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# An auto-ethnographic study of foreign and native language education in the United States of America, the Dominican Republic, and Spain

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An Auto-Ethnographic Study of Foreign and Native Language Education in the United States of  
America, the Dominican Republic, and Spain

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An Honors College Project Presented to  
the Faculty of the Honors College  
James Madison University

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by Mary Margaret Hawkins

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Accepted by the faculty of the Honors College, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

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An Auto-Ethnographic Study of Foreign and Native Language Education in the United States of

America, the Dominican Republic, and Spain

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### Abstract

The paper is a reflexive ethnography documenting the researcher's change and growth "as a result of doing fieldwork" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 278) in the United States of America, the Dominican Republic, and Spain. The purpose of this research is to examine and reflect on the researcher's journey of acquiring language proficiency in Spanish, developing cultural competence, and navigating cross-cultural interactions. This paper also explores how readily students may be able to access language education in both the native and foreign realms and examines the emphasis placed on language education in each of the countries, as observed by the researcher. These concepts are explored in depth through a first-person auto-ethnographic style that highlights a personal narrative accompanied by analysis through the lenses of two specific theorists dealing with language acquisition and intercultural sensitivities and competencies.

*Keywords:* foreign language education, native language education, auto-ethnography, cultural competence, intercultural sensitivity

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An Auto-Ethnographic Study of Foreign and Native Language Education in the United States of America, the Dominican Republic, and Spain

## INTRODUCTION

As an auto-ethnography, this paper is written to primarily be a first-person narrative that describes my life's experiences of acquiring a second language, teaching my native and my second language, and negotiating diverse intercultural exchanges. The main purpose of this research is to examine and reflect on my journey of acquiring language proficiency in Spanish, developing cultural competence, and navigating cross-cultural interactions. The auto-ethnographic style "seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 273) and is "research grounded in personal experience" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 274), which is why it was chosen for this research project. Additionally, Dyson (2007) argues that "it is an appropriate methodology to use in education" (p. 36). He also expresses that the use of first person is appropriate in auto-ethnography, so long as the "perceived reality of the writer is presented as is, in an open way, i.e. without claims to be the truth" (Dyson, 2007, p. 40).

The process of writing an auto-ethnographic project has been a cathartic journey of reflection and appreciation and has allowed and encouraged me to reflect analytically on my undergraduate experiences. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) wrote that, "as a method, autoethnography is both process and product" (p. 273). As such, the paper is a reflexive ethnography documenting my personal change and growth "as a result of doing fieldwork" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 278) in the United States of America, the Dominican Republic, and Spain. Reflexive ethnography forms itself in this capacity as "the ethnographer

studying her or his life alongside cultural members' lives" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 278). It is such because I study my personal language acquisition experience as well as the language acquisition of students in varied cultural and linguistic contexts from the vantage point of a teacher.

This paper also explores how easily students are able to access language education in both the native and foreign realms and examines the emphasis placed on language education in each of the countries, as observed firsthand. The three countries — the U.S., the D.R., and Spain — obviously vary culturally, economically, and linguistically. I have had the pleasure of witnessing and delivering language education in each country of both native and foreign languages. It is important to note that my experiences in each country are not extensive, and I do not intend to generalize the educational systems of each based on singular experiences at specific schools and locales. Simply put by Dyson (2007), "an auto ethnography is a presentation of one person's view, or map, of reality, constructed around and through other people. It is a good story, which does not establish truth, like an argument, but presents verisimilitude, that is lifelikeness" (p. 46). These concepts of language acquisition and intercultural communication and competencies are explored in depth with the first-person auto-ethnographic style that highlights a personal narrative accompanied by analysis through the lenses of two specific theorists. Throughout the narrative, I aim to evaluate my personal experiences and field observations with the respective works of Milton J. Bennett and Stephen Krashen.

