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Becoming the Cultural “Other”: Pre-service Teachers Conducting Ethnographic Projects While Studying Abroad

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In the summer of 2011 a group of pre-service teachers from Western Oregon University joined a study-abroad program in Argentina. During their approximate two-month stay, pre-service students had the opportunity to take intensive coursework in Spanish, as well enroll in credit-bearing courses leading to an ESOL endorsement (English for Speakers of Other Languages). One of the ESOL courses offered during the program was “Culture and Community in ESOL/Bilingual Classrooms.” This article is written by five of the students who participated in this course, in collaboration with their professor. In particular, the article focuses on an ethnographic course project.

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Abstract

In the summer of 2011 a group of pre-service teachers from Western Oregon University joined a study-abroad program in Argentina. During their approximate two-month stay, pre-service students had the opportunity to take intensive coursework in Spanish, as well enroll in credit-bearing courses leading to an ESOL endorsement (English for Speakers of Other Languages). One of the ESOL courses offered during the program was “Culture and Community in ESOL/Bilingual Classrooms.” This article is written by five of the students who participated in this course, in collaboration with their professor. In particular, the article focuses on an ethnographic course project.

Background

In Oregon, teachers working with high populations of English language learners are required (or encouraged) to add an ESOL or Bilingual/ESOL endorsement to their teaching licenses. To obtain the endorsement, candidates must complete university coursework, participate in a supervised practicum experience, and pass a standardized exam. Western Oregon University (WOU) offers the ESOL and Bilingual/ESOL program to both pre-service and in-service teacher candidates. Courses in the program focus on four key areas: 1) history, current policy and practice; 2) culture; 3) language and language acquisition; and 4) instruction and assessment.

The overarching goal of the Bilingual/ESOL program at WOU is to help candidates become *culturally and linguistically responsive* teachers. As Gay and Kirkland (2003) point out, culturally responsive teaching involves “using the cultures, experiences and perspectives of students as filters through which to teach them academic knowledge and skills” (p. 181). Similarly, Lucas and Villegas (2011) argue that an important quality of culturally responsive teachers is the development of *sociocultural consciousness*, which entails “an understanding that language, culture, and identity are deeply connected, and[...] an awareness of the sociopolitical dimensions of language use and language education” (pp. 56-57). WOU’s ESOL study-abroad program grew out of the desire to deepen our candidates’ skills in these areas. The second language and cultural environment in Argentina provides the ideal context for discussion, investigation and self-reflection on cultural systems through a critical perspective of “otherness” (Smolcic, 2011).

The course “Culture and Community in ESOL/Bilingual Classrooms” focuses on the interrelatedness among language, culture and learning, sociopolitical factors and school practices that affect the academic achievement of English language learners, and culturally relevant practices that foster meaningful learning in the classroom and that build strong partnerships between families, schools and communities. Course topics include principles of multicultural education (Nieto, 2003), parent involvement in schools (Ada, 1999), research on “funds of

knowledge” (González et al., 2005), and issues related to language, discourse and power (Cummins, 2001; Fillmore, 2000). To acquire a broader perspective on the country and its people, topics related to social, political, cultural and historical issues in Argentina (e.g., human rights and education) are explored through guest lectures, visits to schools, museums and cultural sites, movies and other activities.

To capitalize on the immersion experience afforded by the Argentinean context, students complete an ethnographic project. They learn how to utilize qualitative techniques such as participant observation, field notes and interviews to investigate local cultures and make cross-cultural comparisons. The objective is to help them to make thoughtful observations without quick leaps of judgment, to provide detailed descriptions based on situated experiences, to examine their own perspectives and learn about other ways of being (Borg, 2010; Dantas-Whitney, 2010a; Frank, 1999). As Roberts et al. (2001) describe, ethnographic projects encourage students to question their own assumptions about how they construct meanings, and ultimately develop autonomy and flexibility.

Theoretical Perspectives: Sociocultural, Reflective and Critical Approaches to Pedagogy

Sociocultural, reflective and critical approaches to learning recognize that teaching is a complex, dynamic and situated process, as opposed to simply a collection of technical skills (Dantas-Whitney, 2010b). Teachers must take into consideration the resources, constraints and challenges of their local settings to create an environment where learners can interact and collaborate to build new understandings.

