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PSYCHOLOGY OF LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING: 17

Language Teachers Studying Abroad

Identities, Emotions and Disruptions

Edited by
Gary Barkhuizen

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Part 2

Interculturality and Intercultural Learning

7 Re-Imagining Immersion for Teachers: Exploring the Seedlings of Decolonial Roots within Ecuadorian/ United States Partnerships

Rachel Shriver, Magda Madany-Saá,
Eleanor Sweeney, Elizabeth Smolic,
Sharon Childs, Ana Loja Criollo and
Yolanda Loja Criollo

To Eleanor Sweeney, our dear friend and colleague, a bright and warm spirit we had the pleasure to encounter in our personal and professional lives. This chapter is one of many contributions you made to transform education and the teaching of world languages. You'll be always in our hearts.

This chapter describes elements of a TESL immersion program and uncovers how the people, landscapes and histories of two communities support or inhibit the development of a critical interculturality. Learning to teach English learners is knowledge and skill-based, but importantly it is relational at both institutional and personal levels.

In US students' reflections of their experiences, they largely miss the differences between their voluntary and highly supported, five-week experience in Ecuador and an English learner's experience in a US classroom.



Introduction

The intricacies mesmerized me. I (Rachel, first author) was trying my hardest to keep the threads separate while weaving them together. My fingers seemed foreign, the pattern puzzling. After guidance and focus, Mama Susana smiled at me with approval; I began to make progress. Four years later as a teacher of English learners, those complex threads still have evolving meaning for me; just as it took intentional, guided learning to recognize and weave each thread into a multi-colored band, it has taken reflection and practice for me to understand the ways that language, nationality, culture and so many other threads of our identities are vital to our brilliance. I cannot haphazardly jumble my students' threads of identity like I did with the threads in Saraguro. I now recognize and celebrate their countless intertwined threads, as we talk about how these make us vivid and whole.

Mama Susana sparked my epiphany while I was a student in an ESL teacher education program which unfolded on the US university campus and through a cultural/linguistic immersion experience in Ecuador. As I shift roles from student to researcher, the themes of intricacy and interwovenness remain salient in our research and my still-developing teaching practice. This chapter describes elements of the TESL immersion program and uncovers how the people, landscapes and histories of two communities support or inhibit the development of a *critical interculturality*.

With the participating students and program instructors, researchers who investigate intercultural projects must ask themselves what it means to centralize reciprocity in institutional and individual relationships, to build intercultural dispositions in practice, and to go beyond the theoretical to actions. For example, rather than construct an experience abroad

whose benefits focus squarely on participants of the Global North, we can work to incorporate models of decolonizing teacher education that ask students from both the visiting and host countries to collaboratively engage in self-reflection, and work to develop awareness of colonial perspectives and histories. An emerging awareness of *decoloniality* and ownership of one's cultural identity and histories are the first moves toward developing dispositions that endure past the program's end date, following participants into their post-program professional lives.

In this chapter, we (the authors) first outline our theoretical commitments and then describe elements of the TESL immersion program and our reciprocal focus. We offer contextual details of the program demonstrating that study-abroad programs may contain important mediating factors that help or hinder intercultural development. Next, we explain the research process, highlight excerpts from qualitative data that illuminate key themes, and offer recommendations for teacher education programs abroad that work toward decolonizing their thinking and practices.

Critical Interculturality in ESL Teacher Education

Over many decades, teacher educators have worked to develop inter/multi/cross-cultural experiential learning experiences for teacher candidates. Debate continues over the conceptual meaning of these terms, and what the process of 'intercultural learning' and its assumed goal of 'intercultural competence' or 'interculturality' might involve (Smolcic & Katunich, 2017). Critical scholars argue that study-abroad or intercultural projects often follow the tradition of viewing culture as object-based learning that separates the self (knower) from the object (known) which then becomes a profoundly colonizing practice (Bernardes *et al.*, 2019; Smolcic & Martin, 2019). As Pirbhai-Illich and Martin (2019) explain:

Object-based thinking is a way of understanding social and natural phenomena as objects that exist in isolation and possess certain properties which remain constant over time ... Interactions between cultures then become something that happens at the intersection of two entities (i.e., cultures) each of which is bounded ... and in the context of identity, can become essentialized and reified. (2019: 71)

In this way, even if culture is understood as multiple and intersecting, dimensions of identity become homogeneous when scaled up to group (national) identity and are often used as a basis for distinction, stereotyping or bias between members of one group towards another (Dervin, 2017). When we consider North-South immersive experiences, learning from an object-focused perspective leads to the visiting (usually dominant) group's norms as a basis for making racialized judgments about the ways

of being within a host community, which is then often positioned as exotic and/or deficit (Pirbhai-Illich & Martin, 2019). Importantly, the societal structures that divide people by race, class, gender, religion and other categories of difference – which are historically rooted in the processes of colonization – are often obscured.

Coloniality is founded upon a hierarchical object-focused knowledge structure that creates a divided world of superior-inferior, civilized-savage along lines of race viewed as biological and thus the natural order, enabling the colonizers to justify their actions. It is ‘a mindset, a way of being and knowing, that is the legacy of colonialism’ (Pirbhai-Illich & Martin, 2019: 70). Decolonial scholars contend that coloniality deeply affects the way we operate in the world whether on a global or local scale. This mindset continues to act as a set of unstated norms which are mostly invisible to Euro-Western people, who assume their ways of knowing are universal. Critical theorists have drawn attention to the ongoing harm inherent in practices that devalue and further marginalize students of color or from non-English speaking backgrounds. From this critical standpoint comes the imperative to identify and disrupt the roots of the ‘colonial project’ and to decolonize our educational practices (de Sousa Santos, 2018; Pirbhai-Illich *et al.*, 2017).

The need for teacher intercultural competence is increasingly recognized in order to meet learner needs in a globalized world. However, many teachers feel ill-prepared to instruct linguistically and culturally diverse learners (Lucas *et al.*, 2018). Importantly, in school systems with high levels of immigrant learners, all teachers must have the capabilities and consciousness to be responsive to and advocate for sustaining the cultures, languages and social realities of their students’ lived experiences and communities. Research that examines the effects of international teaching practicums or immersive experience on teachers’ intercultural development is mixed. However, the two program characteristics that seem to be foundational to teacher learning include: (a) critical and guided reflection, and (b) opportunities for teachers to enact what they are learning (Romijn *et al.*, 2021). While there are few studies that employ a critical perspective on teacher intercultural development (Bernardes *et al.*, 2019; Mwebi & Brigham, 2009) our work in collaboration with colleagues of the Global South compels us to adopt such a lens.

Critical interculturality (interculturalidad) is a central element of decolonial teacher education to both expose power relationships and support more equitable relations between groups (Granados-Beltrán, 2016). Walsh (2010) describes interculturality as an effort to construct a just, plural and equitable society and explains three forms it might take: relational, functional and critical. The tenets of our work are built around critical interculturality, which seeks to transform structures and institutions so that social relations can be based on respect, legitimacy, equity and equality.

The Research Setting: An International Immersion Program in Ecuador

The Teaching ESL Immersion Program is one pathway to complete the 15-credit ESL teaching credential offered to K-12 teachers in our state. It begins with one course in the spring semester and ends with a blended course at the end of the summer; sandwiched in between are three courses offered during an immersion and teaching practicum in Ecuador. Table 7.1 presents the six main components of the summer 5-week immersion experience. Guided critical reflection in writing, individual and group discussions are ongoing, and a coached teaching practicum takes up much of the days.

As a student in 2017, my day (Rachel, first author) began with breakfast made by my host mom; she scribbled notes on my napkin like ‘cafe = coffee, que te vaya bien mija! [I hope everything goes well, daughter!]’ My morning included three classes: Spanish, and two courses about teaching English language learners (ELLs) and second language learning. Once a week I met with my Ecuadorian tandem partner in a course called *Global Conversations*. Each week featured an invited speaker/theme of global reach such as gender, sustainability, Indigenous knowledges. We discussed the topic in groups of US and Ecuadorian students, choosing which language we wanted to use or sometimes creatively translanguaging. We also wrote dialogue journals continuing our discussions from class, having free rein on language usage.