I utilize Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) as the overarching theory that guides the paper and divides the chapters, as it did my journey over the past 22-years of life. One of the most important aspects to note about the DMIS is that it

is not predominantly a description of cognition, affect, or behavior. Rather, it is a model of how the assumed underlying worldview moves from an ethnocentric to a more ethnorelative condition, thus generating greater intercultural sensitivity and the potential for more intercultural competence. (Bennett, 2004, p. 75)

The DMIS consists of six stages with the first three categorized as ethnocentric and the second three representing gradually increasing ethnorelative perspectives, with “each orientation of the DMIS...indicative of a particular worldview structure” (Bennett, 2004, p. 75). Ethnocentric in this sense refers to “the experience of one’s own culture as ‘central to reality’” while ethnorelativism, coined by Bennett (2004), signifies “the experience of one’s own beliefs and behaviors as just one organization of reality among many viable possibilities” (p. 62). Bennett (2004) describes the path of the stages as the following:

The most ethnocentric experience was named the *Denial* of cultural difference, followed by the *Defense* against cultural difference. In the middle of the continuum the *Minimization* of cultural difference seemed to be a transition from the more virulent forms of ethnocentrism to a more benign form, leading to the ethnorelative *Acceptance* of cultural difference. At the heart of ethnorelativism was the *Adaptation* to cultural difference, followed in some cases by the *Integration* of cultural difference into identity. (p. 62)

When it comes to language acquisition and language education, I will refer often to two of Stephen Krashen’s (1982, 2013) five highly-regarded hypotheses as related to second language acquisition theory — the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis (or Distinction) and the Affective Filter Hypothesis.

While the DMIS serves as the theoretical backbone of my journey to become an interculturally-integrated bilingual and thus “move from *ethnocentrism* to *ethnorelativism*” (Bennett, 2004, p. 62), Krashen’s (1982, 2013) theories are interwoven throughout the narrative to serve as reference points for specific intercultural interactions in my life. Examples of the theories in practice are brought to life within my personal narrative and experiences.

## CHAPTER 1 - DENIAL OF DIFFERENCE

As a little girl, I remember thinking of my own definition of “different” and what that looked like for me. Growing up in rural Augusta County, my concept of “other” was not that of my peers who grew up in diverse northern Virginia. My most abstract concept of “other” was one of my closest childhood friends. My parents raised me in the Episcopalian church, and I remember after a Saturday-night sleepover at my friend’s house, I attended her Baptist church. The church service was unlike anything I had ever experienced. I distinctly remember gawking at the fact that they were playing guitars and drums in church. All I had known unto that point was an organ, a formal choir, and a processional. The entire service from the music to the taking of communion to the Lord’s Prayer was foreign to me. It’s a strange feeling to know now, as a language major with international teaching experiences, that I was so isolated from different languages, cultures, and people, that my only concept of difference resided in my best friend’s church service. I certainly had no concept of culture or cultural differences at that stage in my life, not only due to age, but also due to the racial, political, ethnic, and linguistic homogeneity of my city of residence and my primary educational system.

Bennett describes this as “denial of difference” (2004, 2011). While some people are likely to hold negative stereotypes within this stage, my personal experience stemmed from a lack of awareness or plain ignorance. I frankly possessed the “inability to make the perceptual distinctions that allow cultural fact to be recognized” (Bennett, 2004, p. 64). I can remember being in elementary school and not even recognizing the inherent differences among myself, our one African American classmate, and our one Muslim classmate. I had neither the “opportunity” nor the “motivation to construct relevant categories for noticing and interpreting cultural

difference” (Bennett, 2011, Denial of Difference section, para. 2). Rather than a prejudiced or biased rejection of other cultures, what I was experiencing at that time would be described by Bennett as the inability “to perceive or construe data from differing cultural contexts” (Bennett, 2011, Denial of Difference section, para. 4). The most interesting aspect about this stage, especially as a child, was the sense of being “perplexed when asked about their [my] own culture, because they [I] have [had] not considered how culture impacts their [my] own or others’ lives” (Bennett, 2011, Denial of Difference section, para. 1). In order to make the shift to the next stage, which I passed through quickly, I needed “to attend to the simple existence of other cultures, both globally and domestically” (Bennett, 2004, p. 64). This transition was expedited at age 10 when one of my brothers married a woman from El Salvador.

## CHAPTER 2 - DEFENSE AGAINST DIFFERENCE

That integration of my sister-in-law into our family also expanded my understanding of a different culture and language. At the wedding, there were many adults whom I had never met or seen before speaking a language I had rarely heard. I was having the common thought of learners in that DMIS stage, questioning, “Why don’t these people speak my language?” (Bennett, 2011, Defense Against Difference section, para. 8). This phrase is often associated with the “English-only” sentiment that immigrants should speak English rather than their native language because they now live in the United States. However, that was not my thought process. As a young girl, I had never experienced intercultural relationships so I didn’t experience the strong negative feelings typically accompanied by this stage, rather I was simply noticing the difference in behavior, or language use.