Sociocultural approaches acknowledge that learners’ experiences, skills and beliefs are important sources of learning. Learners are creators of their own knowledge; they learn by constructing new meanings based on prior experiences. From a sociocultural perspective, the learning process is viewed as an internal process of invention and reflection, rather than as a passive process of accumulation. Learners are not viewed as “empty vessels” who need to be filled with knowledge; rather, they are viewed as active seekers and creators of meaning. As Cummins (2006) states, “prior knowledge, skills, beliefs, and concepts significantly influence what learners notice about their environment and how they organize and interpret it” (p. 56). Therefore, classroom activities should be designed to help learners gain access to their experiences and beliefs so they can reshape their existing knowledge in light of new course content. Teachers should take advantage of students’ “funds of knowledge” (González et al., 2005), the knowledge and skill sets available in the households and communities of students, to contextualize language and to design meaningful curricula and class activities. This includes using students’ home and heritage languages as resources for learning an additional language.

Contrary to the modern conception that every individual has a fixed and essential identity, sociocultural approaches emphasize the multiple and changing nature of identities, shaped by the contexts and situations in which the individual operates. This dynamic notion of identity is critical for language learning, since language is “the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed” (Weedon, cited in Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 15). Norton Peirce (1995) argues that our theory of language learning must regard learners as “having a complex social identity [because] it is through language that a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time, and it is through language that a person gains access to—or is denied access to—powerful social networks that give learners the opportunity to speak” (p. 13). Cummins (2006) points out that *identity investment* is an essential component of

learning, and proposes educational activities which inspire students to examine actively the themes that characterize their identity(ies) in the world. The concept of identity investment has important implications for teacher education. Students' identities are deeply influenced by the patterns of interaction and the power relations they experience in the classroom, at school, and in society. Therefore, teachers need to provide all students, and particularly those from marginalized groups, with opportunities to develop positive identities that are linked to competence in academic areas. Cummins and Early (2011) explain:

Educators have considerable power to affect student identity construction in positive (and unfortunately, in negative) ways. Teachers' instructional choices within the classroom play a huge role in determining the extent to which students will emerge from an identity cocoon defined by their assumed limitations (e.g., 'ESL student') to an interpersonal space defined by their talents and accomplishments, both linguistic and intellectual. For this to happen, teachers must 'see through' the institutional labels to the potential within (p. xvi).

A critical and reflective orientation to education views teaching and learning processes as potential tools for student empowerment and liberation. It advocates a "transformative relationship between students and teacher, students and learning, and students and society" (Shor, 1993, p. 27). As Pennycook puts it, a critical reflective practice "seeks to understand and critique the historical and sociopolitical context of schooling and to develop pedagogical practices that aim not only to change the nature of schooling, but also the wider society" (cited in Crookes & Lehner, 1998, p. 319). To this end, critical educators suggest classroom practices which promote dialogue, empowerment and critical reflection (Freire, 1970; Rose, 2011). A critical orientation is particularly relevant to second language education because language learners do not share the linguistic or the cultural practices of the dominant community (Auerbach, 2000). Issues of access and power relations must be considered in second language research and in the classroom. As Norton and Toohey (2001) remark, second language educators "need to pay close attention to how communities and their practices are structured in order to examine how this structuring facilitates or constrains learners' access to the linguistic resources of their communities" (p. 312).

Ethnography as a Tool for Learning and Reflection

Gay and Kirkland (2003) remind us that teacher candidates need structured and guided opportunities to engage in critical consciousness and personal reflection. They point out that reflective tasks in teacher education often lead to generic accounts of "newly found awareness" without deep consideration of "the implications and consequences of this knowledge for changing personal and professional behaviors" (p. 184). To overcome this challenge, they recommend using concrete situations and specific contexts as catalysts for reflection. "Real-life experiences make the learning activities more genuine and authentic, and lessen the likelihood that students will escape the intellectual, emotional, psychological, moral, and pedagogical challenges inherent in reflection and critical consciousness" (p. 186).

Ethnographic projects have the potential to provide teacher candidates with concrete situations and real-life experiences needed for meaningful personal reflection. Through a systematic process of conscious observation, detailed description and intensive analysis,

candidates start building understandings about the contexts and communities they are studying. Ethnography is by definition situated and contextualized. The goal is to embrace complexity, rather than to simplify reality (Blommaert & Jie, 2010). While conducting their ethnographic projects, candidates adopt an emic, or participant-informed perspective, taking into consideration the subjective views of the participants in the research process. At the same time, they experience what it means to be “different” from the majority of the people in a society (Smolcic, 2011). As Blommaert and Jie (2010) describe, ethnography is often a “critical and counter-hegemonic” (p. 10) enterprise because of its potential to challenge established views and to question accepted norms and expectations.

