

## **RECIPROCITY IN SERVICE LEARNING: INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH SLA STUDIES**

Kara McBride

Saint Louis University

[kmcbri8@slu.edu](mailto:kmcbri8@slu.edu); <http://www.slu.edu/~kmcbri8/>

Undergraduate students enrolled in a second language acquisition (SLA) course were required to undertake a service-learning project involving teaching or tutoring second language learners. Connected to the community service project, students kept journals in which they reflected on their experiences and connected them with SLA theories discussed in class. Analysis reveals that those undergraduates whose attention remained most fixed on their tutorees' SLA processes were also the participants who showed the greatest insights into intercultural communication. This paper argues that the subjects whose service learning project was more successful in the ways described above exemplified the role of a participant in what Palmer (1998) calls a community of truth. While other students who experienced less satisfying service learning experiences generally had similar interests and goals as their more successful peers, intercultural connections and deeper understanding of SLA was hindered by the way those students framed their inquiry and reflection.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The data for this study come from the reflection journals and final papers of undergraduates enrolled in a service-learning course about second language acquisition (SLA). Examined is the extent to which the service-learning experiences impacted students' understanding of SLA and their development of intercultural competence.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Service Learning**

Learning does not happen through a learner's passive reception of ideas. Instead, learners actively construct knowledge for themselves through interaction with others and the world (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998; McBride & Wildner-Bassett, 2008). Service learning supports this process by sending students outside of their school or campus to work with members of the community. Students' learning is not only deepened through experiential learning (Ash, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2005; Collins, 2009; Dewey, 1933), but,

by working with community members the students would not otherwise have interacted with, students gain new perspectives and become more tolerant and understanding of others (McElhaney, 1998; Seigel & Rockwood, 1996), and this in turn supports their moral development (Bernacki & Jaeger, 2008; McElhaney, 1998).

The two essential characteristics of successful service-learning experiences are reflection and reciprocity (Jacoby, 1996). Reflection is needed for students to make the connections that constitute the construction of knowledge and understanding (Dewey, 1933; Ray & Coulter, 2008). Through reflection, connections can be made between theories presented in a class and experiences students have out in the community, and between those experiences and the students' larger world views. Because indeed learning is not a passive activity, it takes effort. Deep reflection is not automatic and must be worked at purposefully.

Therefore, students should have from the beginning an understanding and expectation that they have as much, if not more, to gain from the service experience as the community members they are serving. Relations between the community members and service learners ought to be established as between equals, and the service performed must be one that the members of the community themselves decide that they want, and not something imposed upon them from outside (Jacoby, 1996). A hierarchical relationship of help-giver and help-receiver blocks the students from benefiting from the experience and could cause the students to behave in an insulting manner that is harmful to the relationship that they establish with those with whom they work.

### **Community of Learners**

Palmer's (1998, p. 102) model of a "community of truth" describes and can further elucidate a successful relationship among participants in a service-learning encounter. Palmer's intention was to describe what kind of community—which could be within a class or among scholars in a field—best supports learning and the pursuit of truth. It is one in which all members are recognized as "knowers." That is, the structure of interaction among participants in a community of truth attests to the fact that all participants bring with them some knowledge and a unique perspective that can add to the discussion through which participants learn (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005).

Palmer (1998) contrasts this dynamic to the hierarchical, one-sided encounter in a traditional classroom, where only the teacher, as expert, is given a voice, because of an assumption that only the expert can have direct information about the object of knowledge. The learners, or "amateurs," as they are labeled in Palmer's model, do not, and it is only through the expert that the students can come to know the object of

knowledge. Thus, in that model, the expert becomes the center of attention, and the other participants are dependent upon him or her. In the community model, on the other hand, all participants have direct relationships with the subject of study, and with each other, and it is the subject that occupies the center of participants' attention. Palmer also deliberately contrasts the *object* of study in the hierarchical model with *subject* of study in the community model, saying, "A subject is available for a relationship; an object is not" (p. 104).

Palmer calls his model of a traditional, hierarchical class "the objectivist myth of knowing" (1998, p. 100) because it is founded on the false hope that a person might be able to possess truly objective, absolute knowledge untouched by the subjectivity that results from interpretation. The community of truth instead acknowledges that all understanding necessarily is shaped by the perspective of he or she who understands. Recognizing and embracing that, the community of truth seeks multiple perspectives. Palmer (1998) writes, "Reality is a web of communal relationships, and we can know reality only by being in community with it" (p. 97). Perhaps nowhere is this as certain as when the truths that we study concern human cultures.

### **Intercultural Competence**

Intercultural competence, very broadly speaking, is the ability to relate to people who come from cultures different from one's own. This ability is a fundamental skill that is required for a person to thrive in life, for it is required for personal growth, mental health, and, as we have seen, learning. Globalization has made it so that the ability to relate to people from cultures different from one's own has become a necessary part of this wider skill (Kramsch, 2006).

Given the limitless forms that intercultural communication can take, and the fact that "Intercultural development implies personality development," (Sercu, 2002, p. 65), efforts to describe concisely what intercultural competence is and to identify it definitively remain elusive (Byram, 1997; Schulz, LaLande II, Dykstra-Pruim, Zimmer-Loew, & James, 2005; Sercu, 2002). It involves a range of types of attitudes, knowledge, and interpretive and interactional skills (Byram, 1997), and it implies a certain kind of positioning of oneself towards the other:

The 'intercultural speaker'... is committed to turning intercultural encounters into intercultural relationships. He or she is not satisfied with a view from the outside, with marveling at differences and at what seems exotic and intriguing about another culture. An intercultural speaker is determined to understand, to gain an inside view of the other person's

culture, and at the same time to contribute to the other person's understanding of his or her own culture (Sercu, 2002, p. 63).

