

Language Teachers' Intercultural Learning: A Sociocultural Perspective

Ekaterina Arshavskaya, PhD
Languages, Philosophy, and Communication Studies Department
Utah State University

Abstract. Responding to the call to build teacher interculturality in more dynamic ways, this paper analyzes developmental trajectories of three pre-service teachers enrolled in a course on language and culture in a master's in second language teaching program at a U.S. university. From a sociocultural theory perspective, the article illustrates the various ways in which the pre-service teachers incorporated (or not) the mediational means available to them. The article findings support the claim about the sociocultural nature of human learning, while the analysis informed by a sociocultural perspective on learning explicates why intercultural learning can be more enriching for some participating pre-service teachers than for others. In line with the sociocultural perspective on human learning, the article highlights the importance of the affective dimension and activity for promoting teacher learning and argues for the need to better understand the process of teachers' application of new understandings into their practice. Besides, the article demonstrates the value of teacher educators' reflection on their work. It ends with pedagogical implications for language teacher educators.

In line with the recent call by Smolcic and Arends (2017) to build teacher interculturality in more dynamic ways, this article analyzes developmental paths of three pre-service teachers participating in a project introduced into a course on language and culture in a master's for second language teaching program at a U.S. university. Recent inquiries into teacher intercultural learning highlight the necessity to expose future language teachers to the fluid nature of culture rather than to learn about cultural differences and facts in the context of promoting culturally responsive pedagogy (Black & Bernades, 2014; Dervin, 2015; Hoyt, 2015; Jokikokko, 2010; Smolcic & Arends, 2017). Besides, we witness a shift away from the word *intercultural competence* since it pre-supposes an endpoint in the learning process about cultures and a preference for the term *intercultural learning* (Smolcic & Arends, 2017). A project reflecting these developments in the field was integrated into the course on language and culture offered to prospective language teachers in the master's program at a U.S. university with the following goals in mind: 1. to increase prospective teachers' self-awareness in terms of culture; 2. to promote re-thinking and re-design of one's teaching practices in the classroom given new understandings.

The study's unique contributions lie in: 1. proposing a way to engage prospective language teachers in conceptualizing culture in more dynamic ways; 2. investigating the unique developmental trajectories of participating pre-service teachers from a sociocultural perspective. In particular, while teachers' engagement in ethnographic interviews has been examined in the context of foreign language education (Allen, 2000), the research on English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' experiences with interviews is only emerging (Nelson, 2018; Smolcic & Arends, 2017). This study aims to add to this emergent body

of research by focusing on both ESL/EFL and foreign language teachers and explicating an innovative way to build teacher interculturality in more dynamic ways.

The study pursued the following research question: How do social interactions with individuals from different cultural backgrounds and/or an intercultural experience mediate the participating pre-service teachers' intercultural learning?

Literature Review

Studies on Interculturality and Teacher Intercultural Learning

Nowadays, the demographic trends in many places around the world account for the need to prepare teachers who enter diverse classrooms to teach students who may differ from them in several ways. Models of intercultural learning have been developed to explain the nature of intercultural learning in general (Jackson, 2012). The developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett & Bennett, 2004) focuses on the process during which individuals attain greater cultural understanding and therefore, is more relevant to this study than other models. According to this model, an intercultural mind is defined as "a mindset capable of understanding from within and from without both one's own and other cultures" (Bennett et al., 2003, p. 252). Individuals generally move from ethnocentric (where one's own culture is seen as a norm) to ethnorelative stages (greater acceptance of differences) as they develop intercultural sensitivity; yet, people rarely experience this process as linear and may regress to lower levels of sensitivity due to culture shock (Bennett, 1993, 2012, as cited in Jackson, 2012). In the post-intercultural approach to teacher education, the pedagogical emphasis shifts from teaching teachers about culture towards focusing on learner "identity as a process" (Dervin, 2015, p. 84), which may involve culture, gender, religion, and other learner self-identifications, realizing unequal power dynamics in society and in the classroom, and becoming aware of the crucial role of contextual factors (e.g., the teaching context, curriculum).

