Valuing ourselves: The world language teachers’ responsibility in the 21st century

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Portfolio 3 – Idea Paper

October 2, 2011

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World language learning remains an isolated exercise. As a world language (WL) teacher, I am troubled by the isolationist practices that occur within the WL classroom. Language taught in a vacuum reinforces stereotypes, exoticism of the language and/or people, assimilationist practices, and conflict. Isolated language learning practices are relevant problems for the field of education and for humanity. Research in the field of WL education (Díaz-Greenberg & Nevin, 2003; Byram & Feng, 2004; Fox & Díaz-Greenberg, 2006; Qu, 2010, Ömer & Dinçer, 2011), have provided a new look at the WL teacher and teaching culture in the WL classroom which are both fundamental pillars that affect the isolationist problem. In my future research I would like to look at the WL teacher and his/her perceptions about experiential knowledge, culture, and global awareness. My primary research question is: How can WL teachers transfer their experiential knowledge of culture and global awareness to their teaching practice in the WL classroom? This inquiry would help to make the WL classroom more inclusive and attune with the changing world. Edelman (1992) stated that “It is the responsibility of every adult—especially parents, educators, and religious leaders to make sure that children hear what we have learned from the lessons of life” (p. 15). WL teachers and their students would benefit from sharing teachers’ experiences. Unfortunately, far too often these experiences are excluded from the classroom discourse. Current educational policies that place a higher value on empirical and analytical knowledge and a lesser value on teachers’ experiential knowledge in fact prompt teachers to be unaware of the value their knowledge has (Elbaz, 1981). This unawareness contributes to the isolation of the WL student, WL teacher, WL classroom, and the world language.
In an effort to make WL classrooms more inclusive scholars have examined critical perspectives on language (Grimshaw, 2007), intercultural agency of WL teachers (Byram & Feng, 2004), culture in the WL classroom (Díaz-Greenberg & Nevin, 2003; Qu, 2010; Ömer & Dinçer, 2011), and preservice WL teachers, culture, and standards (Fox & Díaz-Greenberg, 2006). These are all valuable contributions to the field, but they fail to include WL teachers’ experiential knowledge about global and cultural awareness and the transfer of this experiential knowledge to the teaching practice. A study of this type is intrinsic to the fields of World Languages, Multicultural, Multilingual, and International Education because of the nature of our changing world. The WL classroom can be a space that has the power to foster linguistic and cultural connections around the world or that can continue to perpetuate the status quo’s isolationist stance.

**Personal Interest**

For me, the words “world languages” imply a sense of globalism, the studying of another language, people, and culture. Within this context the WL classroom and teacher have the opportunity to become vehicles that connect students to diverse perspectives and experiences while equipping them with the language skills necessary to “compete” in an interconnected community. The WL teacher is similar to an ambassador, guiding students’ interaction with the new language and culture. The WL teacher is also able to introduce the world language to the student and facilitate the construction of a new discourse in this new language. I refrain from using the terminology “second language” here because I realize that some students who enter WL classrooms are already polyglots, bringing with them a wealth of knowledge from prior language acquisition experiences. For both the polyglot and the monolingual, the world language classroom environment has the potential to promote global awareness, an appreciation
for multiple perspectives, and foster a desire to learn about others. Ideally, in this space the teacher has the opportunity to share his/her experiential knowledge about the language, culture, and people who speak the particular language of instruction. But, it has been my experience that WL teachers refrain from using their experiential knowledge in the classroom and rely heavily on grammatical lessons that have the power to disconnect language from culture. This can result in the limited scope or context for which the language takes place. Students will then only use language in the WL classroom, but not connect their learning or usage to the outside world. Language learning becomes an isolated exercise that may be theoretical in nature, but not practical. Everyone who comes into the classroom has prior knowledge, but the prior experiential knowledge of the WL teacher could be used to spark an interest in other cultures, learning and understanding other perspectives, and global awareness, but I am afraid it’s not. It has been my experience as both a WL teacher and WL learner that language teachers rarely share or incorporate their lived experiences into the classroom. Lessons are limited to conjugations, irrelevant scenarios, rote exercises that do not address the native speakers of the world language, their perspectives, or their culture. I posit that this practice for WL teachers stems from a desire to only view theoretical knowledge as practical while dismissing the relevance of ones’ own lived experiences. The dismissal of lived experiences as irrelevant has the power to further isolate language learning as a mere tool for use within the WL classroom.