Thus, once again we see that learning and seeking out truth require a specific kind of relationship with others: one where one does not enforce one's own views onto others or passively accept those of another, but instead where an open exchange of ideas among equals happens. The real exchange of such ideas does not result in one party becoming convinced to abandon his or her previous cultural identity. Rather, both parties gain something of an insider's view of the other culture, as well as an outsider's view of one's native culture. The point of view attained, then, is neither from the first place from which one begins, nor the second position of one's interlocutor, but rather a third place, informed by both (Kramersch, 1993).

### **Framing**

Learning, therefore, requires that the learner not remain solely focused on his or her own perspective. The learning process also necessitates the same of teachers, who need to attend to student thinking in order to assess where the students are developmentally. Knowing this allows teachers to best choose class activities and provide appropriate feedback to students, which in turn promotes learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Leung, 2007; Poehner, 2007).

Unfortunately, it has often been found that beginning teachers tend not to focus on student thinking but instead on issues of their personal identity as teachers, on the establishment of teaching routines, and on classroom management (Borg, 2006; Brandl, 2000; Numrich, 1996; Nunan, 1992; Richards, Li, & Tang, 1998). A widely accepted explanation for this strong trend is that it is necessary for teachers first to attend to these concerns and master them and develop certain automatized routines, before they can focus on student thinking while in the classroom (Fuller, 1969; Kagan, 1992; Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991). "The notion that mastery of organizational routines is a prerequisite for attending to student learning has become conventional wisdom in teacher education and is often assumed in published research" (Levin, Hammer, & Coffey, 2009, pp. 144-145).

Levin et al. (2009) argue, however, that teacher development need not necessarily proceed in these stages and that it is possible for beginning teachers to attend to student thinking. What determines what beginning teachers focus on while teaching is how they frame what occurs in their classes. Typically, teacher trainers and supervisors direct new teachers to focus on their own behaviors and assess the quality of it, as well as to direct their attention to curricular objectives and standards. These concerns can

dominate new teachers' thought to the extent that they leave no room for attention to student thinking. Such narrowness of focus, however, stunts the new teacher's development, for it is attention to student thinking that ought to guide much of the teacher's decisions about what happens in class (Poehner, 2007). Furthermore, attending to student learning can be the vehicle by which new teachers construct their identities as teachers (Levin et al., 2009; Shapiro, 1991).

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study examined participants' reflection journals and final papers in order to examine how their service-learning experiences impacted their understanding of SLA and their intercultural competence. Specifically it attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What evidence is there that students' service-learning experiences aided their understanding of SLA?
2. What evidence is there that students' service-learning experiences helped to further their development of intercultural competence?
3. What are the distinguishing characteristics of the service-learning experiences where students demonstrate understanding of SLA and intercultural competence through those same service-learning experiences?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The data for this study come from eight undergraduate students who were enrolled in an SLA course that included a major service-learning component. These eight subjects were chosen out of an original 13 undergraduate students because they met two criteria: 1) they worked all semester in the same service-learning context, and 2) the people they worked with were not from the same cultural group as themselves. Table 1 below summarizes the nature of the participants' service-learning projects.

Six participants took the course as fulfilling part of the requirements for a Spanish major. These students had a level of Spanish equivalent to eighth-semester college Spanish or

higher. The other two participants took the course to fulfill requirements for a minor in education or as an elective.

Table 1. Participants.

<b>Student<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Service learning context</b>	<b>Department</b>
1. Erin	Spanish literacy support for heritage learner in middle school	Spanish
2. Linda	ESL tutoring with refugees	Spanish
3. Chris	ESL classes with Mexican immigrants	Spanish
4. Amy	ESL classes with Mexican immigrants	Spanish
5. Sarah	ESL classes with Mexican immigrants	Education
6. John	Teaching Spanish in middle school for disadvantaged girls	Spanish
7. Beth	ESL with Chinese students	Education
8. Marta	ESL tutoring with refugees	Spanish

## The Class

The course, cross-listed with both the Spanish and the education departments, was taught at a private Jesuit university where service is a dominant characteristic of the university's mission. Class time was spent mainly in discussions of readings on SLA topics such as classroom interaction; behaviorist, cognitive and mentalist accounts of SLA; learner differences; sociolinguistics; bilingual education; and study abroad. There were also units on service learning and lesson planning. Class discussions were conducted in English, but students who took the course for Spanish credit had to write their reflection journals and final papers in Spanish.

Students were required to complete 30 hours of service learning, but up to half of their service hours could be time spent in orientation sessions, class preparation, and other activities necessary for realizing their work. Arrangements had been made ahead of time with four organizations where the students could do their service: with English as a second language (ESL) students at the university; ESL classes offered for Mexican immigrants; ESL tutoring offered for refugees; and tutoring or teaching Spanish classes

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

at a middle school for underprivileged girls. Some students, not included in this study, found alternative opportunities.

## **Data**

For the course, students kept a reflection journal. Students were asked to write primarily about their service-learning experiences and were encouraged to regularly relate those experiences to topics that had been discussed in class. They were allowed to sometimes write about SLA more generally, however, and the first entry had to be about their expectations for the course and a reaction to Jacoby's (1996) article about reciprocity and reflection in service learning. The grading rubric for the journal was drawn up through consensus between the instructor (the investigator) and the students and can be found in the appendix.

Students' journals averaged about 35 pages each, and their final papers were 5 to 6 pages in length. Students' journals and final papers were analyzed for evidence of the development of intercultural competence and insights into SLA.

## **Procedures**

***Depth of reflection on SLA.*** All students included in their journals discussions of SLA processes, and they frequently employed specific terms that had been discussed in class. The depth of analysis and the extent to which these were accurately connected to students' teaching experiences, however, varied radically. The Kelley-Robinson Coding Rubric for Reflective Thought (Robinson & Kelley, 2007) was chosen in order to operationalize and quantify depth of reflection in these journals. It was felt that the categories of this rubric met the needs of the present study more closely than other alternatives (e.g., Ash et al., 2005; Ray & Coulter, 2008). Nonetheless, given the differences between the context within which the Kelley-Robinson rubric was developed and the circumstances of this study, it was decided to collapse Levels 0 and 1; to eliminate the parenthetical comment from the original description of Level 7; and to add a phrase to the description for Level 6 ("or struggles to change perspective on previous belief"). Otherwise, the original descriptions have been preserved. As was done in Robinson and Kelley (2007), exemplary quotes from the data from the present study are provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2. The Kelley-Robinson Coding Rubric for Reflective Thought (Robinson & Kelley, 2007), revised.