The process of teacher intercultural learning has been described as "a process that lasts a whole lifetime" and "is often informal and incidental" (Jokikokko, 2010, p. 14). This process may involve "strong emotional experiences" and crises and greatly depends on individual teachers' backgrounds, living environments, and the roles of others in this process (Jokikokko, 2010, p. 14). Borg (2003) also underscores the significance of contextual factors in what teachers think and do. Furthermore, researchers found that "going beyond studying culture in the classroom to collaborate with cultural others" can help prospective teachers "to develop greater cultural self-awareness" (Smolcic & Arends, 2017, p. 68). In particular, Smolcic and Arends (2017) engaged a group of pre-service language teachers in collaborative projects and discussions with students of English at an intensive English program at the same university. As a result of this partnership, the participating pre-service ESL/EFL teachers demonstrated some emerging understanding of the complexity of culture and identity and "critical cultural awareness" (Byram, 1997), such as the benefit (or, the privilege) of speaking English as the first language. Black and Bernades (2014) investigated the effects of teachers' participating in an international teaching practicum

and found it to be a transformational learning experience. The teachers came to question their previously held beliefs and assumptions and realized the necessity to globalize the curriculum by reflecting the interconnectedness of all people around the world. The authors conclude that teachers "influence a generation of students and must have a critical sense of global issues and intercultural perspectives to improve social justice and the human condition globally" (Black & Bernades, 2014, para. 3).

Recent developments in the field have been reflected in the research on second language learning and learning of culture (e.g., Bateman, 2002; Robinson-Stuart & Nocon, 1996). It has been found that even proficient foreign language speakers may not always be successful in intercultural encounters due to a lack of intercultural competence (Christie, 2007; Schenker, 2002), and therefore, ethnographic interviews (i.e., interviews with cultural others) can be used as a tool to provide more authentic cross-cultural experiences for language students (and teachers). Bateman's (2002) study shows that as a result of interviewing native speakers of Spanish, students' attitudes toward the target language and its speakers improved. In an earlier study, Robinson-Stuart and Nocon (1996) found that ethnographic interviews allowed students to develop greater awareness of their own culture and the culture of the Spanish-speaking world. Among the potential challenges that the use of ethnographic interviews may present in the classroom researchers note the additional time necessary to introduce students to the ideas related to the ethnography, ethnographic interviews, and the value of learning not only a foreign language, but also the target culture.

The use of ethnographic interviews with cultural others has been reported in the context of foreign language teacher education (Allen, 2000); yet, its adaptation into the ESL/EFL teacher education is only beginning to emerge (Nelson, 2018; Smolcic & Arends, 2017). By focusing on both ESL/EFL and foreign language teachers, this study aims to add to the emergent body of research on language teacher intercultural learning through interviews with cultural others. To respond to the need of preparing teachers entering diverse U.S. classrooms today and fulfill the research gap by tracking pre-service teachers' intercultural learning in an innovative course project in the context of both ESL/EFL and foreign language teacher education, this study reports on the developmental paths of three pre-service language teachers through a sociocultural theory perspective.

Theoretical Framework

A Sociocultural Perspective on Human Learning

The sociocultural views on human learning grounded in the works of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky foreground the importance of social activities, interactions, and relations in which humans choose to engage for human development. Particular attention is paid to the various mediational means (tools) that facilitate the learning process and the role of expert others (e.g., educators) who provide mediation. The mediation varies from more direct to more implicit and is offered within the zone of proximal development (the ZPD) of learners. The ZPD has been defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through

problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). It is particularly important to pay attention to the ways learners respond to mediation and adjust it accordingly. In collaboration with a more capable other (e.g., a teacher, a peer), learners can “transfer” newly learned concepts and skills to solve more complex tasks, meaning that this new knowledge has been internalized. This collaboration to accomplish more difficult tasks has been defined as transcendence (Poehner, 2007).

The sociocultural perspective used in the context of teacher education gives us the means to “see” teacher learning (Johnson & Golombek, 2003) as it occurs in various contexts. Johnson and Golombek (2003) explain:

Ultimately, we believe sociocultural theory enables teacher educators to see important aspects of the cognitive processes at work in teacher learning. ... It enables teacher educators to see how various tools work to create a mediational space in which teachers can externalize their current understandings and then re-conceptualize and re-contextualize their understandings and develop new ways of engaging in the activities associated with teaching. (p. 735)

Various tools that teachers use in mediating their learning can involve expert knowledge, prior experiences as students and/or teachers, teacher journals, colleagues, and other resources, but they still need “to work through the transformative process in a personally meaningful way” (Johnson & Golombek, 2003, p. 735).