There has been substantial research conducted about the incorporation of culture in language classrooms (Byram & Feng, 2004; Qu, 2010). Culture has even become a standard. Its incorporation is relevant to world language learning, but is still taught in isolation, much like the world language itself. I wonder why world language teachers do not consider their lived experiences to be an extension of culture or culturally relevant? Now some may pose the
question what happens if the world language teacher is not native, can the nonnative contribute to the sharing of culture? Simply put, why not? Culture’s complex nature integrates both individual and group dynamics. The mere acknowledgement that a person is human and exists in this world makes this person a member of numerous cultural groups. Historically, the tendency, even within WL classrooms has been to narrowly define culture and the experiences surrounded by it and in turn who is or can be a participant. I stress here that when we do not recognize our conscious and unconscious participation in these exclusionary practices we only perpetuate the notion that our personal lived experiences are inferior or not worth inclusion.

**Research Questions**

**Question:** How can world language teachers transfer their experiential knowledge of global awareness to their teaching practice in a world language classroom?

**Question:** What are the perceived advantages of using lived experiences to promote global awareness in the world language classroom? / What are the perceived advantages of promoting global awareness in world language classrooms?

**Question:** What are the perceived disadvantages of using lived experiences to promote global awareness in the world language classroom? / What are the perceived disadvantages of promoting global awareness in world language classrooms?

**Question:** What are the perceived challenges to incorporating lived experiences of global awareness in the world language classroom?

**Research Methods**
Deweyan philosophy calls for the exploration of experiential constructs in teaching and learning (Downey & Clandinin, 2009). For this reason I would like to find out how world language teachers can transfer their experiential knowledge into their teaching practice. The best approach for this study is narrative inquiry. Jalongo & Isenberg (1995) commented that “…Teachers’ stories are an appropriate way of getting started with any of these reflective thinking practices as well as an avenue for attaining the highest level of professional insight.”

Through stories we ‘witness’ and ‘remember’ lived experiences (Cooper, 1991). Narrative inquiry provides the perfect avenue to understand lived experience and more importantly reflect upon it (Korthagen, 1985; Van Manen, 1990). I consider Dewey, Van Manen, Freire, S. Wilson, Connelly, and Clandinin to be theoretical contributors to the following study.

The qualitative study I propose will use a semi-structured approach and include interviews, written narratives, and observations as methods of data collection. The participant interviews and written narratives will provide rich data for analysis, re-storying, and reflection. I also believe that through observation I can gain an added perspective on WL classroom practices. For data analysis I will use a multi-method approach. I will use the Listening Guide (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2006). This method transforms the data into “I” statements, which are then used to create thematic bins. The second approach is called Storying Stories (McCormack, 2004). The method itself requires both researcher and the participant to be involved in the re-storying. This for me is fundamental because it empowers the participant and makes sure that their voice and experience is told. “Both the participant and the researcher hear their voices and see their experiences in the interpretive story and invite the reader to interact with the [new] stories” (McCormack, 2004, p. 234). The written narrative data will be used in reflection and then coded thematically.
Conclusion

The world is changing and this change requires a different type of investigation, one that looks at multicultural, multilingual, and global awareness as a part of our experiences rather than an add-on to disguise assimilationist practices. Now, this may be misinterpreted by readers as a phenomenon that only affects people of color, but that posture neglects the importance of culture and language to all cultural groups and continues hegemonic practices. Schools are social institutions that should adapt stances that are multicultural, multilingual, and global. Within the world language classroom, the inclusion and integration of lived experiences is necessary because of (1) the diverse make-up of our populations, (2) the diversity in classrooms, both teacher and student, (3) the changing world, and (4) the interconnectedness of local and global communities.

When schools, teachers, and curriculums exclude lived experiences that demonstrate global awareness a message is sent to the students, parents, and larger communities. If a teacher is unable to include his/ her experiential knowledge the learning experiences within the classroom are less rich. This exclusion trickles down and affects the larger community. Whose experiences really matter in local and global communities? It is my hope that studying of WL teachers’ lived experiences and their teaching practices in this study will add to the existing body of research.

Areas of expertise needed for the dissertation committee.

For my proposed research study I will need to form a committee that includes (1) a qualitative methodologist, (2) an International Education specialist, (3) a World Language specialist, and (4) a Multicultural/ Multilingual specialist.
References


*Language Teaching, 37*(3), 149-168.


*European Journal of Teacher Education, 29*(3) 401-422.