Level	Type of Reflective Thought	Description	Example
1	None	Statement of fact or skill; No observation	Next week we will give them a test.*
2	None	Descriptive writing: Must be observed	But today the girls brought an article they needed help understanding so they could answer questions about it.
3	Technical Rationality	Description of observed event with terminology	I have seen many instances of transfer... They always want to put "the" in front of words that don't need it.*
4	Descriptive Rationality	Description of an observed event with associated terminology and personal perspective; Looks at impact on others	I showed them how they could split the reading up into different parts, take the main idea of each part, and link them all together into one sentence about the entire reading. That was kind of confusing for them, so I had to go through it a few times, but eventually they understood.
5	Dialogic Reflection	Description of an observed event with associated terminology/ concepts; Uses multiple perspectives	Yet, there is somewhat of a defense boundary that is set up in order to, in a sense, protect the In-group from the Out-group. Thus, because of many of these factors, it is highly unlikely that many of the students here will succeed in acquiring English as a second language.
6	Critical Reflection	Considers entire context; Discourse with self and explores possible reasons for actions. Steps out of self and observes from a distance, or struggles to change perspectives on previous belief	Since I have been learning Spanish in language classroom contexts only for so long, the focus has been on "perfect" production... I'm getting more comfortable with the idea of not knowing what I'm going to say before until immediately before something comes out, and from that I have learned the most.
7	Reflect-on-Action	Ethical and moral issues; Considers a holistic picture and considers implications for future practice	"...both teach and both learn." This quote sums up my semester... I know that I will always continue to note my students' experiences with SLA so that we can find the solutions!*

\*These are translations of entries that were originally in Spanish.

Another way in which the use of the Kelley-Robinson rubric differs here from its original implementation is that in that study, each individual sentence in the journals was rated. In the present study, it was decided instead to attach to each student's journal entry the highest number that could be said to apply to the entire entry. High scores on the rubric require that several elements be present, and typically it took students more than one paragraph to establish all of those elements in their more reflective entries. Because students wrote an average of two entries per week, their production was regular. Their depth-of-reflection scores averaged over the semester indicate how deeply the participants were thinking about their service-learning experiences on a regular basis. By not counting each sentence individually, average depth-of-reflection scores were not skewed by differences in the length of participants' entries.

Only those entries that referred to specific SLA episodes were rated. This included encounters directly connected to participants' service-learning projects, as well as other instances of SLA that students chose to describe and discuss in their journals. Entries that discussed concepts only in the abstract, without referring to specific events (for example, before the student began his or her service experience), were not included in this part of the analysis. "High-quality reflections... should reflect the practitioners' constant engagement in critical and multi-perspective interactions and reasoning with the contexts they were situated in" (Luk, 2008, p. 627).

Two raters coded the data according to the rubric. Before coding, the raters discussed the rubric and jointly rated three entries written by different students. The raters then coded the data independently. The initial correlation between scores was .79 ( $p < .01$ ). This is a moderate strength of agreement. The raters arrived at a final score for each entry by discussing discrepancies in the scores.

***Intercultural insights.*** In order to identify insight into intercultural matters and the development of a "third place" perspective on the part of the student participants, descriptions of intercultural competence found in Byram (1997) were used. In this work, Byram lists a number of behaviors that exemplify intercultural competence, under five broad categories: Attitudes, Knowledge, Skills of Interpreting and Relating, Skills of Discovery and Interaction, and Critical Cultural Awareness/ Political Education (pp. 50-54).

This round of analysis examined all journal entries and final papers for occasions in which the participants exhibited insights into the experience of others from other cultures. Not counted, however, were mere expressions of beliefs that the participants had clearly formulated before that semester and that were not explicitly connected to some encounter with another person. When there was evidence of these beliefs being

re-examined, though, these episodes were counted and coded. Each new theme presented in the students' writing was categorized according to Byram's (1997) scheme. Themes covered in final papers that had been discussed previously in the student's journal were not added into the data, but twice the final papers introduced new intercultural themes not earlier expressed in a journal entry.

Coding was done as follows. Each of the five broad categories was assigned a letter: Attitudes (A), Knowledge (K), Skills of Interpreting and Relating (I), Skills of Discovery and Interaction (D), and Critical Cultural Awareness/ Political Education (C). Under each of these categories in Byram's (1997) work, there is a list of specific objectives. Each specific objective was assigned a number. Thus, for example, under the category "Skills of Interpreting and Relating," the first objective is "Identify ethnocentric perspectives in a document or event and explain their origins" (p. 52). That objective was coded as "I1." Every instance in the data that had been identified in a previous reading of the data as a potential example of the exercise or development of intercultural competence was either assigned one of these codes or rejected. Only one code was assigned to any given passage, so as not to over-represent the frequency of occurrence.

Two objectives from Byram's (1997) schema were not coded. One objective, under "Skill of Discovery and Interaction," was "Identify and make use of public and private institutions which facilitate contact with other countries and cultures" (p. 53). This objective was not coded in the data because it pertained to all participants by virtue of their meeting the requirements of the course. The other excluded objective was a Knowledge objective wherein the learner achieves contact with interlocutors from another country. Whether students chose to do their service work with people from other countries or not did not seem relevant to what kind of intercultural competence score they should receive.

## **RESULTS**

### **Depth of Reflection on SLA**

Table 3 shows first how many entries were considered in the analysis of depth of reflection about SLA. Although all students had between 27 and 38 journal entries total, only those entries that made reference to concrete examples of SLA were considered here. Table 3 also reports the highest and lowest levels of depth of reflection attributed to journal entries by each subject. That is to say that subjects Linda, Erin, Chris, and Amy all had at least one entry that was categorized at Level 7, "Reflect-on-Action," while

Marta and Beth had no entries above a Level 4, “Descriptive Rationality.” The next two rows in Table 3 show the standard deviation of each participant’s journal entry levels coded here, followed by the average score.