My classmates and I were asked to meet once a week with our tandem partners outside of class; what actually happened is that students (every year!) formed a group chat on WhatsApp and spent a lot of time hanging

Table 7.1 Components of the immersion experience

Component	Who/What’s Involved?
Home stay	– Daily grappling to communicate in Spanish; ‘living’ another culture.
Global Conversations Course + Tandem partners	– Translingual, facilitated discussion amongst US and Ecuadorian students around weekly global topic; one-hour tandem conversation weekly. – Spontaneous hangouts initiated by students; ongoing conversation through social media. – Dialogue journals between tandem partners.
Language Courses (Spanish or Kichwa)	– Serves as a ‘new language learning experience’ for US students. – Journal writing to deconstruct the language learning experience.
Teaching practicum	– Co-teacher model; two student teachers per class to teach English through a cohort-wide content theme. – Coaching by experienced ESL instructor. – Ecuadorian students volunteer for course; finish with certificate rather than grades.
Weekend excursions	– Various themes and locations; spoken and written reflections in journals and in-class discussion.

out. I remember constant texts: ‘I’m on Calle Larga – alguien está por allí? [is anyone near there?]’ And suddenly there would be 6, 10, 20 of us playing soccer or splitting a mojito while unpacking the world around us. Our translanguaging never stopped, nor our cultural revelations and conversation. This close-knit friendship with local students was the most enriching part for me. Hearing questions like ‘why do gringos leave without saying good-bye?’ gave me pause, causing me to consider my own thoughts and actions and to interrogate my culture (sometimes more genuinely than class prompts did).

After morning classes, I had lunch with my host family. Their seven voices bustled as I hyper-focused, attempting to understand a full idea. I remember once I was engrossed in a very basic conversation with my 3-year-old ‘niece’ about her doll’s favorite foods. On my walk back to class I was on cloud nine; I had had my first conversation in Spanish! This moment changed me personally and professionally; I realized my students didn’t need perfect grammar or a developed vocabulary to achieve meaningful communication.

Three weekend excursions were organized: Ingapirca (an Incan temple and archeological site), Cajas National Park, Reserva Mazar (a cloud forest and conservation area) and Saraguro (a strongly indigenous, Kichwa-speaking town). In Mazar, we learned about efforts to conserve the surrounding cloud forest and planted over 500 trees. We slept in basic cabins with no service and made meals together; for some students, these experiences pushed them emotionally in all directions. In Saraguro, we participated in weaving demonstrations, dancing, shaman-led spiritual cleansing rituals, eating Indigenous foods, and blazing through mountains in jeeps. Every activity was first contextualized, involved personal engagement in some activity, and closed with discussion and reflection.

The research process

This study was launched through the initiative of the first author who was a previous student in the program and secured a university research grant. The research team includes program instructors as well as researchers who were not directly involved in the implementation of the program, and the chapter was written in collaboration with colleagues at the Ecuadorian partner university.

We (the authors) used grounded theory to analyze data and found Emerson *et al.*’s (2011) approach to writing up the data a helpful tool. We worked collaboratively and cross-referenced themes among the researchers in the group, discovering themes relating to cultural self-awareness, racism, language teaching and sustainability, the loss of Indigenous languages/cultures, privilege, and English as a lingua franca.

Research questions

The analysis for this study was guided by the following questions:

- (1) What are the impacts of the program activities on student attitudes towards language, culture and power?
- (2) What conditions help or hinder the development of critical interculturality for the students, and how does this relate to their future professional lives?

Participants

This chapter focuses on a subset of data from the larger project and is guided by the intention to be inclusive of the Ecuadorian and US student participants. Data was collected from the 2018 cohort involved in the immersion program in Ecuador. Five US and five Ecuadorian students were interviewed three times: before the program began, during the program, and six months to a year after the program had ended. All participants were university students enrolled in undergraduate programs. The US students were all pre-service teacher education majors working towards their ESL teaching endorsement. All of the Ecuadorians had intermediate to advanced English proficiency and were motivated to learn English to pass a university required English exam.