From this perspective, teacher educators can examine the process of novice teachers’ learning to teach for the instances of emotional/cognitive dissonance that signal possible growth points in learning (Johnson & Worden, 2014). According to Vygotsky (1987), both the human mind and emotions represent a dialectic unity and therefore, cannot be separated from one another in the analysis. In his own words, “every idea contains some remnant of the individual’s affective relationship to that aspect of reality which it represents” (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 50). The dialectic approach to development also presupposes the emergence of contradictions, e.g., emotional/cognitive dissonance. Through resolving contradictions, the learner can move forward developmentally. The Russian word *perezhivanie* has been used in the field to refer to the affective impact of past experiences on individuals (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1994). Any event is experienced differently (*perezhivanie*) by each person and

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therefore, it is impossible to understand the process of learning without considering the emotions of the learner. Johnson and Worden (2014) further argue

that responding to “novice teachers’ expressions of cognitive/emotional dissonance and framing them as growth points in the learning of teaching may prove to be a powerful step in creating initial learning-to-teach experiences that support and sustain productive teacher development in teacher education programs” (p. 147).

Overall, a sociocultural perspective can be used as a lens to “see” (Johnson & Golombek, 2003) teacher intercultural learning and to explicate why this process may be more beneficial for some participants than for others.

Data Collection

The data were collected during a one-semester academic graduate course from five enrolled students. At the time of the data collection, the course was offered as a pilot elective course. The students were recruited by a colleague of the researcher (also, the instructor of the course) to avoid potential issues with respect to coercion when working with one's own students. The researcher was not notified of the students' decision to participate (or not to participate) in the study until the final grades had been posted.

More specifically, the researcher collected pre-service teachers' background information (i.e., relevant personal and professional experience, prior education, trips abroad) and three course papers. The data collected included: (1) a short background information survey, (2) a paper containing analysis of an interview with a study-abroad learner, (3) a paper containing analysis of an interview with a foreign-born teacher teaching in the U.S., and (4) a short reflection paper where the participants reflected on their overall experience in the project. Also, the researcher used email exchanges with the focal participants to arrive at a better understanding of the data. While all five students allowed the researcher to use and to analyze their work for research purposes, three participants were chosen out of the pool of five participating pre-service teachers to illustrate the uniqueness and extent of the intercultural learning process.

Data Analysis

This study utilizes a qualitative methodology approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) with the two-fold purpose: 1. to "understand the nature or the meaning of the experience" of the pre-service teachers undertaking the discussed project (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 11) and 2. "to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide for action" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12). The data were analyzed using a content analysis technique (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researcher (also, the instructor of the course) undertook a detailed content analysis of the relevant course papers of all participating teachers. As the sole instructor of the course, I had a deeper understanding of the situations of participating students (the insider's perspective), and these shared experiences in the classroom and beyond (i.e., field trips) helped me to gain a deeper understanding of the participating teachers' experiences in the course and with the project.

The papers were read and re-read repeatedly by the researcher throughout and upon the completion of the data collection period. While reviewing the data, themes from the participating teachers' papers were re-examined and either eliminated or created, as further analysis suggested. The themes were based on participants' language rather than the researcher's pre-determined categories. For example, one of the themes in a focal participant's (Sheila's) data had to do with increased understanding and empathy towards her learners. This theme could be traced across all the three papers that Sheila had submitted in the course. Here is a relevant quote from her paper about an interview with a study-abroad learner: "... but if people were able to understand the irreplaceable perspective and genuine empathy gained as a by-product, I think the investment of studying abroad would be seen as lucrative as it

truly is." In her paper about an interview with a foreign teacher, she again returns to the same topic of being able to relate to her students' cultural and educational backgrounds: "As an ESL teacher, I learned that I should never assume that all of my students have been taught the way I teach and/or have had similar experiences with their education." Finally, in her reflection paper on both interviews, she concludes: "Teachers we should be sympathetic toward our students and draw from our own language learning experiences to encourage them. This year I have had the opportunity to do this with a student. The result has been a noticeable increase in their confidence."