Table 3. Scores for depth of analysis and occasions of intercultural insights.

	Name	Erin	Linda	Chris	Amy	Sarah	John	Beth	Marta
SLA	# Entries scored	17	16	16	21	32	17	20	19
	# Entries total	29	38	27	37	38	33	29	38
	Lowest	4	4	3	4	2	3	2	1
	Highest	7	7	7	7	5	5	5	4
	SD	1.1	1.0	1.4	0.9	1.0	0.6	0.9	0.9
	<b>Average</b>	<b>5.6</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>5.4</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>3.1</b>	<b>2.8</b>
Inter-cultural	A	3	9	10	11	3	0	0	2
	K	0	2	1	4	0	0	0	0
	I	7	3	6	4	4	1	0	0
	D	2	2	2	5	0	0	0	0
	C	1	1	1	0	5	0	2	0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>

The insights that participants had into the SLA processes of the people they were working with covered as wide of a range of topics as had been covered in the course syllabus. The following example shows how participant Amy reasoned through her students’ difficulties learning possessive adjectives.

Yo vi que muchas veces ellos escribieron “their” cuando solo había una persona mostrando la posesión. No sabía porque... ellos han comprendido cuando lo escribimos en la pizarra. Me di cuenta que ellos estaban escribiendo “their” cuando lo que fue poseído fue plural... como en español. *(I could see that many times they wrote ‘their’ when there*

*was only one person possessing the thing. I didn't know why... they had understood it when we wrote it on the blackboard. I realized that they were writing 'their' when the thing possessed was plural... just like in Spanish.<sup>2</sup>)*

Comments on the sources of the second language (L2) students' motivation were common, as in the following from Sarah's first service encounter for this project:

One of the students that came was a younger male, perhaps in his mid twenties. It was quite obvious that he was not extremely motivated to be there or to learn English. Initially I was working with him and it seems obvious that there was a great amount of *pena* when he was attempting to pronounce certain words.

Mentions of motivation were often connected to insights regarding sociocultural issues. The continuation of the entry just cited included a reflection on the dynamic of gender roles and age. Later in the semester, after the acculturation model (Schumann, 1986) was discussed in class, this participant and others wrote about how this model could be applied to the situation of the learners they were working with.

The four participants with higher average depth-of-reflection scores frequently had insights into teaching, hitting on important themes in SLA research. Chris's discussion of collaborative learning is a good example:

*Es importante que un estudiante tenga otros estudiantes con quien puede aprender. Si un estudiante siempre está con un nativo, después de unos minutos, se siente tonto o siente como nunca va aprender. Sin embargo, con otros estudiantes, el grupo puede enseñarse mutuamente, cada persona puede aprender de cada persona. (It's important for students to have other students to learn with. If a student is always with a native speaker, after a few minutes he'll feel dumb or like he'll never learn. However, with other students, the members of the group can teach each other, everyone can learn from everyone else.)*

Entries receiving lower scores on depth of reflection reported occurrences from the students' encounters without probing into the potential impact or other perspectives. For example, in the following quote, John reports on something he taught the girls in his Spanish class:

---

<sup>2</sup> All translations are my own.

Tenía que enseñar qué significa yo, tú, él, nosotros...y la idea que él y el gato es la misma forma del verbo. (*I had to teach them what “I,” “you,” “he,” “we” mean... and the idea that “he” and “the cat” go with the same verb form.*)<sup>3</sup>

The four participants with lower depth-of-reflection scores reported overall fewer details, two of them failing ever to include their students' names, and the other two including such information only in the earliest entries. These participants also had a tendency to express skewed interpretations of SLA theories. For example, after a semester of reporting very low comprehension and retention among the refugee students with whom she worked, and despite having expressed misgivings about the lesson structures dictated by the institution where she was volunteering, Marta described a model of SLA thus:

No hay sola repetición en la lección del día, pero también hay mucha repetición cada semana. Los estudiantes practican con las mismas ideas y palabras cada día por una o dos semanas para reforzar y repetir los conceptos muchas veces. Entonces es obvio que los estudiantes al [instituto] dan apoyo a la teoría 'behaviorist' en mi opinión. (*There isn't just repetition of the lesson of the day, but there's also a lot of repetition each week. Students practice the same ideas and words each day for one or two weeks to reinforce and repeat the concepts many times. And so in my opinion it is obvious that the students at the [institute] support the 'behaviorist' theory.*)

The fact that SLA was happening as little as it was indicates that the behaviorist model fails to explain what was happening with these refugee ESL learners. Marta appears not to have understood that a lack of success in an SLA situation indicates that the approach being taken is ineffective, and hence the assumptions it is based on are probably incorrect.

Like Marta, two other participants with low depth-of-reflection scores, John and Sarah, wrote extensively on their tutorees' low retention and concluded that such problems could only be effectively addressed through massive repetition.

---

<sup>3</sup> This Level 3 entry shows the kind of language that counted as the “terminology” referred to in the rubric. As in Robinson and Kelley (2007), this could be anything that was specific to the field of SLA and/or categories and concepts that people unfamiliar with the field of SLA would be unlikely to comment upon.

## Intercultural Insights

The lower half of Table 3 summarizes the data for the area of intercultural insights and learning. The participants who scored high on one measurement tended to score high on the other ( $r=.86$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Three of the four participants whose average depth-of-reflection scores were low also had few occasions of manifesting intercultural competence or learning in reaction to the SLA episodes or other occasions of intercultural contact that they reported upon. Lower scorers' descriptions tended to be flatter, reporting bare facts about the lesson, such as "Today we taught class again. We began using chapter four," and so on. Information about the L2 learners, and therefore about their cultures, was sparse in the journals of those with lower scores.