Students were interviewed individually using a semi-structured approach with a set of guiding questions that probed the following themes: (a) language awareness; (b) understandings of culture, race and decolonial ideas; (c) personal awareness or growth; (d) attitudes or beliefs about English as a lingua franca, and (e) global awareness or knowledge. The data also includes dialogue journals written by program participants in US/Ecuador pairings (44 students). Students chose which language they preferred for the interviews and the interviews conducted in Spanish were transcribed by an Ecuadorian speaker of Spanish and then analyzed by research staff proficient in English and Spanish. Pseudonyms are used in place of actual names.

Interweaving New Threads of Understanding

Focusing on the activities of the Global Conversations course, we now describe its apparent impact on student thinking. Without exception, the students stated that the experience helped them to share perspectives, develop self and cultural awareness, and become more comfortable with multilingual language use. However, we acknowledge that constructions of the cultural self and Others which stop at awareness are problematic because they ignore power relations.

We begin with a look at five students, one from the US and four from Ecuador, who embrace and question ideologies surrounding the loss of Indigenous knowledges and languages. Tiffany (US) connected language

loss and cultural identity while acknowledging how important home languages are to individual learner identities, familial relationships and broader humanity. In a conversation about the loss of worldwide Indigenous languages, she remarks:

But their language ... different ones are being wiped out and if the language was literally beaten out of you and you can't participate in that part of your life anymore, or you can't communicate with your grandma who only speaks this language, it's such a big part of somebody's life. And I don't think people view language that way. They don't think about how it has all these connections that make a person who they are. And when you take that away, like they lose the sense of identity. If you take the language away from them or it dies out, disappears, that piece of their identity is now gone.

Several Ecuadorian students echoed Tiffany's ideas, particularly the value of an Indigenous language of their home country, Kichwa. Gabriel (Ecuador) claims:

One of the most important lessons that this program gave me, it made me feel I really should know Kichwa. I've been always aware of ... that it's not okay that Ecuadorians don't know one of their native ... their languages. But when the people from [US university] came and sometimes you were talking about that, for example my tandem asked me about Kichwa, what was the government efforts to implement it ... when I was talking about that I'm realizing, 'Oh my god, I should know Kichwa'.

Alberto (Ecuador) not only asserts he will learn Kichwa, he goes further to critique his country's educational policies around language.

There should be something like a subject, which teach you Kichwa. So if as a kid you start learning your language because it just is also **our language**, if you as a kid start to learn in Kichwa, you are gonna have actual feelings about Kichwa ... There's something wrong there, because I think it's part of our culture, and if a language disappears, it means that ... groups of people, are gonna disappear ... for example, what about a child who just speaks Kichwa? What if this child wants to study? What if a native Kichwa speaker needs a hospital, nobody knows Kichwa?

Alberto's proposal is surprising in the face of global English dominant ideologies, whereby higher-status students learn English for career advancement, and Indigenous languages, lacking societal value, are frequently relegated to low-status minoritized groups. Alberto explained that, prior to the Global Conversations course, he had not given much thought to Kichwa and the Indigenous peoples of Ecuador.

Looking back on a talk by an Indigenous scholar from her own university, Tannya (Ecuador) recognizes significant gaps in her knowledge of her country's Indigenous cultures and, thus, her own roots.

I felt so bad and ignorant, because, according to me, Ecuadorians only came from the Cañaris. And in this talk I found out that we can come from the Saragureños, the Cañaris, the Huancavilcas ... Kichwa must be

respected. In Ecuador we are dollarized, but I don't believe that it would be correct to decree English as our language, never! It would be a type of dictatorship. The language should be Kichwa, not even Spanish.

Tannya reports her embarrassment at the gaps in her knowledge of the Indigenous historical foundations of her country. She references Ecuador's adoption of the US dollar as national currency (in 2000) and relates the growing dominance of English (and Spanish) to colonizing forces, which she now rejects.

Concern for the loss of an Andean Indigenous worldview which values the interconnectedness of all things and rejects anthropocentric perspectives was also raised by Sandra (Ecuador) who studies environmental engineering.