Roberts, Bryam, Barro, Jordan and Street (2001) report on ethnographic projects conducted by university students during a period of residence abroad. They describe four categories of learning derived from projects such as these:

1. *Local social and cultural knowledge*. This involves developing an understanding of one's own and others' particular cultural practices in local contexts.
2. *Processes of interrogation and relativisation*. This involves developing in students the habit of constantly interrogating the source of their knowledge and so questioning their own assumptions about how they construct meanings, values and attitudes. This, in turn, leads to developing the habit of relativising, of seeing one's own and others' worlds as socially constructed and not natural, normative and universal.
3. *Observation, social interaction and analytical skills*. This involves developing a number of skills out of ethnographic methodology and the opportunities for interaction created by the demands of the ethnographic project.
4. *Personal development*. This involves developing initiative, autonomy, self-confidence and flexibility. (Roberts et al., 2001, p. 42-43)

Good teachers are constantly reflecting on their practices, taking into consideration the constraints of their individual contexts and the particular needs of their students. They “assess the local needs, observe their teaching acts, evaluate their outcomes, identify problems, and find solutions. Such a continual cycle of observation, reflection and action must be firmly planted in ground reality” (Kumaravadivelu, 2012, p. 13). Ethnography is a useful tool for teachers because it helps them observe their own classrooms more effectively, interpret classroom events from multiple perspectives, and create a basis for informed action. Ethnography helps teachers become reflective practioners. As Frank (1999) points out, “an ethnographic perspective provides a lens to understand [...] particular patterns of classroom life which often become invisible because they become so regular, patterned, and ordinary” (p. 3).

The Ethnographic Project in Argentina

One of the main assignments of the “Culture and Community in ESOL/Bilingual Classrooms” course in Argentina was an ethnographic project. Because of the short and intensive nature of the course (40 hours in 3 weeks), the students couldn't conduct a long-term ethnographic study. Nevertheless, the class learned ethnographic techniques for data collection (e.g., participant observations, field notes, interviews, photographs) and analysis (e.g., rich description, thematic patterning, building emerging theories). The students were encouraged to choose topics for their investigation based on their interests. They conducted their observations in settings they were used

to frequenting such as their host families' homes, cafés, restaurants, and parks. They each conducted three or four interviews with members of their host families, their Spanish teachers, as well as other local acquaintances. At the end of the course, they wrote a paper discussing their purpose and rationale for the project, their methodology and analysis, and their conclusions. They presented the project to the class, and at the end, they wrote a reflection based on what they learned and the implications for their future teaching.

The team examined each other's papers and reflections and identified recurring themes within and across documents. In the following analysis, we discuss these salient themes.

Frustration and discomfort leading to awareness

For many of us, the choice of research question came out of a sense of frustration or uneasiness with some of the cultural practices we were experiencing. Many of the behaviors and actions we were observing seemed odd, or even rude, to us. Little by little, we became aware that we were using our own cultural lenses to interpret these behaviors. The ethnographic project became an opportunity to dispel our biases and preconceived assumptions:

Chelsea:

This particular café was larger than most. It was packed. Even the seating outside was full despite the cold wind. It took the waitress nearly ten minutes to greet us and get our drink order. It took an additional ten to actually get the drinks. As we were sitting around the table complaining about the wait, I began to think to myself; surely other customers must be annoyed with this "horrible" service. That did not seem to be the case. Everyone seemed to be at peace and very relaxed. It looked as though everyone was in deep conversation with the other people at their table. This is when I had a cultural awareness moment, not only about the Argentinean culture but my culture as well.

Maggie:

When I first arrived I was a bit uncomfortable being so close to others, especially those I didn't know. It was interesting to me how Argentines interacted and greeted each other in different locations... A similar experience occurred just the other day in my Spanish class. I had misunderstood [the teacher's] correction and when she came back around she pointed it out. She placed her hand on my shoulder, with her body very close. I almost moved away at first because in the U.S. teachers never make physical contact.

Cross-cultural comparisons

As we examined our papers and shared our reflections, we noticed that all of us connected what we were observing and learning to our existing knowledge and previous experiences. Many times our choice of research topic was elicited by the cross-cultural comparisons we were constantly making. This allowed us to establish personal relevance for our research:

Haley:

Upon my arrival into Argentina, I noticed a variety of social groups and was

curious as to any patterns of these social groups. At home, there are various social groups that I am a part of (with family, friends and boyfriend) and I was curious to find out the patterns and frequency of these groups in the Argentinean culture.

Jessica:

An adjustment that was difficult at first to make was eating dinner no earlier than 9:00 PM. At my home in Oregon I always have dinner on the table no later than 7:00 PM. Lunch around 12:00 PM and dinner no sooner than 9:00 PM? I thought to myself, “Don’t these people get hungry between meals?” After a few days of walking home from class and observing the behaviors of people, I realized an interesting occurrence. Between these times people flood the streets... and seem to concentrate around cafés and bars. I decided I wanted to explore this topic a little more in-depth so that I can better understand the culture here and be a more active participant in it.

