

## **Trying on Their Shoes: Empathy as Pedagogy for Teachers of English Language Learners**

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In the past two academic years alone, the number of designated English language learners<sup>ii</sup> (ELLs) in the Missoula County Public School (MCPS) District has risen by 50 percent (S. Lindburg and A. Peters, personal communication, April 30, 2018). This dramatic influx is largely due to the reopening of Montana's only refugee resettlement office in the summer of 2016. Families fleeing war and devastation in their home countries of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iraq, and Syria have settled, at least temporarily, in this university mountain town. Many of these families include school-aged children. One of the major challenges these young people face in their new country's neighborhood public schools is the urgent task of learning English, and learning it well enough and quickly enough to access grade level content.

Like most districts in Montana, MCPS has had relatively low numbers of ELL-designated students in recent decades compared to national trends (although two previous resettlements of Hmong in the 1980s and Belarusian refugees in the 1990s prompted an influx of English learners here). While the newly-resettled refugee students do not comprise the majority of ELL students in the district, their arrival has heightened the interest in second-language education in our community. This is due not only to the spiking rate of growth of this demographic (from zero to 50 refugee students in less than two years with more families due to arrive each month), but also to the media attention and visibility of the refugee families' presence in the community, and the fact that most of the newly arriving students are less proficient in English than many other ELL-designated students. This burgeoning attention to English learners has prompted requests from

local educators, school leaders, pre-service teachers, and community volunteers to access professional learning opportunities related to language support.

Many of us who work on language issues in this region are energized by the surge of inquiry and activity. As an associate professor of literacy studies in the University of Montana-Missoula's Teaching and Learning department, I have served as a collaborator and a consultant to MCPS's very busy ELL Services Department, and to organizations coordinating resettlement efforts. As my colleagues and I have worked to design professional development opportunities for in-service, pre-service, and volunteer teachers, we are constantly taking stock of which approaches seem to effectively and efficiently support teachers' learning.

The approaches I would most like to highlight in this themed issue of *Literacy Voices* are those designed to build empathy by intentionally positioning educators as language learners themselves. It is important to recognize in this work that which makes empathy distinct from sympathy: stepping into others' shoes to share in their perspectives, emotions, and experiences as if they were one's own. While there are a number of ways to help teachers feel more empathy for students and their families<sup>iii</sup>, my colleagues and I have found that when an educator *takes on the role* of a learner encountering a language in which they are not (yet) proficient, there is potential for powerful professional growth.

What follows here is not an empirical investigation of the efficacy of these approaches (see Baghban, 2015). Rather, I posit a conceptual argument: I aim to make a case for including and expanding opportunities that build empathy in the broader effort to improve educational equity for language learners in Missoula, the State of Montana, and beyond. To this end, I include a description of three distinct learning experiences, noting trends in participating teachers' responses to these experiences.

### **Experience One: Becoming a Language Learner in a Lesson Simulation**

This experience has been facilitated within the contexts of both professional workshops and university-based literacy methods courses. In-service or pre-service teachers (I will refer to them collectively as “teachers” or “educators”) participate in a simulation that positions them as students trying to understand directions, learn content, and demonstrate learning in a language they may not know. When I facilitate these simulations, I teach in Spanish, and have most often taught a lesson on “la superficie de la luna” (the surface of the moon). The moment I start the simulation, I see many people in the room quickly become uncertain and self-conscious. They look around in desperation and even incredulity at the two to three people in the group who can answer “más pequeña” to the quickly fired question: “¿Es la luna más pequeña o más grande que la tierra?” (“Is the moon smaller or larger than the Earth?”) I intentionally limit instructional supports in the lesson, but do include a few, and I introduce tasks that require receptive language proficiency (listening and reading) in Spanish, as well as those that require “students” to produce language via speaking and writing in Spanish. I give directions and feedback (including praise and managerial directives, etc.) in Spanish throughout. As you might guess, this experience often elicits confusion, frustration, “checking out,” attempts to pretend to know what is going on—so many of the responses we see in K-12 students who are not able to access learning opportunities. Noting this range of responses in a post-lesson discussion can in itself can serve as an “ah-ha” to novice teachers, who are beginning to understand the connection between engaging instruction and classroom management.

After the simulation and exchanging some initial “noticings,” I guide the group to acknowledge all of the ways in which their brief experience was like and unlike that of an elementary-level ELL student. Teacher candidates in my methods courses typically point out

their relief that I already know them and understand they are capable; because of this, their inability to accomplish the assigned tasks in the lesson does not result in judgments about their intelligence or work ethic. They know that I know “it’s a context thing” because I have already seen them operating successfully in situations where tasks align well with their linguistic resources. Another important difference is that the teachers who participate in the simulation typically already know all or most of the content taught in the lesson, so they imagine the difficulty they would have encountered had they faced the dual challenge of trying to navigate a new language *and* learn content alongside their linguistically-proficient peers. Further, the teacher groups note the ways in which they leveraged their knowledge of English (their first language, or L1) in their attempts to communicate in Spanish (the target language, or L2); they recognize they would not have been able to utilize their existing phonological, orthographic, or cognate knowledge if they were not already literate in a first language, or if the language of instruction were very different from their L1, such as Arabic, Russian, or Mandarin.

After the exchange of initial reflections about the simulated lesson, I ask teachers to orient themselves as (Spanish) language learners on WIDA language proficiency scales in reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Gottlieb, Cranley, & Cammilleri, 2007); this proficiency framework is used in 39 states, including Montana. Thus, this activity allows teachers to self-assess with the very tool that is used to categorize their ELL students, offering another opportunity for growing empathy and understanding. In past years, I had teachers do this self-assessment step *before* the lesson, but I have found that the fresh simulation experience actually helps them to better understand the function of the scaling tool and accurately identify their proficiency levels across the four modes. Many are surprised that their proficiency in reading is much higher than in listening, for example. Surprisingly, in the numerous times I have

conducted simulations like this at workshops and in my courses, I have found that very few teachers are fluent enough in Spanish to engage with ease in all of the lesson's tasks. Of course, there have been some teachers whose Spanish is stronger than my own, as well. These individuals often reflect on the role their linguistic proficiency played in their "learner identity" during the simulation.

At this point in the session, we work on identifying strategies and practices that give students access to learning, and particularly those that support simultaneous language development and content development. Teachers brainstorm ideas, and I share highlights from research literature (e.g., DiCerbo, Anstrom, Baker, & Rivera, 2014; Hinkel, 2011; Snyder, Witmer, & Schmitt, 2017). I pass out the lesson plan from the simulation, this time in English, and the English translation of written materials, and teachers launch into the task of revising the plan with language learners in mind. I use "launch" intentionally, as I find that teachers approach this task with great fervor, having experienced firsthand the limitations of the lesson. In the years before I began incorporating this empathy-building simulation, when I asked groups to "make over" lesson plans to better support language learners, I noticed that many teacher candidates selected strategies to insert into the lesson plan in a somewhat superficial and random way. The simulation lesson tends to bring a sense of concreteness, urgency, and meaning to the revision effort, and I notice a difference in the quality of their products. Teachers' revisions tend to include more detailed descriptions and thoughtful placement of the strategies. Rather than saying "use a visual support," for example, teachers are more likely to indicate precisely the type and placement of the visual support. They recognize the kinds of sentence stems that would have supported them to be able to produce L2 with efficacy. They brainstorm specific ways to make

directions clearer. When sharing their revised lessons afterwards, I notice impressive levels of confidence and engagement in the exchanges, and deeper explanations of rationale.

### **Experience Two: Observing in a Dual Language Immersion Program**

The second experience is one in which a smaller number of my pre-service teacher candidates have participated to date, but the impact of the experience for those novice educators—and for me—has been noteworthy. Graduate-level and some undergraduate teacher candidates from our elementary teacher education program have had the opportunity to observe in Montana's first public dual language (Spanish) immersion program, which is located at Paxson Elementary, a school near our campus. For half of the school day at Paxson, the language of instruction is Spanish, and young students learn Spanish while also learning content in L2.

Nearly all of Paxson's young students start kindergarten as monolingual English speakers, so candidates have the opportunity to observe a classroom of novice language learners in the early grades and can see the progression of language development as they visit intermediate grades. Further, few of the candidates are proficient Spanish speakers, so they have the opportunity to vicariously experience instruction as language learners themselves. My own Spanish is quite rusty, and like my teacher candidates, observing in the language immersion classrooms has served as a powerful empathy-building opportunity, helping us better understand the experiences of language learners in our school system. It has facilitated a rich context in which candidates and I can personally identify teacher practices that make content accessible and support us to successfully produce the language ourselves.

I have noticed several trends in the analytic reflections that follow these observations. Without fail, candidates always marvel at the level of engagement in the instructional activities. Instruction that is accessible to five-year-olds in a language they do not yet proficiently speak

must be, absolutely has to be, engaging! The role of affect, wait time, the use of gestures and visuals, multiple opportunities to encounter content and through different modalities—these often-recommended teaching dispositions and practices take on an intense and visible importance in an L2 classroom. Teacher candidates attend carefully to the four domains of reading, writing, speaking, listening in ways that I do not typically see in English classrooms; they tend to recognize the strategic way that teachers draw on one domain to support the others. We are often struck by how much we can learn about good teaching from language educators. We see strategies that are familiar, but they often include additional opportunities for student interaction and language use. For example, our teacher candidates see “turn and talks,” where students discuss a prompt with a peer as a way to maximize engagement, in nearly every field placement throughout their preparation experience; in the immersion classrooms, they are likely to see additional layers of support in this strategy, including sentence stems, multiple rounds of guided practice, and/or a “second set” of turn and talk in which students have one more round of discussion with another partner to practice producing language connected to the focus concepts. The intense language and comprehension scaffolding used in interactive read alouds in this setting is also remarkable. Teacher candidates have argued that *all* elementary teachers, including those with ELL students or students who need extra support in academic language development, could benefit from observing immersion educators teaching language via read alouds.

While I have seen the powerful potential this vicarious immersion experience has in helping educators build a repertoire of pedagogical strategies, what has stuck me the most from my time in these classrooms has to do with *identity and community*. All students in these dual language classrooms are positioned as language learners. A student who is new to the target

language is not seen as unintelligent or lacking status. I love this. It is understood by everyone in the room—as well as those outside of the room, including families, administrators, staff, etc.—that students are working to become more and more proficient. They are not “less-than” for learning an *additional* language. It is quite the opposite, in fact: they feel pretty smart and special. They are not defined primarily by what they do not yet know. This has important implications for how we can be better and more intentional about framing and situating our students who are learning English as an additional language.

### **Conclusion**

Both experiences described here afford pre-service teachers opportunities to empathize with English learners, which my colleagues and I believe is paramount for professionals working with students and families from diverse linguistic backgrounds. There are countless ways to support educators’ work with ELL students; however, I argue that these direct, empathy-building activities, particularly those which position us as would-be learners of a new language, tend to “stick” because of the emotional and clear experiential impact. Just this week, I ran into a former UM student who brought up the simulation lesson experience. She characterized it as the most impactful 10 minutes of professional learning for her: “I was in shock,” she said. “It rocked me and shocked me, and I remember thinking, ‘If she (the instructor) would just slow down, I could be getting this.’ I think about that all the time when I work with students.” While this is just one anecdote, it exemplifies the potential for this approach. We have found that these direct experiences, help teachers “get it” in ways that other professional learning activities do not.

An interesting element in this work is *humility*. At the time of publication, my language arts methods students and I are engaged in a fledging Salish language learning partnership. With the help of elementary students in the Flathead Reservation, we are learning basic Salish, the

language first spoken in our valley. One sentiment that I continue to hear from my bright and competent candidates: “This is so hard!” There is something valuable about teachers feeling *the struggle* for themselves—in this Salish effort, and in the two experiences I describe in this paper. In facilitating such experiences, it is my hope that teachers will grow in their attention to and appreciation of language itself, and understand the relationship between language and power.

These experiences have clear implications for other teacher educators and ELL services personnel, and the opportunities they consider designing for pre-service and in-service teachers. Given the promising dispositional and philosophical benefits in these approaches (with regard to overcoming the deficit-focused framing to which language learners are so often subject in schools) as well as the promising pedagogical benefits, I recommend them as high-leverage activities for these audiences.

However, I am most interested in sharing this work with the wider *Literacy Voices* readership. The exciting impact I have seen prompts me to encourage *all* education professionals who work with ELL or Limited English Proficient (LEP)-designated students to find ways to observe or participate in a foreign or indigenous language classroom. My colleagues and I hope that more and more educators seek out opportunities to “try on the shoes” of our language learners, and thus “try on” some of the emotions, challenges, and power dynamics our ELL students face. In so doing, we can grow the community of empathetic educators in our region who recognize and facilitate teaching practices that give access to content and language learning. We can enhance our collective work toward educational equity.

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<sup>ii</sup> The term *English language learners* (ELLs) in this article refers to students who have been identified as such via state-adopted assessments (ACCESS and WIDA).

<sup>iii</sup> Clearly, there are many realms of students and families' lives that educators should approach with empathy and understanding. The experiences described here deal mainly with language.

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