The Andean cosmovision caught my attention because it was something that I had heard, but had never known. Since there is a lot of belief that the crops depend on the moon, the sun, the mother earth. I study an environmental area, so it calls my attention that this cosmovision has to do with environmental issues.

While her major focuses on human interaction with the environment, she claims that she had not previously made connections between Indigenous agricultural techniques and success in conserving the land before hearing the speakers and discussing Indigenous knowledge with her classmates. Sandra concluded that the knowledge and awareness she gained through the talks offered by Indigenous experts in our program fundamentally enabled her to work toward solutions to environmental problems in her own country.

Limited Growth in Decolonial Thinking

Most pre-service teachers enter the immersion program with limited previous multilingual/multicultural experiences. The program provides structured opportunities for them to engage with people in another linguistic and cultural context. The data shows students adopting an accepting attitude towards multilingualism, clearly a positive move for teachers who will work with English learners. However, these positive attitudes lack criticality of power structures and societal or global inequities.

Patrick (US) drew on his struggles with Spanish in Ecuador as he considered English-only policies in US schools:

I think [English-only] puts unnecessary stress on students. And I can say that with experience because when I was in Ecuador, there was a short period where I got very depressed ... And the last thing I wanted was to hear Spanish. And on a child, I can only imagine it would be worse. So, I don't in any way support an English-only approach. Using an English-only approach is easier on the teacher and on the administration, but it is unnecessarily harder on the student.

Patrick's rebuttal shows some rejection of prevalent English-only discourses in schools. However, Patrick lacks a nuanced understanding of the powers of privilege at play that make his experience in Ecuador quite different from English learners who attend schools where English-only attitudes are predominant. Although Patrick's experience of language learning might give him empathy, the false equivalency fails to acknowledge his privilege in being able to travel and having supportive peers and program structures to bolster his language learning.

Like Patrick, Tiffany (US) remarks on the inappropriateness of English-only policies, expressed empathy for the challenges language learners face in classrooms requiring the use of English, but did not demonstrate awareness of broader power dynamics.

Those poor kids. They would drown. I've kind of experienced that when I was there because my host mom wanted me to use Spanish only and it was so hard. I tried and then because I couldn't get out what I wanted to say quick enough or maybe she was talking too quick, it's hard for me to process so I would shut down ... I found that when I was able to trans-language, so use Spanish and then use the English where I needed it, that helped build my Spanish.

Tiffany built on her own experiences learning Spanish to suggest that incorporating home languages would be most effective for students learning English. This is a positive attitude regarding multilingualism, trans-language and student's identities; however, her wording that 'those poor kids ... would drown' seems to further Other and disempower them. While she speaks from a deficit mindset, she grows in empathy:

I think especially with kids, ESL kids, I can understand their frustrations so much more because I was that person in Ecuador. Like I'm able to empathize with you, so I'm not going to be so quick to make judgments like, they're not listening or they're being defiant. I think that's one of the most important things I have is experience of being the outsider.

But Tiffany goes no further. In US students' interpretations and reflections of their experiences, they largely miss the differences between their voluntary and highly supported, five-week experience in Ecuador and an English learner's experience in a US classroom.

Sarah (US), however, begins to analyze institutional post-program inequities. In a course during the semester before going to Ecuador, she partnered with a Saudi Arabian student learning English. While Sarah considers learning languages to be a positive thing, the widespread motivation to learn English is 'accommodating us rather than us accommodating everybody else'. She begins to construct the dynamic of English dominance, finding it 'mind boggling' and 'hypocritical' that her partner was learning English to be able to speak to US workers who went to Saudi Arabia for business. She extends this accommodation inequity to the Global Conversations course, pointing out that Ecuadorian students

tended to accommodate to them when interacting in small groups because they (the US cohort) spoke less Spanish. These comments still fall short of making critical commentaries that are societal in scope, but are a step beyond those offered by Tiffany and Patrick.

Through lived experience, pre-service teachers can shape understandings of how deeply language, culture and identity are connected. On the other hand, critical interculturality and interrogation of colonialism in their own lives and across the globe is still mostly emergent.