Additionally, a series of subsequent email exchanges with the participating pre-service teachers served as a member check (Maxwell, 2004) and was used in the data analysis below. Therefore, the data analysis should be seen as co-constructed, and this strengthens the validity of the findings.

Study

Instructional Context

The project involved pre-service ESL/EFL and foreign language teachers in interviews with individuals from different cultural backgrounds and/or a cross-cultural experience and was integrated into a graduate-level course in the master's in second language teaching program at a U.S. public university. The program aims to prepare college-level language instructors and offers a variety of courses and practical experiences to prepare pre-service teachers. The course on language and culture engaged teachers in both theoretical readings (e.g., study-abroad language learning, ethnography, intercultural learning) and practical activities (e.g., designing a study-abroad program). The researcher was also the instructor of the course wherein the project took place.

The Project

The project involved pre-service teachers in two face-to-face interviews with individuals with distinct (from theirs) cultural backgrounds and/or an intercultural experience. The participants were encouraged to use open-ended questions with their interviewees, yet before the start of each interview, they were assigned to choose a possible focus for the interviews, which reflected their interests and potential gains from the project. The students were also encouraged to use their own earlier intercultural experiences (e.g., a study-abroad trip) to add to and to deepen their understanding of cross-cultural learning that individuals engage in throughout their lifetime.

They reported their findings and analysis in two separate course papers (one paper for each interview). Besides, they were asked to submit an overall reflection paper on this project. The post-interviews reflection required students to demonstrate a "deep reflection on implications for language learning and teaching in your classroom" (taken from the assignment directions).

As mentioned earlier, the project was aimed at: 1. increasing prospective teachers' self-awareness in terms of culture; 2. promoting re-thinking and re-design of one's teaching practices in the classroom because of new understandings. All the

participating teachers (except Iris) were teaching entry-level language courses at the same university at the time of the data collection.

Participant Profiles

At the time of the data collection, all three participants were young adults. Two of the three focal pre-service teachers were completing their second semester in the master's in second language teaching program at the time of the data collection. One of them, Sheila, was teaching a conversation class to a group of mixed-level ESL students, while the other, Carter, was teaching introductory Spanish classes. Before the start of the program, Sheila had taught for several years at a community-based ESL program, and Carter had some limited tutoring experience. Both Sheila and Carter are native English speakers. Sheila plans to continue teaching ESL, while Carter will teach Spanish upon program graduation. Before the start of the project, Sheila had a study-abroad experience in Spanish-speaking countries, while Carter had no such experience.

The third participant, Iris, was taking the course as part of her exchange program. Iris is a non-native speaker of English who was enrolled at a similar master's in a second language teaching program in a country in Europe. Iris plans to teach ESL/EFL and/or Spanish upon completion of her degree program there. Before this project, Iris went on a study-abroad program in Spain.

Regarding the project, Sheila chose an American student with a study-abroad experience in an Arabic-speaking country for the first interview and a foreign-born instructor teaching in the U.S. for her second interview. Carter interviewed a student from Spain currently living and working in the U.S. and an instructor from Spain for his first and second interviews, respectively. Iris chose a study-abroad student from a European country currently residing and studying in the U.S. for the first interview and a foreign-born instructor for her second interview.

Results

The results are first presented in the form of a cross-case analysis of the three participants (section 7.1), while the subsequent sections (sections 7.2, 7.3, and 7.4) focus on each teacher's individual trajectory (a modified case-study approach). Table 1 below previews some relevant background information and the resultant thematic categories for each participant.