Lindsay:

I have a dog at home and she is extremely spoiled. She gets fed four times a day at the same time every day, can go outside or come inside as she pleases and receives a ton of love and attention every day. So after seeing all these stray dogs running around on their own, I wondered how they survived. After looking more closely I realized that none of these dogs look starved or sad, but that they actually looked content and some even had clothes on. I have slowly learned through observation how these dogs survive.

Understanding students’ cultures

García (2002) points out that “we may all possess the thinking skills... but if our experiences and mental representations of these experiences differ, the results of our thinking will differ. Herein is the basis for recognizing that diversity in experience is diversity in thinking” (p. 243). Through our class readings and discussions, we came to understand that our students’ past experiences determine who they are and how they think and learn. In order to teach them effectively, we need to tap into their prior knowledge. The ethnographic project brought this realization to light:

Lindsay:

This reminded me how complicated culture is and as a future teacher it is going to be near impossible to understand every student’s identity, but it is my responsibility and my opportunity to try and learn as much as I can from them.

Haley:

This process of ethnography will be valuable in the classroom to learn about the backgrounds and culture of our students. It is so vital that we make this effort to understand our students’ cultures. In doing this we can successfully teach our students by make meaningful connections from their education to their own lives.

Teachers as learners

Perhaps the most important benefit of the ethnographic project was that it encouraged us to adopt the role of *teachers as learners*. "When teachers shed their role of teacher and expert and, instead, take on a new role as learner, they can come to know their students and the families of their students in new and distinct ways" (Lopez, 2006, para. 2). Being able to check on our assumptions and to observe without making generalizations and value judgments is a skill that we will take with us when interacting with our future students and their families:

Haley:

I developed more cultural observation skills – the ability to observe without bias or assuming social norms before I take the time to observe.

Chelsea:

The most important thing I learned was just because one culture may do something completely different than what I'm used to, it does not mean that it is wrong, or that my way is right. It is just a different lifestyle.

Maggie:

I realized that my culture and other cultures aren't going to do all things the same, but [I need to] know why I do things and also be open-minded to new "ways of life."

Implications

Lucas and Villegas' (2011) framework for culturally and linguistically responsive teacher education outlines important qualities teachers must develop in order to effectively serve students from diverse backgrounds. These qualities include attitudes and beliefs (i.e., "orientations" such as sociolinguistic and sociocultural consciousness, value of diversity, and desire to advocate for students and families), as well as knowledge and skills (i.e., knowing the students you are serving, and applying key principles of second language learning in the classroom). The framework highlights the need for teacher education programs to provide opportunities for candidates to understand their students' experiences and backgrounds, and to become aware of their own assumptions and perceptions regarding students' languages and cultures.

The development of sociocultural consciousness is a life-long journey, and cannot be accomplished through one assignment, or even one class (Dantas-Whitney, Mize, & Waldschmidt, 2009). Teacher education programs should provide multiple co-curricular opportunities for students that emphasize a reflective and culturally-minded inclusive education which prepares them for teaching and problem-solving in authentic ways. However, co-curricular assignments can be potentially damaging if an effort is not made to discuss and understand the underlying factors that influence what is being observed. As Pang (1994) points out, "teachers need a chance to talk about what they have observed so that their encounters with other cultures do not become 'zoo' experiences [...]. Many cultural traditions are rooted in deep values, but these values may not be obvious because of differences in dress and behaviors" (p. 291). Co-curricular assignments must go beyond superficial contact with members of diverse communities and offer teacher candidates meaningful opportunities to learn the perspectives of

those who are culturally different from themselves. Additionally, the assignments must be accompanied by readings, discussions, and guided reflection to help candidates dispel stereotypes, learn about individual differences, clarify beliefs, acknowledge privileges, and build empathy.

Final Thoughts

This close examination of the ethnographic project has reinforced to us the importance of grounding our reflections on specific contexts and concrete experiences. From a sociocultural perspective, teaching and learning processes are by definition localized. When teachers develop an ethnographic stance, they seek to learn about their students' multifaceted realities and cultural practices, and begin to utilize them as resources for learning in the classroom.

This project has helped us to understand that all students, families, and classrooms are unique, and that there is no "one size fits all" solution to issues related to teaching and learning. Most importantly, it has made us aware that our personal histories, our perspectives, and our attitudes can impact the way we teach. Just like López-Robertson, Long and Turner-Nash (2010) have described, we began to realize "how easily bias is manifested when, by positioning our own culture as *normal*, we position other cultures as *not normal*" (p. 100). This realization was captured in Jessica's reflection below:

Having this experience has put me in the position of being the cultural "other," and has allowed me to step back and look at culture in new ways.

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