Which of Byram's five categories participants manifested activity in varied from participant to participant, but the Attitudes category was especially common. A clear example of this category is in Amy's affirmation,

Me quedé allí porque pienso que es muy importante tener amistades con personas que son muy diferentes que mí. Sin relaciones entre personas de la minoría y la mayoría nunca van a estar juntos y sin el compañerismo, los dos grupos les faltan la oportunidad de aprender y saber. (*I stayed there because I think it is very important to be friends with people who are very different from me. Without relationships between people from the minority and the majority, they will never be together, and without this companionship, neither group will have the opportunity to learn and know.*)

An example of Critical Cultural Awareness/ Political Education came from Erin after she had occasion to review a social studies reading with the Mexican-born middle school girl with whom she was working: "Me siento 'awkward' y casi sucia y fraudulenta cuando ayudo a María con su tarea sobre Colón. Ella es de México. Ella tiene sangre indígena." (*I feel 'awkward' and almost dirty and fraudulent when I help Maria with her homework about Christopher Columbus. She is from Mexico. She has indigenous blood.*) Erin later addressed this situation by introducing to María a heritage Spanish textbook that had readings about Latin America culture and history (Roca, 2005), to which the middle school tutoree responded enthusiastically.

Other themes discussed by participants included the political situations of their tutorees' countries and the reasons why they had come to the US; US immigration policy; the English Only movement; the financial needs of the tutorees and the extent to which they were in a position to make what the college student participants considered to be wise,

long-term decisions about them; the tutorees' family ties and other close relationships; and differences in the perception of age in different cultures. Mention of either of the two topics about US policy was generally accompanied by expressions of surprise and a discussion of the student's position on the policy. Usually the students expressed dismay, as in, "¡No puedo creer que este movimiento exista! ¡Estoy una poca avergonzada que vivo en una sociedad tan elitista!" (*I can't believe this movement exists! I'm a little embarrassed that I live in such an elitist society!*)

As mentioned before, several participants discussed the application of the acculturation model to their students' situations, and this was the occasion of intercultural insights. Most participants spent some time in their journals grappling with their frustration over how slow their students' L2 progress was. When some participants got to know their tutorees better and learned about their social lives and work demands, they more fully understood their students' SLA trajectories. Participant Chris clearly expressed his active interest in learning about his students in the following:

Hoy fue buen día para nosotros como profesores de nuestros estudiantes. No necesariamente por la clase (porque no enseñamos casi nada), sino por aprender de la situación de nuestros estudiantes y de la organización que mantiene nuestras clases. (*Today was a great day for us as teachers of our students. Not so much because of the class (because we taught almost nothing), but because we learned about our students' situation and the organization that provides the classes.*)

A distance between the low scorers and their tutorees, on the other hand, was evident by a dearth of anecdotes about good conversations between them. Communication instead was strained or difficult. One example is the following: "After the article, they didn't have any other material from class but we still had a half hour left, so we practiced conversation skills." The use of the expression "practice conversation skills," which this participant, Beth, used a number of times in her journal, suggests a dull exchange with little sharing of information, even though the L2 learners with whom she worked could speak English fairly fluently. Another participant, Marta, working with a beginning ESL learner felt it was nearly impossible to work with someone who knew so little English: "Espero que [esta estudiante de Eritrea] pueda aprender más del idioma rápidamente porque ella quiere saber el idioma, pero es muy difícil cuando no hay comunicación para explicar las ideas." (*I hope that [this student from Eritrea] can learn more of the language quickly, because she wants to know the language, but it very difficult when there is no communication for explaining the ideas.*)

## Framing

Participants who received high scores on the depth-of-reflection measure and on the intercultural scale did so because they wrote about many insights into their students' thinking and experiences. These high scorers' framing of their service-learning experiences, then, can be described as focused on their learners. High scoring participants tended to describe their service-learning experiences as learning experiences, using words such as "discovery," "realization," and "revelation" (or their Spanish equivalents) when recounting their findings. Also, high scorers used overall a markedly more positive tone, some of them devoting considerable space to rejoicing in their new friendships, or praising their students' creativity, intelligence, and perseverance. In contrast, low scorers were more likely to express frustration with their students' performance—an element, it should be noted however, that was not entirely absent from the high scorers' journals.

Participants who received lower scores on these two scales necessarily wrote less about their understandings of their students' SLA processes and cultural perspectives. Their focus was elsewhere. For example, Sarah, whose score was fairly high on the intercultural scale but low on the depth-of-reflection scale, showed consistent insight into students' hardships and suffering. She many times chose to describe this using the Spanish word *pena*, although the rest of her journal was written in English. These numerous insights led her to have a fairly high intercultural score. Those issues of SLA that appeared in her journal were also described in terms of struggle and language deficit, and she reported little on the language production of her students.

John's experience in service learning was characterized by deep frustration. Although he never described his students in terms of numbers, looks, demographic characteristics, or names, he did expound extensively on his disappointment in their accomplishments and commitment. Another great source of frustration for John was his disagreement with the school principal over how to teach Spanish classes, causing him once to begin a journal entry with the expression, "*¡Voy a matar alguien!*" (*I'm going to kill someone!*) On a positive note, John did many times describe his love for languages. These expressions were generally detached from his service-learning experiences, however, except to comment on how much less his students were interested in language learning than he was.

For Beth, the focus was on herself and her desire to be helpful. She described her encounters with her students almost entirely in terms of her actions. For example, occasions of the ESL students' speech were described more in terms of her ability to understand them, as opposed to the students' abilities in speaking. Throughout her

narrative, Beth reasserted her desire to be helpful. The intensity of her preoccupation with this contrasted markedly with her tutorees' lack of interest in tutoring sessions with her. By the second week of tutoring, Beth's students began making excuses and not showing up to agreed-upon meeting times, and three weeks before the end of the semester, she had lost contact with all of them<sup>4</sup> and had to seek service-learning opportunities elsewhere in the university's ESL program in order to meet the course requirements.

