Case Study

Autobiographical Case Study on Teaching, Learning Language, and Culture

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■ **ABSTRACT** ■

This autobiographical narrative focuses on my life experiences learning two languages as well as the cultures. It acts as an archive from which I elicit evidence in exploring issues and themes related to learning language and culture, particularly those issues and themes relating to the complex dynamics of context. It explores factors influencing learning language/culture, such as subjective constructions and interpretations of teachers and learners, cultural, social, geographical, political, and local community aspects.

Keywords
Learning language; Teaching; Conceptual background; Methodological background; Autobiography.

INTRODUCTION

Using relevant literature, and an autobiographical narrative, this paper examines and deconstructs instances in my life, which provide a platform for the development of new knowledge, both as a teacher and as a student, related to the learning and teaching of language and culture.

The narrative is framed by a socially constructivist epistemology, which advocates that people inevitably construct and give meaning to reality based on interpretations and connections that are influenced by deep contextual forces specific to their unique existence. This unique existence exists within the parameters, and paradigms, of some context through, and with, the use of some form of communication.

Constructivist epistemology reveals that context can be used as a tool to explore the connections and meanings participants assign to their existence and their constructions of language and culture. One implication for teachers is that this new knowledge pertaining to context can be incorporated in the development of language/culture curriculum and programs.

Thus, I examine and revisit three instances in my life in an effort to derive understanding and provide insight into the complex constitution of context, its complex dynamic, and its relation to the process of learning and teaching language and culture. Finally, through reflection on the examined literature and a discussion on the content of the autobiographical narrative, I examine the link between the complexities of context and the acquisition of language and culture.

Section one introduces the conceptual and methodological background to the autobiographical narrative that contributes to this thesis.

Section two consists of the biographical narrative primarily focusing on my life experiences learning a language and the culture of the new language. This part of the thesis acts as an archive from which I elicit evidence in exploring issues and themes related to learning language and culture, particularly those issues and themes relating to the complex dynamics of context. The narrative also explores factors influencing learning language/culture, such as subjective constructions and interpretations of teachers and learners, cultural, social, geographical, political, and local community aspects.

Data Collection Method

The data is qualitative and derived from my life experiences and literature I have consulted. Throughout this paper, I cite relevant research that supports experiential studies within the autobiography, the critical examination of issues emerging and identified within the autobiography, and an analysis related to the acquisition of language and culture.

The data consist of a review of literature, exploration of educational policy, and practices relevant to my life experiences, anecdotal records, life experience, selected syllabi, and school texts relevant to my experiences, curriculum frameworks, and empirical aspects. The use of narrative is important in documenting these experiences. Nobody other than me has had the same experiences, and these unique life experiences are my warrant to make personalized new knowledge, public. Therefore, this research is subjective and socio centric, since my personal experiences were developed alongside those of others in a multitude of environments in varying contexts. Barone[1] states that, "our autobiographies as learners in childhood, adolescence and young adulthood frame our approach to teaching at the start of our careers, and they frequently exert an influence that lasts a lifetime".

SECTION ONE

Conceptual and Methodological Background

The methodology of autobiographical narrative raises potential concerns related to personal interpretation of events and the influence of preconceptions/prejudices in determining my subjective construction of meaning and understanding. In anticipation of these potential concerns, I examine my interpretation of events and experiences using a hermeneutic approach. I also consider reflexivity to enhance my level of awareness of how my values and experiences have shaped the research/content of the autobiography.

The autobiographical case study is experiential and empirical, where I draw on my own experience and try to support my memory and personal interpretations with references to relevant literature and historical records.

Constructivist-based research is a qualitative form of inquiry within an interpretativist paradigm, where there is an interdependent and interactive relationship between the subject and researcher and it is essentially subjectivist. Constructivist inquiry seeks to understand the entire context, both at the macro and micro environmental level, to offer understanding of the meaning behind the actions of individuals.[2]

Constructivism, as a philosophy of learning, is based on the premise that all our understandings of the world are in essence our constructions. A teaching philosophy that considers this engages the learners into becoming active participants in their own learning, which includes deriving meaning from their experiences, as well as the shared ones in a classroom. Learners do not trans-

fer knowledge from the external world into their memories; rather they create interpretations of the world based upon their experiences and their interactions in the world.[3]