While I did experience some of the feelings accompanied with the Defense stage, I cannot say that I fully accept all of its features as described by Bennett. Bennett (2004) also describes this stage as “The world [being] organized into ‘us’ and ‘them,’ where one’s own culture is superior and other cultures are inferior” (p. 65). These feelings are typical of this stage along with other severely polarizing views often associated with negative connotations. “People of dominant cultures are likely to experience Defense as an attack on their values (often perceived by others as privileges)” (Bennett, 2004, p. 65). Taking this into account, I know that as a child and a pre-teenager, I didn’t feel these strong sentiments. My experience in this stage was predominantly marked by the noticing of different cultures and languages, rather than the rejection or polarization of them. Mellizo (2017) asserts that there is research suggesting that

“students between the ages of 12 and 18 are generally accepting of cultural difference” and that this has not been studied “with students younger than 12 years of age” (p. 574).

The shift out of the Defense stage came during high school and in my initial years of college when I began exploring language learning and education; with that, I was exposed to language learners from all walks of life. Bennett (2004) states that “The resolution of Defense issues involves recognizing the common humanity of people of other cultures” (p. 66). At this point, I had the chance to work with adult English language learners who had immigrated to the United States for a myriad of reasons — safety, jobs, family, etc. I also had practica in both public county and city schools for my educational program. Working with English language learners in these capacities changed my day-to-day interactions greatly and introduced cultures and languages into those interactions that had not been present before.

## CHAPTER 3 - MINIMIZATION OF DIFFERENCE

A shift from Defense to Minimization occurs when commonality is established, not when a “more sophisticated understanding of difference” (Bennett, 2004, p. 66) is introduced.

Throughout my learning and acquisition of my second language, Spanish, in high school and by teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages at the Career Development Academy (CDA) in Harrisonburg, VA — that shift occurred. I began formally learning Spanish as a freshman in high school in Augusta County, Virginia. At the time, there was no such thing as immersion in foreign language classrooms, at least not in a small, Title I school district. Our language learning focused heavily on prescriptive grammar, vocabulary memorization, and generally decontextualized communication skills and cultural facts. Krashen (2013) describes this as “language learning” rather than “language acquisition” in his Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis. Rather than acquiring a second language as many who immigrate to the United States are required to do with English, I retained “conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules, being aware of them, and being able to talk about them” (Krashen, 1982, p.10). Through this method of learning my second language, I was exposed to different cultures, but only through the classroom and personal research.

I began to delve into Spanish-speaking cultures including representative examples of their foods, music, dances, clothing, and customs. I distinctly remember sitting in my Spanish IV class of only five students my senior year watching “A Better Life” and thinking that although the culture in the movie was foreign to me, there was an undeniable common humanity reflected. The movie, which illustrated a strong father-son bond through the hardships of immigration and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, illuminated that although the culture or the

language might be different, the relationships and the feelings permeate barriers. Thoughts such as “a common humanity” are associated with Minimization, as the perceptual process is marked by the following: “Unfamiliar data is perceived in neutral terms, but it is construed within the familiar categories of one’s own worldview (‘bow, shake, kiss — it’s all just showing respect’)” (Bennett, 2011, Minimization of Difference section, para. 4).

This feeling of recognizing “the common humanity of all people regardless of culture” (Bennett, 2011, Minimization of Difference section, para. 1) persisted throughout the first few years of my undergraduate experience as I taught ESOL at the CDA — until I participated in a short-term study abroad trip to the Dominican Republic. I believed all of humanity was alike on some level. In working with English learners from the Harrisonburg community, I often related to the students in their language learning process, thus concluding that the language learning commonality was yet another one shared in the human experience. I consistently had the thought, “While the context may be different, the basic need to communicate remains the same around the world” (Bennett, 2011, Minimization of Difference section, para. 6). As the last stage in the ethnocentric half of the DMIS, Minimization “takes one’s own cultural patterns as central to an assumed universal reality” (Bennett, 2004, p. 68).

It was in this context of teaching ESOL that I first encountered elements of Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis while working in the classroom. I had encountered his hypotheses in my TESOL program coursework, but I was not convinced of their relevance. When I realized that I was not getting through to my students as I hoped, I changed our classroom dynamic by incorporating elements of in-class journaling so that I could get to know the students better, also implementing more cooperative learning activities so that they could develop a sense of

community among one another. The goal was to lower the anxiety students experienced while producing oral and written language, as Krashen stated “Low anxiety appears to be conducive to second language acquisition, whether measured as personal or classroom anxiety” (Krashen, 1982, p. 31). He also asserted “even if they [the learners] understand the message, the input will not reach the part of the brain responsible for language acquisition” (Krashen, 1982, p. 31).