Finally, the outstanding focus of Marta was a sustained attempt to formulate how best to teach second languages. Many of her entries were displays of her (variably accurate) understanding of topics discussed in class and applications (again, with variable correctness) of SLA models to what she had observed in the learners she worked with. Her occasional misinterpretation of SLA occurrences was most dramatically exemplified by the following quote: "Pienso que es un poco extraña que ella no puede pronunciar los nombres de sus propios hijos" (*I think it's a little strange that she can't pronounce the names of her own children*), said in connection to a lesson introducing family vocabulary. What is problematic about this comment is that it is, by definition, impossible for a woman not to be able to pronounce the names she chose for her own offspring. Over a series of entries near the end of the semester, Marta sketched out what she considered to be fundamentals for L2 teaching. As described above, her model reflected the patterns of practice that she participated in implementing in the institute where she volunteered—practices that her journal entries established as highly ineffectual and which she sought to improve by greater amounts of repetition. Her solution was problematic, however, as it appeared to entail essentially more repetition of the same practices that had not yet been found to be effective.

## DISCUSSION

Students who showed greater depth of reflection were also likely to demonstrate more occasions of intercultural competence. These students framed their service-learning experiences in terms of the learners with whom they worked. By maintaining a focus on the language learners that they were working with, they stayed focused on the subject of study, which was SLA.

---

<sup>4</sup> This Level 3 entry shows the kind of language that counted as the "terminology" referred to in the rubric. As in Robinson and Kelley (2007), this could be anything that was specific to the field of SLA and/or categories and concepts that people unfamiliar with the field of SLA would be unlikely to comment upon.

## **Framing**

Students in this study tended to have either highly successful service-learning experiences, or they had strikingly less satisfying learning experiences. Levin et al.'s (2009) application of the idea of framing to new teacher cognition provides a useful lens through which to view these data: those who scored low on the two measures used in the present study failed to perceive more deeply the realities of their tutorees because, instead of being focused primarily on student thinking, they were preoccupied with other concerns. Failing to attend fully to their students then led to few insights about either the tutorees' SLA process or cultural realities.

For the new teachers in Levin et al. (2009) and the studies they reviewed, a major obfuscating concern was the new teachers' development of their teacher identities. Two of the low scorers in the present data set had a similar primary focus. Both Beth and John framed their narratives in terms of what they as teachers were doing, such that information about their unnamed students functioned as descriptors of John or Beth's teaching and not as events in themselves.

Another obstacle to focusing on student thinking that the new teachers discussed in Levin et al. (2009) experienced was an over-emphasis on meeting course objectives. This is in fact the focus that many school boards want their teachers to have, but, as Levin et al. (2009) demonstrate, making sure that a set curriculum is being covered can pull a teacher's attention away from student thinking and cause him or her to quickly and superficially rush through a list of topics that the students may well not understand entirely. This is not to say that the curriculum and standards do not represent the important concepts that students need to learn, but since it is only through student thinking that learning can happen, when a focus on curricula and standards competes with a focus on student learning, none of the goals is served.

Participants Marta and Sarah were likewise framing their service-learning experiences in terms of important issues, but, as with Levin et al.'s (2009) student teachers who ignored student thinking in favor of teaching objectives, they failed to gain as much insight into what was actually happening with their students as they might have. Marta's focus was on being able to articulate an accurate and universally-applicable model of SLA, but she searched for her evidence only from sources of authority, such as the course readings and the directions from her superiors at the institute where she volunteered. This was not a successful route, and her tutoring experiences were marked by a lack of communication between her and the tutorees, as well as a lack of progress in the tutorees' SLA.

Sarah on the other hand, whose average depth-of-reflection score was on the low end but who demonstrated considerable intercultural competence, framed her service-learning experiences in terms of students' suffering, or *pena*. As there was indeed a substantial amount of struggle to witness in her tutorees' lives, Sarah was able to demonstrate insight and understanding in terms of the students' personal realities. Framing the SLA processes in terms of deficit, however, allowed her to see mostly what was not happening and not what was happening. This was all the more evident when her accounts of the events are compared with those of Chris and Amy, who retold the same events in their journals. Chris and Amy, who were focused on student thinking, were able to detect the sources of their students' difficulties and work productively within the students' zones of proximal development (Leung, 2007; Poehner, 2007). That is, they were able to formulate for themselves what was missing in their students' understanding, and they used this to work towards the next stage of L2 development by scaffolding the students' language processing in order to accomplish more. Sarah, framing the classes in terms of struggle, reported far less progress and appeared less able to formulate creative solutions.

### **Reciprocity in a Community of Learners**

The model of learning that Palmer (1998) describes as ineffectual is also based on students' lacking. The "amateur" students are seen as bringing nothing to the classroom and must rely on the "expert" teacher entirely. The distance between the student and what he or she intends to learn—this lack of engagement—is a barrier to learning.

In the community of truth model that Palmer (1998) offers as a contrast, it is not the expert teacher at the center of the community, but the subject of study itself, and all members of the community have a direct relationship with both the subject of study, which is their focus, and with each other. Learners are not characterized by their lack of knowledge in this model. On the contrary, all participants come to the discussion as "knowers," and each gains from what others have to say. For such an exchange to be beneficial, however, members of the community of learners must pay careful attention to each other.

Through their detailed and critically reflective journals, the successful SLA students in this study demonstrated their openness to what their tutorees could teach them. By focusing their attention on student thinking, these participants directly engaged with the subject of study, SLA, and at the same time with the other members of their community of learners, their tutorees. This engagement happened through the relationships that they established with their tutorees. "When we know the other as a subject, we do not

merely hold it at arm's length. We know it in and through relationship" (Palmer, 1998, p. 104).

### **Intercultural Competence**

The arena in which the four most successful participants displayed their outstanding depth of reflection and intercultural development was the relationships that they established with their tutorees. As was asserted earlier, a person who possesses intercultural competence "...is committed to turning intercultural encounters into intercultural relationships" (Sercu, 2002, p. 63). By engaging with their service-learning partners, students learned more about their partners' cultures and were several times led to reevaluate aspects of their own culture on both social and political planes.