Idros et al[4] state that the fundamental argument underpinning constructivism is "that meaningful learning is affected by the integration of knowledge gained from new experiences into existing schemas". According to Pickard et al[2] constructivist-based pedagogy stresses the learner's active participation in constructing knowledge and emphasizes, "the shift from a simple single reality to the complex multiple realities of the individual". This notion is magnified through the experience of being an immigrant and a (second+) language learner. Just as constructivism takes account of deriving meaning from experience, social constructivism takes account of context, social interactions and culture in our understanding. Social constructivism suggests that knowledge and social reality are created through daily interactions between people particularly through discourse.[5]

Constructivists advocate that learners use existing knowledge to create and develop new knowledge. Therefore, students are not merely passive recipients of knowledge. Social constructivist and constructivist teachers recognize that learners are active and invent or construct knowledge as they are engaged in learning situations individually and collectively, in order to make sense of their world and their existence. Social constructivism in particular emphasizes the significance of social context and culture in the development of understanding and the creation of new knowledge.

Language teachers (and learners) do not find themselves within one paradigm or approach, but rather respond to a set of standards, irrespective of their knowledge/awareness of how researchers and theorists argue over the point. It is conceivable that the typical language teacher would find it difficult to easily recognize or identify the basic tenets of each or all of the philosophies and paradigms mentioned above. As a teacher of language, I was only aware of my effectiveness insofar as my students' engagement with, and learning of, such language (and culture). As a learner of language, I was busily engaged with it, and in it, to be able to peg myself onto any one paradigm or approach. As a learner of language, I did not have the knowledge and understanding of such content to try to figure out my language teachers' theoretical or pedagogical approach. Neither was I aware of the circumstances that made up the setting for my experience of learning a language to the extent that I could fully understand and assess such experience: in other words, I did not have the awareness of context.

Context

There exist multiple contexts within contexts that play a role in our constructions of reality, in the actions that we take or do not take, in the way we make or do not make perceptions, in our interpretations of events, and in the way we use and apply language(s). Context is not linear or one-dimensional. Context means the conditions of environment in which something exists or in which events happen. Context is a social construction with subjective meanings to those existing in it. Context is complex because all participants

within it can make connections and have shared meanings. However, all participants may also have very subjective interpretations of reality that are impacted by a number of factors that are very specific to each individual. Some of these factors may be static, like the race of the participant, and some may be dynamic, like the daily mood of the participant. These unique contextual forces influence perceptions and construction of reality. Since each individual has unique contextual forces impacted on them, and subjectively interprets things relative to those forces, there cannot be one set notion of context. Thus, context is a complex and ever-evolving construction of existence and events.

Dilley[6] suggests that contextualizing is a form of social action where people, through the construing of contexts, make interpretations and meanings for themselves. Wals et al[7] suggest that teachers try to understand the world of the learner so they can have this understanding as a base for learning. Robertson[8] also suggests that understanding the context in which knowledge is individually and socially constructed and mediated informs our understandings of current practices.

Hattam[9] suggests that practitioners connect learner's real lives to the official curriculum by establishing a link between the learner's existential context and their learning/understanding:

Knowing the students as learners is essential, but students are learners in and out of school. The aim of researching your students' life worlds as a source for planning curriculum and pedagogy… and the redesigning of curriculum and pedagogy that demands high intellectual challenge from students in ways that engage young people's life worlds and the concerns of their communities.

Therefore, throughout the case study I will situate incidents, events and experience within a context of relevance and meaning.

CASE STUDY

In this narrative, I examine contextual factors that illustrate language/culture learning in different settings/circumstances. Thus, our understanding of context in learning a language also provides background into the learning of the culture associated with the language, and this has a great impact on the learning of such language. Personal experience is a major part of this study, and as a participant in the research, hermeneutical implications abound, since I have constructed specific meanings from my lived experiences that are subjective and prejudiced. Therefore, I will explain the perspective from which I draw conclusions.

Bachor[10] states, "the researcher must unfold his/her perspective and clarify how evidence has been interpreted so that the reader can determine if the case study as published has integrity." Davis[11] claims that case study is "an analysis of a real world problem of which he or she has experience or been able to observe." This is my intention in describing events related to the learning of language and culture.