Developing Critical Interculturality: Programmatic Structures and Relationship Building

We have examined our data to ask what conditions of this immersion experience have supported or hindered the critical intercultural development of our students. A central theme begins with and recurrently points towards *relationships* being of equal importance not only for program staff, homestay families and local communities but also among participating students. Meaningful relationships seem to be a necessary element to move towards the ‘inter’ of intercultural and to dismantle object-based traditions (of ‘us’ and ‘them’).

As institutional associations in a study-abroad experience precede student interaction, there must be a commitment on the part of program developers to create and sustain long-term relationships built on trust and friendship. In the case of the program in Ecuador, our ties have deepened over five years. Our contact began as a cooperative effort to design a study-abroad experience that would benefit students from both countries. We prioritize teamwork and create space to ask and listen. We have discussed finding common goals that might sometimes favor the Ecuadorian students over a sole focus on US students’ growth. For example, we directed resources to allow greater participation of the host country students in weekend excursions rather than more comfortable lodging for US students. We have rewritten our end-of-program evaluation so that the questions do not probe US student levels of satisfaction, but instead ask ways that the student has moved outside of daily structured routines to talk with, notice and engage in localized cultural practices. Program leaders from both institutions consider and ask about potential benefits to the broader host community. Over time our relationship has moved towards collaborative research that reveals new ways we can build towards enacting decolonial thinking within the program.

Pedagogical Recommendations towards a Critical Interculturality

Over time we have come to see that we need to continually attend to decentering White, English-speaking ways of being which tend to dominate

relationships and program practices, and instead explicitly give space for other ways of being. We encourage translanguaging in our classrooms as well as written and oral communications. For example, our program explicitly instructs students about the concept of translingual practices and presents ideas about how it is used in language classrooms, and we also model it in our own teaching. Since neither group of students is proficient in the language of the other group, instructors are conscious of using both languages in the classroom and translating key ideas into both languages (Spanish and English; there were no Kichwa speakers). We encourage ‘playing’ with language and use of either language in class and in reflective writing.

Building on the results of a recent review of the literature on efforts to improve intercultural development of teachers (Romijn *et al.*, 2021), we highlight two key elements that are visible in the program we studied: (a) guided critical reflection, and (b) sustained enactment. The extent to which pre-service teachers understand social inequities in education and recognize their own cultural biases and White privilege affects their readiness to change their beliefs. The input of new knowledge on understanding systems of power, oppression and Whiteness/privilege, and how these factors are reproduced in schools, is essential, as is detailed background knowledge regarding the history and contemporary realities of the host culture. Relatedly, not all students possess skills of reflection when they start the program, and we spend time teaching and supporting the development of reflective abilities; the chance to work with students over time and in five credit-bearing courses is a distinct advantage.

Learning about components of intercultural or translingual interaction must also be complemented with opportunities to enact them. While interculturality is knowledge and skill-based, it is most importantly relational. The explicit invitation to Ecuadorian students to join us in class and the expectation that informal connections will occur outside of class are important openings to enactment. Offering instruction in an Indigenous language along with Spanish and spending time in multilingual Indigenous communities is a way to offer openings to decolonial thinking, as well as asking our students to help set the global themes of interest to them to be discussed in the Global Conversations course. Finally, for the US pre-service teachers, making explicit links to instructional practices for English learners through the teaching practicum is vital; it allows them to translate newly addressed knowledge and skills into lesson plans and experiment with how strategies might be adapted to learners of differing language abilities.

Conclusion

International learning experiences for teachers can be constructed to center on a critical look at intercultural and global issues and offer program structures that build on binational peer collaborations and

expectations for meaningful and long-term relationships. Our analysis concludes that while opportunities exist to make decolonial perspectives more visible, without intentional program supports, program participants can remain captive to entrenched deficit perspectives that are common to colonial discourses. These findings are consistent with previous work that shows that participants can grow in awareness and engage with diversity. We emphasize that enactment and relationship building are long-term goals that happen over a lifetime; intricate threads can only be made sense of with intentional, enduring commitments to listening, engagement and reflection.

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