Participants whose scores clustered near the high end on both measures reported satisfying, inspiring relationships and exchanges with the L2 learners they were paired up with, while the participants whose scores were relatively low experienced greater distance and less engagement with their tutorees. The overall assessment of their tutorees' SLA also tended to be more negative. The quality of the students' relationships with their partners may have decided whether they were able to continue grappling with questions of why certain things happened as they did, or whether, alternatively, the student gave up on these questions earlier, settling on negative conclusions such as that communication was impossible, the learners were not motivated enough, or nothing could be done to encourage SLA except to keep repeating the same lesson over and over.

### **Cause and Effect**

There is no one way to determine from these data which factors in the study caused others. It could be that those students who strove especially to understand the SLA processes of their tutorees, as recommended by the course, were then, having assumed to some extent the perspective of their tutorees, in a position to see more about their students' cultural realities as well. However, this influence could have occurred in the opposite direction: perhaps participants who were particularly attuned to the cultural realities of their tutorees may have then been in a better position to recognize and interpret the SLA processes of their tutorees. What is more likely is that these two tendencies worked in both directions, reinforcing each other. Also possible is that neither factor had a causal relationship with the other but that both were displayed to a high degree in subjects who were simply very insightful.

To suggest that some of the participants could have been fundamentally more insightful than others is to assign the locus of control to the students, but it should be noted that outside variables certainly had an effect as well. It could be, for example, that the more successful students were the ones who were fortunate to work with people whom they had a natural affinity with or who were representatives of cultural groups that were of particular interest to the participant. One might ask, for example, if John might not have been more prone to intercultural sensitivity if he had worked with people from other countries as opposed to a group of students who differed from him on a number of demographic points but not country of origin.<sup>5</sup>

It is not surprising that greater intimacy was not achieved in all cases. Between cultures, "...understanding and shared meanings, when it occurs, is a small miracle, brought by the leap of faith that we call 'communication across cultures'" (Kramsch, 1993, p. 1). Although a fair amount of parallelism exists between the service-learning contexts of the more successful and less successful participants, it is undeniable that the results might have been different had the service learning students been paired with different L2 learners.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Because this study looks at a small number of subjects in one particular learning context, no generalizability claims can be made. However, the concept of framing helped to identify in this study distinguishing features between more and less successful service-learning participants: participants who remained more focused on the other, and on the other's student thinking, had more successful service-learning experiences.

It is possible that some participants reflected more deeply on SLA and culture than was seen in their journals but simply did not share some of this information. Cultural musings especially may not have been understood to be relevant to a reflection journal for an SLA class, even though culture did receive mention in the class grading rubric for the journal, as agreed upon with the students: 40% of the grade was based on whether the students demonstrated "insight into SLA theory, the process of teaching or learning an L2, language, or culture" (see appendix).

---

<sup>5</sup> A sizeable number of the students at the school where John worked were from other countries, but there is no indication whether John's students were all from the US or not.

Another factor to consider is the fact that most of the participants did not write their reflections in their first language. This could have had an effect on the way that they expressed themselves and what they chose to elaborate on. Still, students writing in Spanish as a second language had an advanced level of Spanish, while the two participants in the sample who wrote in their first language in fact had scores in the lower half on the sample.

What may be impossible to eliminate from the rating process is the influence that writing quality has on ratings of depth of reflection and similar measures. It is only through the writing that such scores can be reached. The form and structure of the writing itself, however, reflects the nature of the thoughts therein expressed (Luk, 2008), and at the same time, the writing process helps to “create a view of the world” (Hyland, 2000, p. 3).

What might be gained from recognizing these facts could be a decision to teach more explicitly to new teachers and practitioners of service learning what it is that characterizes a journal that shows depth of reflection (Ash et al., 2005; Luk, 2008) and the exercise of intercultural competence. Informing students of what constitutes valuable reflection improves their writing and their service-learning experiences (Ash et al., 2005). Student teachers in Levin et al.’s (2009) literature review and data set, as well as the students in this data set clearly attempted to focus their attention on what they understood as being important, and some of these new teachers were able to focus on student thinking. “If it is possible for even some novice teachers to attend to student thinking, then we should make this an explicit agenda in [teacher education]” (Levin et al., 2009, pp. 151-152).

## **CONCLUSION**

This study began with three questions. The first question asked whether there was evidence that students’ service-learning experiences aided their understanding of SLA. There was, and the students who could connect what was happening in their tutorees’ L2 processes with SLA theories tried to use this insight into student thinking to further advance their tutorees’ progress. Students who were not able to make these connections often reported less success with their tutorees and tried to remedy the situation simply through greater repetition of what had been done before.

The second research question addressed evidence of the development of intercultural competence. Evidence was found of participants learning about their partners’ cultures, grappling with questions of how this explained for them the way their service-learning

partners acted, and reexamining social and political features of their own culture. As with the occasions of insights into SLA, this development occurred when participants were focused on their tutorees and entered into a relationship with them, which answers the third research question about the distinguishing characteristics of the more successful service-learning experiences.

Luk (2008) suggests that if students are taught explicitly about discursal and schematic features that characterize profound reflection, this may make such features appear more in their own journals. Students may initially include these items in their writing because they believe that that is what they need to do to get a good grade. This by itself is neither remarkable nor formative. However, in order to have this kind of material to write about, students will necessarily have to focus their attention on more details of their service-learning experiences and how they can be used to support their questions and conclusions. They will also need to attend more carefully to the perspectives of the community members with whom they work. The data of the present study suggest that through such an act, students may gain greater insights into the thought processes and cultural realities of others and through this, into their own cultural realities. This kind of a result would indeed be both remarkable and formative.

---

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Kara McBride earned her PhD in Second Language Acquisition and Teaching at the University of Arizona and now trains teachers and teaches Spanish, linguistics, and second language acquisition at Saint Louis University. Her research interests include CALL, the teaching of oral language skills, and service learning.

