Losing Strangeness: Using Culture to Mediate ESL Teaching

Jennifer Rowsell
Graduate School of Education, Rutgers, The State University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA

Vannina Sztainbok
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Judy Blaney
Faculty of Education, York University, Toronto, Canada

This paper explores ways of using culture and cultural practices as an informing principle in ESL teaching. To research culture and ESL teaching, we conducted focus groups with teachers in an urban ethnically diverse school in Toronto, Canada and their student teachers during their month-long practica in the school as a part of a Bachelor of Education programme. As instructors in the teacher education programme, we set out to find ways of infusing culture and cultural awareness into our coursework on ESL teaching and learning. The implications for the study show that culture should not be viewed as a ‘discrete’ or ‘bounded’ entity and that teacher education programmes need to do a better job of bridging the divide between theory and practice.

doi: 10.2167/lcc331.0

Keywords: culture, teacher education, literacy teaching, second language/ESL learners, anti-racist education

In the first term of his Bachelor of Education year, Josef, a recently converted Muslim, taught a grade two class about celebrations. The class was composed primarily of Muslim students. The day of his teaching evaluation, he discussed the celebration of Ramadan. From a theological perspective, Josef could discuss rituals and their purposes and significance; however, on cultural points children in the class could fill out a picture of celebrating Ramadan with family and friends and differing perspectives on rituals. What struck me most sitting in an inner city school in Toronto was the fusion of old and new, of young and old, of crossing domains and sharing rituals, and importantly, of local interpretations of a global faith. Josef learned a great deal from the cultural enrichment and expression of Islam and being a Muslim offered by students in his class, and equally, students appreciated having a teacher who shared their faith and who possessed such an in-depth knowledge of their religion. (Field Data, Jennifer Rowsell, 20 October 2003)
This paper deals with the notion of culture as constantly beneath the surface of ESL teaching and learning. We know on a tacit level that culture bubbles up into our work with second language learners, but do we operationalise it in our planning and teaching? The moment of cultural fusion illustrates what it means to ‘make strange’ together: to come together from very different backgrounds, experiences, and understandings of the world yet at the same time, share cultural practices. Eve Gregory speaks of how ESL students need to ‘lose their “strangeness”, not only to the new language, but to a strange culture through experiencing everyday new routines and ways of life’ (Gregory, 1996: 9). Based on our study of cultural crossings in an ESL context, we found that inhabiting the sense of strangeness felt by students new to a culture and language led to a stronger, more inclusive classroom.

Viewing Josef’s pedagogical moment from an anti-racist theoretical perspective alerts us to a tension within urban educational settings. While cultural inclusivity is desirable, the question remains: how do we take up cultural difference in a way that does not reinscribe its ‘strangeness’ and reproduce the ‘normalness’ of the ‘mainstream’ culture? Dei et al. (2000: 264) advocate acknowledging diversity within teaching staff, but cautions that teachers should not be regarded as ‘speaking for’ or representing their entire cultural or ethnic group, nor should they be on call to ‘perform’ as part of the school’s multicultural offerings. Rather, these teachers bring alternative ways of knowing that can provide greater points of access for students in developing broader worldviews. (Dei et al., 2000: 264)

In order for minoritised students to feel culturally validated, inclusion must go beyond representation of specific cultural practices and towards a more holistic approach to education that understands all of the children as coming from backgrounds that bring specific and valid knowledges to the school. Moreover, for researchers such as George Dei, it is important that the educational system stress the interconnection between and among cultures, rather than positism them as existing as discrete, bounded entities:

This sense of ‘interconnectedness’ and ‘interdependence’ is an important vehicle through which teachers can gain an understanding of difference that does not automatically become exoticised and pushed outside of the predetermined and socially regulated framework of dominant culture (Dei et al., 2000: 264). Language itself ‘stands as one of the strongest support structures of ethnic identity’ (Dei et al., 2000: 107). Therefore the way that we deal with language in schools plays a role in structuring inclusions and exclusions, in validating and marginalising cultures.

In this paper, we present a study conducted by a team of researchers as part of a university initiative to develop stronger ties with ‘school partners’ (schools that accommodate student teachers from our programme). We conducted the study in a partner school (i.e. a school involved with a teacher education programme) in an ethnically diverse part of the city with students from a mix of socio-economic backgrounds.