Table 1
Participants' Teaching and Thematic Categories

Participant	Teaching Experience and Status	Thematic categories
Sheila	Some teaching experience, instructor of ESL	Re-thinking teaching beliefs and practices
Carter	Limited teaching experience, instructor of Spanish	Demonstrating emerging "critical cultural awareness"
Iris	No teaching experience, exchange student	Coping with culture shock

Main Themes

The following themes were prevalent in all participating pre-service teachers' data: 1. Learning a new language is a challenge. 2. Living in/experiencing a new culture is hard and requires learning new knowledge and skills. Besides, each participant experienced the intercultural learning process differently, focusing on distinct ideas that became salient to them through this process. While Sheila was able to "transfer" her newly acquired understanding to re-imagine her relationship with her ESL students, Carter was more focused on seeing his own culture from the perspective of individuals from other cultural backgrounds. Importantly, these new understandings correspond to the project goals described earlier. Finally, Iris did not demonstrate significant gains in terms of her understanding of her own culture, the cultures of others or connecting new understandings to teaching contexts.

Sheila: Re-thinking Teaching Beliefs and Practices

The salient themes that emerged in Sheila's course papers were related to learners' identities in a second language and empathy one can develop based on one's challenging experience with new languages and cultures towards people in similar situations. In the interview with an American student who went on a study-abroad trip in an Arabic-speaking country, she describes her interviewee's "feeling inadequate with the language and losing her sense of identity", as she started her program abroad. Sheila also compares this learner's experience to her own study-abroad trip to a Spanish-speaking country and notes that she "remembered feeling equally disillusioned as I left a language training center feeling confident with my Spanish only to later discover I couldn't even understand taxi drivers." In her first interview, the process of learning a second language is defined as "a struggle with Arabic" which "caused her [the interviewee] to experience a sort of identity crisis." The interviewee explains that "physically and linguistically you don't fit in and you just kind of feel dumb all the time."

The study-abroad learner whom Sheila interviewed is now teaching ESL students and acknowledges that "the biggest thing I got out of [studying] Arabic was I can relate so much more with the ESL kids I work with." In her turn, Sheila admits that she can as well relate to her ESL students more based on her own study-abroad experience in Spain. In her own words, "the increased empathy she reported having now for ESL students resonates deeply with me."

For her second interview, Sheila chose a foreign-born language professor at the same university. While this instructor teaches Chinese as a foreign language and therefore, focused on her professional experiences with this language, it is remarkable that Sheila was able to "transfer" some of her ideas on her own ESL context:

As an ESL teacher, I imagine many if not all of my Asian students experience major culture shock while attending my English class¹. ... Culture influences

¹ Here and hereafter, the text in bold indicates the most important segments for understanding the data.

every aspect of our lives including down to the way we learn and perceive the roles of students and teachers. As an ESL teacher, I learned that I should never assume that all of my students have been taught the way I teach and/or have had similar experiences with their education. (Sheila's report about the foreign-born language instructor)

In this interview, the foreign-born instructor explained how she was able to change her professional identity from being an "authority" in a language class (a role expected to perform for teachers in Taiwan) to becoming more like "a friend" to her American students. Yet, as we witness above, Sheila projects these experiences on what her own ESL students might experience in her ESL classroom and draws conclusions for her teaching (i.e., "never assume that all of my students have been taught the way I teach and/or have had similar experiences with their education").

In her final reflection paper on this project, Sheila concludes:

I learned how challenging it can be for language learners and teachers to experience other cultures. ... Language learning is hard. It takes time and can be emotionally draining as learners feel they sometimes lose their identity in the process as they are unable to fully communicate in the L2. ... Avoiding the urge to immediately assume that the student is lazy or does not care can save us a lot of trouble in the long run if we are open in communicating when an initial misunderstanding arises. ... Empathy, patience, understanding, adaptability, and avoiding assumptions are all important takeaways from the interviews I did. (Sheila's final reflection paper on the project)

As Sheila's reflection in her final reflection paper above shows, she is able to develop a better understanding of the challenges of learning a second language her students might encounter and to re-think some of her prior beliefs about teaching and students (e.g., "avoiding the urge to immediately assume that the student is lazy..."). In the end, given this new understanding and greater empathy that she developed towards her students, Sheila can potentially start to engage in her classroom activities in new, more empathetic and culturally responsive ways.