Walker[12] states that the study of particular incidents and events, as well as the selective collections of information on biography, personality, intentions, and values, allow the case study worker to capture and portray those elements of a situation that give it meaning. Therefore, I gather my data from personal meanings and understandings that are revealed through the autobiographical account of my experiences.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics largely informs my autobiography. Gadamer[13] suggests that all individual interpretation is affected by historical consciousness and traditions that have an impact on objectivity.[13,14] My awareness of the impact of personal history and interpretation of events during my life has assisted me in situating prejudice and context in a perspective that give validity to my autobiography. The autobiographical narrative does not serve the purpose of documenting an objective history but rather positions myself and the reader alongside events that have affected my life's perspective. Thus, the reader will engage with my reflection and interpretation of events within the specific context of my qualitative inquiry framed within my own historically located tradition to better understand the complexity of learning a new language and the culture associated with it in different contexts.

Autobiographical Narratives

The key features of autobiographical research involve personal reflections and reflective thinking that is meaningful to the researcher about such experiences. Clandinin et al[15] state that autobiographies are a narrative study of experience. Danzin[16] describes autobiographies as "inscribing and creating life." Roth[17] tells us that autobiographies "tell us about a culture as well as about lives at the same time." Taylor et al[18] state:

When autobiographical research is conducted from a critical social perspective, it can enable teachers to develop critical reflective awareness of the culture of their profession, especially the shortcomings that restrain the quality of their educative relationships with their students.

Autobiographical narratives are constructed through life experiences. Taylor et al[18] state:

This form of research focuses on the researcher's own life history, involves writing in the narrative first person, and can give unique insights into the social and cultural forces shaping his/her own practice.

Roth[17] argue, "That since our autobiographies and our scholarly activities are deeply integrated we can therefore draw on our autobiographies to elucidate our knowledge".

The strategy of using an autobiographical narrative is the appropriate strategy to use for my unique story to be told. No one has had the exact experience I have lived. The methodology I have chosen makes it possible to make my unique experiences public

knowledge and contribute new knowledge to the field of language learning and teaching.

SECTION TWO

The guiding question that allows me to develop this section is "why do I teach the way I do?" The answer involves formal and informal learning. I went through a formal process of development, where I learned strategies, theories, and activities through my experience and education. Outside of these formal structures, I was already a learner who incorporated new knowledge/information with a healthy amount of skepticism and critical analysis: I was keenly aware of issues of subordination. Furthermore, I also acquired specific characteristics in childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood that made me a somewhat successful learner. These characteristics have also helped frame my teaching and still influence me.

Learning My First Language

I was born in Mexico in 1963, in a colonia habitacional (substandard housing in the periphery of cities). The Mexican educational system was undergoing major reforms that begun under President Adolfo Lopez Mateos in 1959. One important aspect of such reforms involved the issue of compulsory education for grades one through six, as well as free textbooks for those grades. The goals set in the nationwide eleven-year plan for the expansion of primary education were achieved in two-years. Between 1962 and 1963, the construction of new school buildings proceeded at a rate estimated at one classroom every two hours.[19]

This rate of expansion created educational opportunities for many children. However, there also were issues related to the shortage and training of teachers. Under these circumstances, teachers in urban areas were better trained, had more experience, and the program and curricular offerings involved more choice for students. Schools in rural areas and in colonias habitacionales often had teacher shortages and less choice in curricular offerings.

When I turned 5-years-old I started school in first grade, as there was no preschool or kindergarten. Being the 4th out of eight children, and having my older siblings attend school before I did, I already had a basic level of literacy when I started formal schooling. My siblings taught me how to read, write and do math, using their government schoolbooks when I was 3-4-years-old. This had been the intent of the free textbooks, and that of standardizing the federal primary curriculum.

The government promoted literacy through the existing mass media. Mexico's first commercial television station was established on August 31, 1950 in Mexico City. It started transmitting the next day. However, television viewing required electricity, and the country's electrical grid was not operational in rural and colonias habitacionales until the 1970's. I did not watch television regularly until I was 10-years-old. However, the radio was always on in our household. Mexico's first radio station started broadcasting from the northern city of Monterrey on October 9, 1921. Due to the nature of the portability of battery-operated transistor radios, this was the most prominent mass media in Mexico for a very long time. There were enough radio stations that offered a good variety of programming related to current news/events, different musical genres, and radio novelas (radio dramas) and cuentosinfantiles (children's stories).