---

## **REFERENCES**

- Ash, S. L., Clayton, P. H., & Atkinson, M. P. (2005). Integrating reflection and assessment to capture and improve student learning. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 11*(2), 49-60.
- Bernacki, M. L., & Jaeger, E. (2008). Exploring the impact of service-learning on moral development and moral orientation. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 14*(2), 5-15.
- Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998). Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment. *Phi Delta Kappan, 80*(2), 139-148.

- Bonk, C. J., & Cunningham, D. (1998). Searching for learner-centered, constructivist, and sociocultural components of collaborative educational learning tools. In C. J. Bonk & K. A. King (Eds.), *Electronic collaborators: Learner-centered technologies for literacy, apprenticeship, and discourse* (pp. 25-50). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Borg, S. (2006). *Teacher cognition and language education: Research and practice*. New York: Continuum.
- Brandl, K. K. (2000). Foreign language TAs' perceptions of training components: Do we know how they like to be trained? *The Modern Language Journal*, 84(3), 355-371.
- Brookfield, S., & Preskill, S. (2005). *Discussion as a way of teaching: Tools and techniques for democratic classrooms* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Bristol, PA: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Collins, P. M. (2009). Understanding service at the service of understanding: An exploration of service-learning in the arts. In C. A. Rimmerman (Ed.), *Service-learning and the liberal arts: How and why it works* (pp. 41-60). Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*. Chicago, IL: D.C. Heath.
- Fuller, F. F. (1969). Concerns of teachers: A developmental conceptualization. *American Educational Research Journal*, 6(2), 207-226.
- Hyland, K. (2000). *Disciplinary discourses: Social interactions in academic writing*. New York, NY: Pearson Education.
- Jacoby, B. (1996). Service-learning in today's higher education. In B. Jacoby (Ed.), *Service-learning in higher education* (pp. 3-25). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kagan, D. M. (1992). Professional growth among preservice and beginning teachers. *Review of Educational Research*, 62(2), 129-169.
- Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

- Kramersch, C. (2006). From communicative competence to symbolic competence. *Modern Language Journal, 90*(2), 249-252.
- Leung, C. (2007). Dynamic assessment: Assessment for and as teaching? *Language Assessment Quarterly, 4*(3), 257-278.
- Levin, D. M., Hammer, D., & Coffey, J. E. (2009). Novice teachers' attention to student thinking. *Journal of Teacher Education, 60*(2), 142-154.
- Luk, J. (2008). Assessing teaching practicum reflections: Distinguishing discourse features of the 'high' and 'low' grade reports. *System, 36*, 624-641.
- McBride, K., & Wildner-Bassett, M. (2008). Interpersonal and intercultural understanding in a blended second culture classroom. In S. S. Magnan (Ed.), *Mediating discourse online* (pp. 93-123).
- McElhaney, K. A. (1998). *Student outcomes of community service learning: A comparative analysis of curriculum-based and non-curriculum-based alternative spring break programs*. Unpublished 9840602, University of Michigan, United States -- Michigan.
- Numrich, C. (1996). On becoming a language teacher: Insights from diary studies. *TESOL Quarterly, 30*, 131-153.
- Nunan, D. (1992). The teacher as decision-maker. In J. Flowerdew, M. Brock & S. Hsia (Eds.), *Perspectives on language teacher education* (pp. 135-165). Hong Kong: City Polytechnic.
- Palmer, P. (1998). *The courage to teach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Poehner, M. E. (2007). Beyond the test: L2 dynamic assessment and the transcendence of mediated learning. *The Modern Language Journal, 91*(3), 323-340.
- Ray, B. B., & Coulter, G. A. (2008). Reflective practices among language arts teachers: The use of weblogs. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education, 8*(1), 6-26.
- Richards, J. C., Li, B., & Tang, A. (1998). Exploring pedagogical reasoning skills. In J. C. Richards (Ed.), *Beyond training* (pp. 86-102). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

- Robinson, L., & Kelley, B. (2007). Developing reflective thought in preservice educators: Utilizing role-plays and digital video. *Journal of Special Education Technology* 22(2), 31-43.
- Roca, A. (2005). *Nuevos Mundos: Lectura, cultura y comunicación / Curso de español para bilingües*, (2nd Ed.). Miami, FL: Florida International Univ.
- Schulz, R. A., LaLande II, J. F., Dykstra-Pruim, P., Zimmer-Loew, H., & James, C. J. (2005). In pursuit of cultural competence in the German language classroom. *Die Unterrichtspraxis Teaching German*, 38(2), 172-181.
- Schumann, J. (1986). Research on the acculturation model for second language acquisition. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 7, 379-392.
- Seigel, S., & Rockwood, V. (1996). Democratic education, student empowerment, and community service: Theory and practice. *Equity & Excellence*, 26(2), 65-70.
- Sercu, L. (2002). Autonomous learning and the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence: Some implications for course development. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 15(1), 61-74.
- Shapiro, B. L. (1991). A collaborative approach to help novice science teachers reflect on change in their construction of the role of science teacher. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 37, 119-132.
- Sparks-Langer, G. M., & Colton, A. B. (1991). Synthesis of research on teachers' reflective thinking. *Educational Leadership*, 48(6), 37-44.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

**APPENDIX**

Grading rubric used to grade the reflection journals, arrived at through consensus between the instructor and students, one-third of the way through the semester.

- Has written about 35 entries which are all close to 3/4 of a double-spaced page (or more) 10%
- Journal entries frequently connect to SLA theory; proper interpretation/ understanding of the concepts, and uses some terms 10%
- Demonstrates insight into SLA theory, the process of teaching or learning an L2, language, or culture (and/or grappling with these themes). Shows depth and creativity in reflecting on theory and experiences 40%
- A substantial number of the journal entries are about actual service learning experiences 14%
- Quality of writing, including good format. 6%
- Includes an easy-to-read log of service hours that clearly indicates how many hours of face-to-face and prep hours were put in 10%
- The journal entries indicate that the student took his or her task seriously and strove to do a good job 10%