



**Title of Project:**

Building Multilingual Communities of Practice

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**Final Report: Building Multilingual Communities of Practice**

**Motivation for the Research**

Socioeconomic and political upheaval, and related patterns of migration, have had an impact on education in local, regional, and national contexts; as a result, educating students, teachers, and other professional communities for linguistic diversity, and for building intercultural understanding, have become urgent priorities. UNESCO (2006) has emphasized intercultural education from a human rights perspective and described linguistic competence as a step toward “the empowerment of the individual in democratic and pluralistic societies” (p. 13). In the United States, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages has emphasized the need for increased participation in multilingual communities at home and abroad (ACTFL, 2014). Educational institutions undoubtedly must lead and promote intercultural education and practice. This dissertation research examines how a university service-learning program for English conversation in a linguistically diverse community addressed these urgent concerns through language education that focused primarily on the skills and dispositions of fluent English speakers in the U.S. context. The author proposes *community of practice* research (Lave, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991) to underscore the potential of language socialization—learning through participation in language—and *service-learning* (Jacoby, 1996) as a vehicle for orchestrating multilingual social spaces. By exploring these avenues, this study addresses the TIRF Research Priority *Plurilingualism in Business, Industry, the Professions, and Educational Contexts*. The following study description begins with a brief definition of service-learning.

Service-learning has been broadly defined as a “form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5). Service-learning has recently received attention from scholars whose social justice agendas converge on interdisciplinary and cross-linguistic models to achieve education for intercultural citizenship (e.g., Porto & Byram, 2015; Rauschert & Byram, 2017). However, research has also found that learning environments alone may not lead to inquiry and reflection, necessary components of interculturality (Byram, 2008); developing such capacity must be guided and scaffolded. Thus, the academic preparation for university students (fluent English speakers) in this study involved 1) developing students’ awareness of the social and political dimensions of speaking, learning, teaching a language; and 2) preparing students for their roles as *sympathetic interlocutors* who understand the interactional demands of



conversation and take responsibility for building understanding with diverse and differently-resourced speakers (Garretón & Medley, 1986).

### **Research Questions**

Community of practice research has shown that new social identifications emerge along with participation in new practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The four-year study addresses the following research questions: 1) What discourses of identity and membership become salient? 2) What interactional moves contribute to (re)/(de)constructions of identity and membership? 3) How can the study findings be applied to the program, and to increasingly diverse classrooms and professional environments?

### **Research Methodology**

*Context.* The study was conducted in a small U.S. city of approximately 59,000 (U.S. Census, 2016). The city has a history of immigration, and English is more often a second language than a first one: 57.4% spoke a language other than English at home (U.S. Census, 2016). Community languages included Spanish, Mandarin, Gujarati, and several Eastern European languages.

*Participants.* University students self-selected by enrolling in a three-credit, academic service-learning course. University students (N=110) represented diverse backgrounds, with 29% having immigrated to the U.S. or lived overseas; 33% were students whose parents had immigrated to the U.S.; 38% were from families in the U.S. for three or more generations. 62% reported speaking two or more languages at home. 64% self-identified as students of color. All were fluent English speakers. Community members self-selected by participating in the English conversation program (called *Conversation Café*). Participation in the research was not required of either university students or community members.

*Data Collection.* Signed consent to participate was obtained through an IRB-approved form in English and Spanish. Data collected each semester included field notes, interviews, journals, surveys, and attendance records (Creswell, 2013). The interview protocol was based on Patton's (1990) *Interview Guide Approach*.

*Analysis.* Iterations of analysis (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) began with open coding *to detect patterns of action, such as university students' characterizations of their conversation activity in the community (e.g., teach, interact, volunteer). With the understanding that characterizations of activity in turn order characterizations of participants roles in the activity, these were identified next (e.g., students, partners, participants). This first analysis showed that university students, fluent English speakers, both claimed and were ascribed identities as "teachers" of English. University students also linked hegemonic categories of social identity centered on membership (e.g., "not American 'enough'") to their linguistic resources. I then analyzed the data from the perspective of autobiographical narrative (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012), an approach that reveals how participation roles, social positions, and social identities may unfold (Wortham, 2001) within complex discursive environments.*

### **Summary of Findings**

The analysis revealed that university students of varied backgrounds grappled with symbolic valences of English and categories of membership in the U.S. polity, applied to themselves and to others. For instance, many students experienced their bilingualism as a deficit (e.g., "my broken Spanish" and "not American 'enough'"). The study found that attention to interaction, specifically the intercultural,

multilingual language practices afforded by the project, in many instances led to university students' (re)constructions of self. In addition to recognizing the perspectives of others (e.g., "the language that each participant spoke signified a different social perception"), one student characterized this (re)construction as empowering: "By knowing two languages, I do not feel constricted to one identity, and I am able to be a multicultural citizen." In many instances, students (re)negotiated their relationships with community members through interactional practices in which community *funds of knowledge* (Moll, Amanti, Neff & González, 1992), including community languages, were valued. These findings are illustrated in Figure 1.



*Figure 1.* In the community of practice model, interaction can be collaborative and adaptive. In the words of the university students, social identities were flexible (e.g., "I was a student in my own classroom" and community members "interject," taking on the role of "teacher"); and "shared language" (such as Spanish) was viewed as a resource instead of a deficit.

### **Implications for Language Education**

Now, more than ever, there is a need to carve out social spaces where community plurilingualism / multilingualism can be practiced. These findings highlight the potential of a community of practice model for language learning through participation and collaboration, with the understanding that participants' identities and memberships may be challenged, (re)negotiated, and (re)constructed in the process.; and suggest applications of this model for language education beyond academic settings, for instance in the public-serving professions. Language educators should be encouraged to lead opportunities for cross-linguistic collaboration in their classrooms; and language policymakers should support access to community-based language education for participation in a linguistically and culturally diverse world.



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