Carter: Demonstrating Emerging "Critical Cultural Awareness"

For the two assigned interviews, Carter deliberately chose speakers of Spanish due to his personal and professional interest in the Spanish language and culture. In his interview with a study-abroad student (Carlos) who was also a TA in his Spanish course, he focuses on the nature of friendship in the two cultures (Spain vs. the U.S.):

"Here, relationships are colder. People are your friends, but they aren't really." Carlos does not feel like he has the same type of friends as he does in Spain due to the difference in culture. ... Instead of going out every night and spending time bonding, American students are more likely to go home and work on homework. This made Carlos feel as though relationships were "cold" and slightly unauthentic. (Carter's report about a study-abroad student)

Importantly, Carter reflected on a possible implication for him, as an instructor, and related to the challenge of living and studying abroad, as the following excerpt shows:

As an instructor, I think it is extremely important to help international or study-abroad students find friends. Spending time in a foreign culture is very difficult, especially if you feel like you are doing it alone. (Carter's report about a study-abroad student)

In his interview with a foreign-born teacher, Carter continues to pursue his interest in the nature of relationships in the two countries and asks his interviewee, an instructor from Spain, about the nature of relationships between students and teachers:

The relationship that all the teachers have in Spain, every month they would do something with all the professors. Social acts are very important in Spain, here it is less important. (Carter's report about the foreign-born language instructor)

In his final reflection paper on the project, Carter demonstrates his emerging "critical cultural awareness" (Byram, 1997) by realizing a different cultural view:

Understanding this fact led to greater intercultural competence for me and can help other students or instructors see just how important being social is in Spanish culture. ... I generally think of myself as nice and outgoing but my actions are not always viewed that way in the context of another culture. (Carter's final reflection paper on the project)

Overall, Carter develops "critical cultural awareness" (Byram, 1997) towards the end of the project. At the same time, he makes fewer connections (than Sheila) to his classroom teaching and therefore, does not seem to demonstrate major changes in his teaching beliefs and/or practices.

Iris: Coping with Culture Shock

In her interview with a study-abroad student, Iris focuses on the challenges this student faces, such as the linguistic challenges:

This paper devotes to the challenges that foreign students may have before and during the exchange period. ... However, writing is the hardest part of learning the language for her. ... Moreover, she says that this language problem increases the educational load. For instance, if a student whose L1 is English can read a text in a short time, she is to put many efforts and it may take much time for her. (Iris's report about a study-abroad student)

Another challenge that Iris describes in her report concerns cultural shock. In her own words:

As for the cultural shock, she says that it is hard for her to get used to the fact that every person in the U.S. asks "How are you?", but in fact, it does not mean that this question is interested in them. During the discussion, the interviewee numerously said that it is difficult for her to make friends. Now she has friends from her home

country and different countries but has little contact with indigenous students. (Iris's report about a study-abroad student)

Interestingly, in her interview with a foreign-born instructor, Iris continues to question her interviewee about the difficulties of living and studying abroad:

As for the culture, most of the teachers are not deeply interested in you, they just try to be polite and that is it. The first time that she spent in the U.S. was very difficult not only because of the cultural shock but also because of this hidden friendless. (Iris's report about a foreign-born instructor)

In her final reflection paper on the project, Iris concludes that “when you meet various people and spend time not only on studying, you develop the intercultural competence and get acquainted with the peculiarities of culture.” In other words, she highlights the importance of informal interactions and relations for language and culture learning, yet frames the other culture somewhat negatively (i.e., “the peculiarities of culture”). She also admits the necessity to learn more about a target culture/country one visits: “When you go to another place, you are to know not only geographical features of it by also some customs and traditions.”

Overall, Iris fails to connect newly acquired understandings to her potential teaching contexts. Her views about the U.S. culture also seem to be rooted in ethnocentricity, meaning that her own culture is seen by her as the norm, while the characteristics of the other culture are defined as “peculiarities.” In other words, unlike other participants, Iris appears to be only at the beginning of her intercultural learning process.

Discussion

The study sought to find an answer to the following research question: How do the social interactions with individuals from different cultural backgrounds and/or an intercultural experience mediate the participating pre-service teachers' intercultural learning?

The social interactions that were included in the course on language and culture for pre-service language teachers mediated teachers' intercultural learning in several various ways due to the distinct backgrounds, prior personal and professional experiences, and the ZPDs of the three focal participants.

For Sheila, the experience in the project was very emotional. Not only did she recall the similar feelings of struggle with the target language, culture, and identity in L2, through this project, she was also able to pronounce greater empathy towards her English language learners. The dialectic relationship between the human mind and emotions (Vygotsky, 1987) can be traced here. While the emotions Sheila and her interviewee had experienced were primarily negative and confusing, they both learned to be more empathetic and concerned teachers through this process. In other words, their *perezhivanie* helped them to be able to better relate to and potentially connect to their ESL students. Similarly to the teachers in Black and Bernades' (2014) study, Sheila resolves to avoid making assumptions about her learners. In Vygotskian terms, in her engagement with the assigned interviews, Sheila relies on her prior experiences (a study-abroad trip) as a mediational means to develop her professional identity and

values. While we do not have the evidence that Sheila can effectively “transfer” her new understandings to the classroom, she externalizes a new understanding of her learners (greater empathy, avoiding assumptions), and this shows her potential to transform her academic knowledge into practical applications for her classroom teaching.

As discussed above, Carter develops “critical cultural awareness” (Byram, 1997) towards the end of the project. Unlike the participants in Smolcic and Arends’ (2017) study, Carter does not focus on unequal power dynamics between various cultures and countries; yet, he is able to shift from more ethnocentric (i.e., seeing his culture as a norm) to more ethnorelative views (Bennett, 1993, 2012, as cited in Jackson, 2012). In terms of the mediational means, Carter’s passion and interest (i.e., emotions) in Spanish language and culture seem to be one of the most important factors that trigger his deeper investigation into the cultural differences and possible reasons for those differences. Carter’s ability to “transfer” (in Vygotskian terms) this newly co-constructed knowledge concerns his realizing the necessity of making friends in a study-abroad trip, yet we do not witness a deeper realization in regards to his classroom teaching here. In an email exchange at the end of the project, Carter shared that he had introduced similar ethnographic interview assignments in his Spanish language course to help students develop a better understanding of the target language and culture. In other words, Carter was able to “transfer” an instructional strategy that was effective for his own intercultural learning to his classroom. We do not witness Carter’s deeper understanding of his students or teaching in his course papers; however, his teaching practices were mediated by the experience with the interviews he had had in the course.

In comparison, Iris, as a newly arrived exchange student, goes through a culture shock herself and therefore, seems to mainly focus on cultural differences and views the target U.S. culture somewhat negatively (Bennett, 1993, 2012, as cited in Jackson, 2012). As a result of her engagement in the interviews, Iris’s ZPD expands, yet it does not allow her to “transfer” the knowledge to her potential teaching contexts. In terms of mediational means, Iris relies on her own experiences in the U.S. to structure and guide her interviewees through her interviews. Yet, unlike Sheila, she does not utilize her *perezhivanie* in an earlier study-abroad trip to Spain to enrich her understanding of her current situation. While the process of intercultural learning takes a lifetime (Jokikokko, 2010), Iris appears to be at the beginning of this experience and, in Vygotskian terms, is not “ripe” to be able to transform this knowledge into greater understanding of her own situation, teacher identity, students, and teaching overall.

Overall, the study continues to include the voices of ESL/EFL teachers in the emergent body of research on teacher intercultural learning through engagement with cultural others. Similarly to previous investigations into the nature of teacher intercultural learning (e.g., Black & Bernades, 2014; Jokikokko, 2010; Smolcic & Arends, 2017), the process of this learning was diverse, complex, and often emotional. The pre-service teachers were able to co-construct new knowledge together with their interviewees through creating interview questions, reporting and reflecting on what their interviewees had shared with them. In line with the post-intercultural studies in teacher education, the focus of intercultural learning was more on increasing cultural

self-awareness and realizing the “fluidity” of cultures and identities (Dervin, 2015) than learning facts about cultures. The sociocultural perspective applied in this study allowed us to “see” (Johnson & Golombek, 2003) each pre-service teacher’s learning and analyze the possible reasons for the extent this learning occurred (or did not occur). While the aims of this study did not involve the analysis of the participating teachers’ classroom practices, the participating teachers’ reference to re-imagining their practices and relationships with students indicates a shift in their understanding. Borg (2003, p. 105) underscores that “we are interested in understanding teachers’ professional actions, not what or how they think in isolation of what they do.” A further investigation into whether and/or how pre-service teachers apply their newly constructed knowledge to their classrooms seems to be a viable direction in future research.

The study also sheds light on the importance of contexts for understanding teacher learning. Borg (2003) writes:

Another central issue to emerge here is the role of context. Greater understandings of the contextual factors – e.g., institutional, social, instructional, physical – which shape what language teachers do are central to deeper insights into relationships between cognition and practice. The study of cognition and practice without an awareness of the contexts in which these occur will inevitably provide partial, if not flawed, characterizations of teachers and teaching. (p. 106)

In this study, we saw how pre-service teachers’ experiences outside the classroom (i.e., Iris’s status as an exchange student) impacted the extent and depth to which they could co-construct new knowledge from social interactions assigned as part of the course project. Iris’s role as a newly arrived international student clearly “shaped” the ways she constructed her interviews and reflections on the project. Besides, her lack of engagement in actual teaching limited the extent of her making connections to teaching contexts.

Finally, a detailed inquiry into the nature of pre-service teachers’ intercultural learning allows promoting further reflection on behalf of teacher educators. Borg (2003) underlines the importance of “the implications of all ... research for the professional preparation and continuing development of language teachers”, particularly as it applies to “the principles underlying the design of their programs...” (p. 106). In this particular case, one of the teachers (Iris) could have benefitted from an actual teaching experience to support her intercultural learning, while the two other teachers could have been further supported in their attempts to re-think and re-design their classrooms.

Limitations

As with any research investigation, this research study has its limitations. First of all, the scope and aims of the study did not lead to an analysis of the teacher educator’s mediation provided to the pre-service teachers, and this could be explored in subsequent research. Besides, the researcher did not include the analysis of teachers’ activity in the classroom, and this can as well be investigated in future research.

Conclusion

Overall, the process of intercultural learning through social interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds and/or an intercultural experience is enriching for participating language teachers and can lead to pre-service teachers' re-imagining who they are in the classroom, who their students are, and what their classrooms may look like. However, this process is also complex and can differ for participating pre-service teachers due to their backgrounds, personal and professional experiences, and the ZPDs. The study continues to draw attention to the importance of emotions for teachers' learning (Johnson & Worden, 2014) and shows how they can be a driving force for development. The paper also underscores the importance of the activity to promote learning. Teacher educators should be particularly attentive to whether and how pre-service teachers internalize new knowledge by applying it in their classrooms, i.e., the concept of transcendence (Poehner, 2007). From a sociocultural perspective, while the process of intercultural learning impacted the participating teachers to a different extent/depth, the participants ended the project as "not the same" people that they were before the start of it.

The investigation into the nature of pre-service teacher intercultural learning during a course project helps both the instructors and the program faculty overall to better understand the experiences of their teachers in the program and may lead to re-thinking of the mediational means available for the program participants. In particular, the quality and the extent of mediation offered to the most struggling (less successful) students (pre-service teachers) can be reviewed and be better adapted to the potential needs of incoming teachers.

Practical Implications for Educators

In view of the findings, it seems necessary to offer several practical implications that this study can present for educators and language teacher educators, in particular:

- Educators in the fields of global communication, languages, and general education may find ways to adapt the assignment involving ethnographic interviews to enrich students' learning experiences with authentic cross-cultural communication opportunities that the interviews represent.
- For language teacher educators, it seems particularly important to be able to allow pre-service teachers to engage in a real teaching experience (together with conducting ethnographic interviews) so that they are able to make connections and implement insights from the interviews into practice. Additionally, it is crucial to be explicit (on the part of teacher educators) about the necessity to make these connections. As expert others, teacher educators can share their cross-cultural experiences and insights and the ways that these insights can be incorporated to improve teaching
- Finally, as a possible modification for this project, pre-service teachers can be guided towards creating and teaching with instructional materials

or ideas that reflect greater cross-cultural awareness, empathy, and inclusivity towards their students within the same course.

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Dr. Ekaterina Arshavskaya is an Associate Professor in IELI. She is also in charge of the international teaching assistants' training at USU and is involved with pre-service language teachers in MSLT. Her research and teaching interest include intercultural learning, multilingual literature, computer-assisted language learning, critical pedagogy, and teacher education.