During the same semester I taught the ESOL course at the CDA, I participated in an alternative spring break trip to the Dominican Republic. The change from the ethnocentric stages to the ethnorelative stages didn’t happen until that time. Bennett (2004) argued that for this shift to occur, “the issue that needs to be resolved ... is the recognition of your own culture (cultural self-awareness)” (p. 68). I did not make that recognition until I was abroad without my parents for the first time.

Additionally, something important to note about this change into the next stage is my female gender. Mellizo’s (2017) study as well as studies of several other researchers in this field have exemplified that “females demonstrated significantly higher levels of overall intercultural sensitivity than males” (p. 584). Additionally, the following shift came easily for me, as a 20-year-old female, with exposure to other cultures while “some males may get hung up within the ethnocentric stages and may need more targeted interventions in order to successfully progress through the DMIS continuum” (p. 585). The research notes that this is likely a maturity correlation.

## CHAPTER 4 - ACCEPTANCE OF DIFFERENCE

Living in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, working as a volunteer in a K-8 school for a week shifted my worldview dramatically. Experiencing another culture so up close and personal changed everything. The short-term study abroad program could be labeled as volunteer tourism, and our class discussed that as a group in the weeks leading up to the trip. Research introducing the DMIS into tourism by Kirillova, Lehto, and Cai (2015) “demonstrated that volunteer tourism is linked to both positive and negative changes in intercultural sensitivity” and “showed that volunteer tourism cannot be expected to yield cross-cultural understanding on its own” (p. 396). As typical of those entering the ethnorelative stages, I had a positive attitude “toward another culture without having the ability to experience the other culture with much depth” (Bennett, 2004, p. 69). I thought before the trip that I was well-prepared and would adjust easily as I had been working with many native Spanish-speakers in my ESOL classes. That was not the case. I had a very difficult time navigating the distinct culture differences, let alone the linguistic challenges.

Participating in the sixth grade classroom within which I was placed taught me one of the most valuable lessons I believe I could have learned as a pre-service teacher: create a community of learners. When I arrived, it felt as if the classroom was a close-knit family community, and the teacher supported that feeling. Students didn't feel anxious in making mistakes in English class and that afforded them great strides in acquiring and learning the language because their *affective filters* were down. Krashen (1982) describes an “effective language teacher” as one “who can provide input and help make it comprehensible in a low anxiety situation” (p. 32). Their English classes were limited as the entire school shared one English teacher. I believe each grade had

English class once or twice a week, and many students confirmed that was their favorite time of the week. Like all textbooks and classroom material resources at this school, English books and realia were not readily available as is customary in the United States. That's one reason why I think the classroom community aspect was not only so important, but so helpful in aiding the students' language learning.

The influence that culture played in the use of the Spanish language and vice versa in my experience in the D.R. was striking. There was a tendency that I witnessed to refer to someone — a friend, a colleague, an acquaintance — by their outward appearance. Many in our group were referred to as *rubia* by the school children there, signifying “blonde.” Additionally, it was common to hear someone referred to by their race or ethnicity either, *chino* for “Chinese” or *negro* for “black.” As a United States citizen, this was a bit uncomfortable at first. It's difficult to shift one's way of thinking to a place of understanding another culture rather than immediately jumping to a judgment of one's character simply because the way they speak or behave is different. What I began to feel, by the end of our week in the school, was an acceptance of their cultural values and nuances. I didn't accept them as my own, but rather I was “able to experience others as different from [myself], but equally human” (Bennett, 2004, p. 68).

For the shift into Adaptation, one must “accept the relativity of values to cultural context (and thus attain the potential to experience the world as organized by different values)...to figure out how to maintain ethical commitment in the face of such relativity” (Bennett, 2004, p. 69). It was not until I returned from the trip to continue teaching ESOL at the CDA that I began piecing together these understandings and these changes in my worldview. I was interacting differently with my students thinking more empathetically from a cultural standpoint.

I will be the first to admit that while I could academically learn about another culture and interact with someone from said culture, I was never able to truly accept their values as equally ‘important’ or ‘correct’ as my American values. Looking back, that was an ethnocentric way to think, but it was where I stood in the DMIS before this trip to the D.R. That trip changed everything for me. Bennett’s (2011) concept of value relativism was exemplified through the perception “that beliefs, values, and other general patterns of assigning ‘goodness’ and ‘badness’ to ways of being in the world all exist in cultural context, and that cultural worldviews can be understood in terms of these values” (Acceptance of Difference section, para. 3). The shift into Adaptation easily followed. I may not necessarily have agreed with all that I saw practiced within that sliver of Dominican Culture in Santo Domingo, but I could at least appreciate what I saw and respect that within a cultural context. As Bennett (2011) stated, “Acceptance does not mean agreement or preference for alternative values, but rather acceptance of the distinctive reality of each culture’s worldview” (Acceptance of Difference section, para. 1). Van Hook (2000) reaffirms Bennett’s teachings insofar “As one’s experience of cultural difference becomes more complex, one’s competence in intercultural relationships is strengthened” (p. 68).

## CHAPTER 5 - ADAPTATION TO DIFFERENCE

As the “application of Acceptance,” my ten-week study abroad trip to Spain that followed a year after I returned from the D.R. was born out of “a need to actually interact effectively with people of another culture” (Bennett, 2011, Adaptation to Difference section, para. 1). In my opinion, there is nothing that can properly prepare you for living outside of your home country for an extensive period of time, besides having lived there before. You can learn the language and read about the locale and the customs, but the lived experience is unparalleled. I spent six weeks in Salamanca and four weeks in Valencia, Spain during the summer of 2017 as part of a study abroad program led through my university. I didn’t have a sharp change of perspective or jolt of worldview as I did with the move from the ethnocentric to ethnorelative stages (Minimization to Acceptance), but rather I noticed a gradual change occurring. I was “consciously shifting [my] perspective and intentionally altering [my] behavior” (Bennett, 2011, Adaptation to Difference section, para. 1).

The first week was full of homesickness and acclimation, but by the end of the ten week trip I was behaving in ways that were culturally appropriate in context yet still authentic to my own cultural identity. One of the key points of my experience in Adaptation was developing “*intercultural empathy*...the ability to empathize with another worldview in turn allow[ing] modified behavior to flow naturally from that experience” (Bennett, 2011, Adaptation to Difference section, para. 1). It was important that I remain genuine throughout my interactions with those at the school where I observed as well as with my host family and all others I encountered. The “natural flow of behavior” referred to by Bennett (2011) is what “keeps code-shifting from being fake or inauthentic” (Adaptation to Difference section, para. 1). I didn’t

have to think through each action so explicitly by the third or fourth week of my trip because I began to acquire “an intuitive feel for the alternative worldview” (Bennett, 2011, Adaptation to Difference section, para. 3).

The one example that stands out to me to demonstrate this intuitive behavior occurred on my first day observing at the K-12 school there in Salamanca, *Colegio María Auxiliadora*. While this might seem insignificant to some Europeans, the act of greeting one another (even acquaintances) in Spain is vastly different from that in the United States. It is customary to shake hands when meeting for the first time, or even subsequent times depending on the relationship, as a United States citizen in our culture. Having been in Spain for about three weeks, I easily and casually introduced myself to my first host teacher at the school with two kisses on the cheeks. Afterwards, I can remember thinking to myself that I didn't hesitate and it felt so normal to me. I was quite proud of myself! I was partaking in what Bennett calls “behavioral code-shifting.” One must “first know how things generally work in another culture, and then allow [one's] behavior to shift into those patterns when appropriate” (Bennett, 2011, Adaptation to Difference section, para. 3). Also according to Bennett (2011), a common thought among learners at the Adaptation stage is, “I greet people from my culture and people from the host culture somewhat differently to account for cultural differences in the way respect is communicated” (Adaptation to Difference section, para. 6).

At that school, I observed many different levels of both English and Spanish instruction, but there was one commonality that stood out. The relationship between students and teachers contrasted with that of the United States. On the first day, as an outsider, it was difficult for me to step back and recognize that what I might interpret as disrespect could possibly be a cultural

component. As I spoke with the teachers about their classes, it became evident that they valued the way their students referred to them by first name and conversed with them in a casual manner. Having witnessed this for several days, I began to compare what was going on with the Affective Filter Hypothesis. As Krashen (2013) describes it,

If the acquirer is anxious, has low self-esteem, does not consider himself or herself to be a potential member of the group that speaks the language, he or she may understand the input, but it will not reach the language acquisition device (p. 4).

What I was seeing was relationships formed of mutual respect between students and teachers that significantly lowered students' anxiety and in turn, affective filters. Those teachers exemplified to me "that our pedagogical goals should not only include supplying comprehensible input, but also creating a situation that encourages a low filter" (Krashen, 1982, p. 32).

## CHAPTER 6 - INTEGRATION OF DIFFERENCE

The DMIS culminates in its sixth stage of Integration, but not everyone reaches this stage. It is unique to those who “are dealing with issues related to their own ‘cultural marginality’” (Bennett, 2004, p. 72). Personally, I do not believe I have reached this stage and perhaps never will. Bennett (2004) makes an important distinction that “movement to the last stage does not represent a significant improvement in intercultural competence. Rather, it describes a fundamental shift in one’s definition of cultural identity” (p. 72). I have never experienced such a shift, and I believe that is because I was not born bicultural or multicultural nor have I lived abroad in one culture for an extensive period of time. The longest I have been abroad in one country was ten weeks. For me, that shift might occur if I were to live abroad for years and thus feel that I had truly taken the other culture as part of my identity and consciousness. Even then, I am not convinced that I could be “a person who is not defined in terms of any one culture – typically a person who is bicultural or multicultural” (Bennett, 2011, Integration of Difference section, para. 1).

I am happy remaining in the Adaptation stage because I believe it correctly encompasses my intercultural interactions, and I don’t know what more I would gain by striving to be in the Integration stage. It would feel inauthentic to attempt to identify with feelings of Integration when I know I am not there and likely will not ever be there. Bennett (2004) affirms “While it is important to recognize the experience of a multicultural identity, there is no implication here that this last stage is preferable to the previous one in terms of intercultural adaptation...If everyone became culturally marginal, what would they be marginal to?” (p. 72). I appreciate the sentiment

that while a multicultural identity is some people's journey, it is not everyone's journey — and it is not mine, yet.

## CONCLUSION

As I have evaluated my life's experiences in language learning and acquisition alongside the development of intercultural sensitivities and cross-cultural interaction competencies, I have been able to analyze my experiences as both a language student and teacher. In addition to those experiences within the United States, I have been able to observe and teach in international contexts. These varied settings have informed my personal beliefs about language learning and acquisition as well as informed my academic experience as a pre-service teacher candidate. Seeing the relationships that I developed with my students have had an impact on their learning and their language use in the classroom, and then seeing that mirrored in both the Dominican Republic and Spain has been very meaningful to me. I was able to see that this is something applicable in multiple language education outlets. When teachers make the conscientious effort to develop lessons and units that engage their students in a classroom community, then students' *affective filters* come 'down' enabling them to take risks and make mistakes and ultimately, ACQUIRE a language.

In conjunction with language learning, one key theme that emerged for me was learning *intercultural empathy*. Bennett mentions this phenomenon in the Adaptation stage of his DMIS, and I have found that it has resonated in so many other parts of my life. I have been through a slew of personal struggles since childhood that have fostered a strong sense of interpersonal empathy for those around me and those close to me in my life. However, this sense of *intercultural empathy* and understanding why another person is behaving in a certain way within a cultural context or because of their native culture is vital to my future aspirations of working in international and immigration law. It is a soft skill that cannot be explicitly taught, but rather

must be implicitly learned in one's own time through one's own personal experiences and development in an intercultural setting.

Another key theme that arose was the correlation between language proficiency development and the development of my intercultural competencies. There were certainly times in my life where I felt as if my language proficiency was at a very high level, and then I realized it truly was not when I went abroad and lived in a country that spoke that language. What I did realize, however, was that as I felt myself getting more situated in my new surroundings (in Spain, specifically), I recognized my language skills improving as well. Adaptation in the DMIS notes a shift that is "not merely cognitive; it is a change in the organization of lived experience, which necessarily includes affect and behavior" (Bennett, 2004). In my experience, it is also a change in language. In their research on study abroad programs and intercultural sensitivity, Bloom and Miranda (2015) contend that "although language proficiency was not a statistically significant variable in [their] study, anecdotally [they] note that four of the students who demonstrated greater intercultural sensitivity also had higher levels of language proficiency, suggesting a possible relationship" (p. 578). I became much more confident in my bilingualism by the end of that trip, and I believe that the growth in my intercultural communication abilities contributed greatly to that effect.

Thank you for being a part of this journey with me, and I leave you with this quote from Michael Dyson (2007): "Rather than be a seeker of 'the truth' the auto ethnographer reveals 'the voice of the insider' who has sought new knowledge and understandings of the world and found what was unknown to them when they began the journey" (p. 46).

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