Growing up in Baja California, Mexican, USA, I was exposed to four different native ethnic groups and their languages, as well as to at least two other prominent ethnic groups' languages who settled in the area arriving from other parts of Mexico. I was also exposed to a large settlement of Americans living in Baja California, as well as to many English-speaking tourists visiting the area.

Therefore, my exposure to the available media and to the diversity of languages found in my community provided me with the context that promoted an expectation of respect and tolerance for such diversity, as well as an expectation that I too could achieve at least a minimum level of competence in some other language other than my primary language.

Learning English

My first experience learning English was as an eleven-year-old entering Secundaria (middle school). The public school I attended offered English and French (as a foreign) language classes. In the early 1970's, there was a lack of a well-articulated framework for the teaching of foreign languages in the Mexican national curriculum. The format for the course offerings was one period of the school day devoted to the teaching of English as a foreign language. There was a lack of integration of language and content learning. The foreign language teaching curriculum consisted of ineffective activities, like grammar-translation exercises, lectures, and made up dialogues. However, the teaching and learning of a foreign language at school was looked at as a positive and rewarding experience. The expectation of getting a good grade was high, although a high-grade was not the same as achieving a high-level of language competence. Therefore, the level of fluency achieved after two-years of middle school English as a foreign language was a low two on a 5-point scale.

My second experience learning English was when the family moved to the United States. As I entered the school system in California in sixth grade, the expectation was that I function in English, and the cultural expression was to be "American". In the early 1970's (and up to November, 2017, when Proposition 58 passed) the stated goal of Bilingual and English Language Development Programs in California was to transition English learners into English as soon as possible. As a consequence of the politicization of education in general, and specifically of Bilingual Education in California, the language submersion programs (sink or swim) were popular in the school district I attended as a sixth grader.

In a submersion model, I was put in an all-English speaking classroom and was expected to keep up with the curriculum taught in English. I had a strong cognitive and language foundation

in my primary language due to my schooling experience in Mexico: the competence in my primary language provided the basis for competence in the second language. This is known as the common underlying proficiency (CUP) from Cummins et al.[20] There were also consequences to my first language, as the district did not offer a first language maintenance program.

Although the cognitive and language foundation in my primary language was set, it took some time to learn academic English. According to language acquisition theory, basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) (everyday language skills) takes between 3-5-years to acquire, and cognitive academic language proficiency skills (CALPS) (academic language skills) takes between 5-7-years to reach competence.[20] During the period I was learning English, my own primary language was atrophying, as there was no language maintenance program in place: the school did not do anything with the skill set I already had competence in. In addition, I missed much of the grade-level curriculum, since I was in an all English-speaking classroom and did not understand or speak English.

Within the context of Southern California's conservative and anti-immigrant politics, there was pressure to learn, and communicate in, English and be/act "American". As difficult as learning a new language under such pressured circumstances was, the language aspect was the easier of the two challenges. The expression of culture was difficult under difficult circumstances. Vygotsky[21] proposed that a child's cognitive schema for operating in the world is culturally bound. Therefore, the effects of trying to learn in an environment where the culture of the classroom differs from the culture of the home are challenging.

Young Latino children exposed to Spanish in the home face the challenge of accommodating their existing schema or constructing new schemas once they enter formal schooling in the United States. When the educational focus is on transitioning culturally and linguistically diverse students to a mainstream culture rather than building on what they already know, students are forced to change to meet the needs of the classroom. Some students are able to change and adapt; other students fail, with no fault of their own. Duquette[22] concluded that children need to be understood and to express themselves (in the same positive light experienced by other children) in their own first language, home context and culture. Their minority background brings out the limitations not of the children but of the professionals who are asked to respond to those needs and cannot or do not.

In their study of the possible effects of language on cognitive development, Hakuta et al[23] recognized the importance of acknowledging students' cultural, linguistic, and cognitive development and addressing them in schools. These effects of language and cognition account for most of the variance in cognitive growth. Therefore, it is important for all children to have a positive schooling experience, including English Language Learners.