The findings of the study clearly demonstrate a need to embed more of an understanding of how to bridge cultural practices in urban classrooms both in teacher education programmes and equally in the curriculum. The ESL
experience is not only about a linguistic divide, but equally and more importantly, a cultural divide. It is clear from focus groups and discussions with participant teachers and teacher candidates that culture is at the heart of ESL teaching. The question remains, why does it play such a secondary role to language and linguistic competence in policy, theory and practice? Additionally, what can emergent bilinguals contribute to the language learning process when not viewed as culturally deficient?

**Losing Strangeness in Our ESL Teaching**

The study brought to relief the significance of associate teachers’ (teachers who work and guide teacher candidates) and teacher candidates’ knowledges and assumptions about cultures and how this informs their pedagogical practice. In other words, the data spoke not so much to cultural difference itself, but to how it is taken up and even constructed in the classroom environment. Thus, it is in the spirit of fostering critical and constructive reflection that we interpret the teacher candidates and associate teacher comments about their experiences teaching ESL in a Toronto school. The purpose of this study is not to come up with the answers about ‘language and culture’ but to inform our own practices within teacher education programmes. What types of discussions do teachers and teacher candidates need to have about ESL? How do we approach the question of ‘the multicultural classroom’ (which of course cannot be universalised)?

Our article is premised on a belief that interactions between teachers and students are never neutral, let alone interactions between native speakers and English as second language students. Based on our experience as classroom teachers and teacher educators, it is clear that, more than ever, new teachers need to come to grips with how to accommodate their programme to ESL students. New teachers need a sensitivity to what it means to enter a new, foreign culture with its own set of customs, values, assumptions, etc. For example, one of the most effective school models for ESL students is premised on a two-way partnership with students and their parents from varied backgrounds collaborating or teaching native-speakers about their culture, their traditions, and their language (Cummins, 1996). Language thereby becomes a resource, a tool for students to learn from each other as opposed to more of a reductionist model whereby ESL students need to assimilate into their host culture.

Understanding the ESL learner is essential when working in multicultural schools within diverse cities such as Toronto. Not only is it important to understand the ESL learner, but also it is important to comprehend how to educate teacher candidates to teach ESL students. While a large percentage of student teachers do not come from an ESL background, there is an increasing number of candidates who do come from an ESL background. As one of our participants sagely expressed it, ‘… it doesn’t matter how old you are, and how many years you have been speaking English you are an ESL learner all your life’.

**Culture and teacher education in theory**

We operate from the perspective that speech and cognition are mediated by social interaction and cultural practice. What this means in practice is that language, literacy, and discourse derive from social and cultural practice
Losing Strangeness (Scribner & Cole, 1981). Literacy and learning practices are embedded in various discourses, or ways of knowing, doing, talking, reading and writing, which are constructed and reproduced in social and cultural practice and interaction (Gee, 1996; Heath, 1983). That teacher and student language practices shape classroom instructional and interactional discourse practices is clear from a survey of current theory (Cazden, 1988; Gee, 1999; Gumperz, 1982).

Our study promotes a greater understanding of the funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) we bring to classrooms and, what is more, our students bring to classrooms. As Rowsell and Rajaratnam express it in a chapter in Literacies, Across Educational Contexts, ‘analyzing moments in our lives when two cultures collide and catalyze teaching or learning is essential to coming to grips with the role of culture in our teaching’ (Rowsell & Rajaratnam, 2005).

Eve Gregory (1996) considers the role of social context in literacy. She notes that children learning to read may or may not identify with what is being said depending on the underlying cultural assumptions in the text. She cites the example of a book that refers to marmalade, which makes complete sense to a child who is a native English speaker, born in the UK. Another UK born child, whose first language is Cantonese, lacks the material reference for the word, thus making the text incomprehensible. Although this simple example may not do justice to all the complexities and subtleties of the process of cultural identification and literacy, Gregory makes the crucial point that: ‘It is easy implicitly to assume that emergent bilinguals share our own understanding of “reading” and will find school methods and materials meaningful although their families may well have learned to read in a world quite different from our own’ (Gregory, 1996: p. 16).

Thus, language assessments can never be ