back into difficult process of learning the English Language.

Third, the emotional impact of the immersion language learning experience on the participants suggests that beginning sequences of in-class foreign language preparations do not adequately equip pre-service teachers with real-world language experiences that relate to literacy pedagogy. Adopting a foreign language requirement is not a panacea in teacher education programs. Traditional courses in language foster a controlled environment where all linguistic tasks (grammar, vocabulary, and communicative exercises) are tightly interwoven into a single theme. Foreign language students in the classroom communicate in the language peer-to-peer, with students who share their language limitations. The classroom limits the foreign language to short, predetermined intervals once a day and allows its students to choose when they would use the language during that hour because they can rely on English. By the same token, the students in the

foreign language classroom often share a similar culture and constitute a majority in the classroom. The learning dynamic is often monocultural, and students are not exposed to competing cultural norms. Thus, our research suggests that the foreign language classroom may not adequately prepare teachers to understand the struggles of their ELLs, who learn in classrooms where vocabulary and grammar cannot be predicted, and where they may have needs that cannot not be expressed or accommodated because of cultural and linguistic differences. The foreign language classroom experience may in fact cause teachers to overestimate what they understand of the ELLs' reality, unlike immersion which combats such misunderstandings by forcing pre-service teachers to live the ELL experience: they are "other"-ed culturally and linguistically.

Our research would support the following recommendations: 1.) embed critical literacy practice into coursework specifically to address pre-service teacher's misunderstandings and assumptions; 2.) include in both child development and literacy coursework the particular socio-emotional needs related to language acquisition and cultural differences; and 3.) sustained and immersive experiences in culturally different communities with the opportunity for sustained reflection. Our research indicates that future teachers who experience study abroad coupled with faculty-guided reflection may gain a crucial developmental opportunity that will almost surely impact their classrooms. The study suggests that the immersion would be particularly useful for education students who are likely to work with ELLs because of the strong degree of empathy that it fosters. It furthermore indicates that additional research is required to determine if an immersion experience by the pre-service teacher is the only means to replicate their future ELLs experience in the classroom.

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