A recent report by the Migration Policy Institute[24] looked at discrimination of immigrant children and children of immigrant parents during the last 15-years, and the psychological and educational consequences. Studies show that immigrant children most often perceive discrimination in the school setting. In elementary school, they also experience discrimination from teachers. By adolescence, immigrant students report that they have been graded unfairly, discouraged from joining advanced level classes, and disciplined for things they did not do.

Experiencing discrimination can provoke stress responses similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Counteracting the effects of discrimination is challenging, but a growing body of research points to a number of factors that may help protect or buffer children from the negative effects of experiencing discrimination: A strong, positive ethnic identity; a supportive family environment, and the coping responses employed by children themselves.[24] Children who hold a positive view of their ethnicity and cultural heritage are protected from the negative effects of discrimination from both teachers and peers.

Coming from a supportive family environment and endowed with a strong sense of ethnic and cultural heritage and pride was a lifesaver. I did encounter discrimination from teachers and peers. This was an overwhelming challenge that I dealt with by ignoring it. As a middle school and high school age student, I did not have the skill set to know how to deal with it effectively and efficiently. I perceived other challenges that were more manageable and I focused on them. One of these challenges was schoolwork. I knew that I was struggling to keep up with the curriculum. During my high school years, I spent much of the time catching up on content I had missed when I was learning English.

It was no accident that when my parents brought us to the United States I had a strong sense of ethnic identity. The national Mexican curriculum had an emphasis on the development of a strong sense of nationalism to coalesce political, ideological, socio-demographic and socio-economic ideas, groups, and institutions. The central element focused on "Lealtad a la Patria", loyalty to the motherland and its institutions.[25]

There was a strong expectation at home that college was an achievable goal. There was also complete trust on the school system to make this possible. My parents had their point of view back in their country of origin, and this is how it was done in Mexico, so they trusted the school system to do it. Therefore, when a counselor informed me of the foreign language requirement for college admissions in ninth grade, I took 3-years of French. My counselor told me my primary language, Spanish, "did not count".

Learning French

My first experience learning French was in a California high school. The school I attended offered three foreign language classes, including French. In the late 1970's, there was a lack of a well-articulated framework for the teaching of foreign languages in California. The Foreign Language Framework for California Public Schools had just been published in 1972 under the State Superintendent of Public Instruction.[26]

In high school, one period of the school day was devoted to the teaching of a foreign language. There was no integration of language and content learning. The foreign language-teaching curriculum consisted of ineffective activities, like translation exercises, made up dialogues and other busy work. The expectation of getting a good grade was high, although a high-grade was not the same as achieving a high-level of language fluency and competence. The learning of a foreign language at school was looked at as the fulfillment of one more requirement towards graduation and towards admission into higher education. Therefore, the level of fluency achieved after three-years of high school French as a foreign language was a low two on a 5-point scale.

Thirty two-years later, my French language skills all but atrophied. As a 49-year-old professor on sabbatical, I purposefully set myself up in the situation where I would be immersed in the language and in the culture. I lived in Paris for two months, and enrolled myself in private language classes. In the mornings, I went to classes, and in the afternoons, I attended political and cultural events, lectures, and sports events.

The focus of the language classes was on oral language development: oral communication. There was no integration of language and content learning, as the main purpose was to work on social language, BICS. The strategies used were contextual and relevant to the experience sought. The class had six to eight students; all of us were there to get our language skills enhanced and developed. The class included outings to different locations, where we used the language just acquired within the context of a museum, restaurant, etc. Thus, the context reinforced the purpose of language learning.

Having spent time in Paris before, and knowing I would return home at the end of a certain period of time, gave me the assurance of belonging (not belonging in Paris, but in my hometown back in the United States). Having this reassurance, I was able to appreciate the experience in Paris and be in the moment every step of the way. My French language immersion experience did not have the psychosocial challenges that my English language submersion experience had. Generally, an immigrant undergoes psychosocial challenges upon arriving in a new place. There are uncertainties for the immigrant about their sense of belonging. This level of concern increases if the receiving society does not appear to be accepting. The immigrant also has mixed feelings about arriving at a new place having left behind a way of life in which he/she was competent to negotiate socially.

Teaching Spanish as a Foreign Language

Upon graduating from college, I took a job teaching Spanish in high school. I had not received a teaching credential yet but had many experiences teaching English Language Learners. I had received some of the most current/relevant teaching training from a federally funded program for Migrant children.

I set out to become a mediating agent in my students' educational experience having learned about Vygotsky and his theory of mediating. Vygotsky's theory stipulates that the development of the child's higher mental processes depend on the presence of mediating agents in the child's interaction with the environment.[27] Initially, Vygotsky was talking about symbolic tools, or mediators appropriated by children in the context of particular socio-cultural activities, including formal education. Eventually, this evolved into two types of mediation: mediation through another human being and mediation in the form of organized learning activity.

Richardson[28] made note of the fact that teachers' thinking is defined by context and experience: teachers have a lot of experience prior to entering the teaching profession. My pedagogy as a teacher was grounded in my experience as a language learner: my lived experience of learning a new language and new culture. Spanish was my primary language. I had native competence as well as a high-level of literacy in it. I had enough sense to be the human being in the classroom mediating concepts in language and language acquisition, as well as the cultural aspects of language. Therefore, the practical experience I had developed, in addition to the learned pedagogy, provided me with enough understanding about learning and teaching. I became competent at organizing formal learning activities and at managing the learning environment: the learned pedagogy guided my teaching. Clandinin et al[29] suggest that teachers acquire practical knowledge through an interaction between their own personal narratives and particular situations.

Generally, the students I taught were taking Spanish as a foreign language, in the same manner I had taken English as a foreign language in Mexico. I was able to draw from my experience the challenge of trying to learn a foreign language devoid of relevance, context and motivation. Therefore, my curriculum, teaching strategies, and overall epistemic outlook enabled me to make sure my students found relevance and meaning in the study of the Spanish language and culture: my experiences, formal and informal, informed my teaching.

Teaching English Language Development

Most of the mechanistic (planning, teaching, assessing, etc) aspects of teaching Spanish as a foreign language to native English speakers were the same (or similar) to teaching English as a second language to Migrant (students whose parents work in the agricultural fields) children. However, when working with Migrant English Learners (EL's) there was the added challenge of mediating not just language but the culture as well. I was sure there were psychosocial implications that would play a role in the achievement of my students. Although I had a similar background as my students, I could not rely solely on my own immigrant experience to develop ways to be an effective teacher.

As I examined the literature to develop a foundational understanding of my students' experience, I was able to identify some of the same phenomena in my own. Suarez-Orozco et al[30] state that 85% of immigrant children and adolescents have been separated from one or both parents for an extended period of time. Disruption of family traditions and dynamics sometimes put children at risk for depression and other mental health problems.

Some immigrants experience hardships as part of their immigration experience (e.g., rape, human trafficking, physical abuse, deprivation of food and water, harsh transportation conditions) even as they escape trauma associated with conditions in their native countries (e.g., war, persecution, natural disasters) that were the reasons for leaving. Buhin[31] states that refugees are at higher risk for having survived ongoing torture in their homelands, putting them at high-risk for serious mental health problems such as PTSD and depression. Even when immigrants arrive in the United States hardships, stress and trauma continue. Most feel a sense of urgency about learning English and experience great levels of stress in being unable to use it fluently.

Berry[32] describes the process of adapting to the host culture as acculturation. This process involves stressors associated with adapting to a new culture, such as language barriers, new customs/traditions and discrimination. The attitudes of the host and the host culture play significant roles in the dynamic interactional process.

Different immigrant groups experience varying levels of discrimination and many types, like job discrimination, bullying, and hate crimes. Many immigrants have no previous experience with being "minority" group members until they arrive to their host country. Accumulation of discriminatory events results in avoidance of interactions with mainstream organizations such as schools, libraries, etc. Children lack the cognitive and social resources to understand and cope with discrimination (and sometimes the ability to label it as such). In addition, immigrant parents might not have the background, ability or experience to teach their children how to handle discrimination.

Another phenomenon of acculturation is the Immigrant Paradox. Suárez-Orozco et al[33] discuss the Immigrant Paradoxas newcomer immigrant children being both optimistic about their future and engaged in learning. However, over time, this engagement becomes precarious and vulnerable to change. Fuligini[34] states that the initial academic advantage for nearly all immigrant groups declines the longer they are in the United States. Other declines include aspirations, and physical and psychological health.

CONCLUSION

Watson-Gegeo[35] discuss important developments that have opened the way for a new paradigm shift in second language acquisition (SLA) scholarship. This development has opened the way for a new synthesis involving a reconsideration of mind, language, epistemology, and learning, based on the recognition that cognition originates in social interaction and cultural and sociopolitical processes shape it. This paradigm shift observes that cultural and sociopolitical processes are central, rather than incidental, to cognitive development theory.

Garcia[36] presents an international intellectual movement that brought together the disciplines of psychology, semiotics, education, sociology, and anthropology into a sociocultural theory. This theory for education proposes that individual learning and social interaction are inextricably connected. Sociocultural theory draws from work by Russian theorists L.S. Vygotsky and Mikhail Bakhtin,[21] and theoreticians and philosophers of education like James W, Dewey J, Pierce CS, Piaget J.[37] The attempt was to find a unified way of understanding issues of language, cognition, culture, human development, and teaching and learning.

Sociocultural theorists argue that the psychology of the individual learner is deeply shaped by social interaction. Sociocultural theorists further state that knowledge is created in the interaction between teacher and student; that higher order mental processes are produced by shared activity and dialogue, and that our social lives, which are the major products of culture and language, are the major ingredients for cognition. This theoretical approach is helpful for educators who work with culturally diverse students because it conceives of learning as an interaction between individual learners and an embedding context.

This lens serves to sum up this case study. Language, culture, cognition, and human development in general, is a complex array of characteristics to be incorporated into the SLA teaching and learning process. Under the best circumstances, this is challenging. The cultural relocation that takes place for immigrants coming into the United States brings up another challenge, that of assimilation.

The two major approaches for the assimilation of immigrant children into U.S. society for the past century have been classic assimilation and pluralism. The assimilationists aim to eliminate ethnic boundaries as quickly as possible, while the pluralist aim to accommodate them.[38] These two views represent a melting pot with a single representative identity and a pluralistic cultural democracy.[39] Under the worst circumstances, both views leave school age immigrant children vulnerable to the political whim that rules their school system.

Thinking and reflecting on the experiences described above, and examining the research related to those experiences and their contexts, allowed me to understand and explain (at least to myself) many instances of meaning-making, as a teacher and as a student, where I made accurate connections as well as inaccurate ones. I realize that inaccurate connections were mostly based on a lack of understanding the cultural norms associated with the language I was learning. In addition, the language itself is at times, inadequate in the message(s) it conveys.

Thinking and reflecting is part of the teaching-learning process for teachers and it is done every day if one strives to be an effective one. When I taught high school Spanish and English Language Development to Migrant students, I understood the challenge to be the language. However, further reflection led me to understand that I was also mediating culture and cultural understanding. I became aware that my cultural mediation was more effective when I was doing it for my English-speaking students studying Spanish as a foreign language.

In high school and college, I became fully competent

and literate in English. However, there were gaps in my knowledge and understanding of some cultural traditions, traits, attitudes and behaviors. I did not come to the United States until I was 11-years-old. One example was teaching nursery rhymes to English Learners. I understood every word in every nursery rhyme, but I did not have the "cultural background' to derive culturally relevant meaning from them. This did not make me less effective when working with English Learners. On the contrary, I had the understanding and experience from having been myself an English language learner. I knew what I needed to do to mediate the cultural gap for my students. This knowledge and experience grounded my interest in becoming the best teacher I could be and the professor I became.

With the benefit of hindsight and experience, I have come to observe that learning theories and socialization theories have a confluence and relevance to what happens in the classroom. Teachers are a product of that confluence and, inadvertently, may perpetuate an imperfect and unfair system. As an English learner and as an immigrant, I had experienced the system's inadequacy and education/miseducation of English learners and immigrant students. Working within the system there is pressure to comply, to conform, and to perpetuate it. When I became part of the system by becoming a teacher and professor, I did not base my epistemic approach solely on my own experience. I did not base my epistemic approach on the feedback received from the system either. I became a critical consumer of appropriate and relevant research. It is dangerous to depend on the feedback received from the system, as you become part of it.

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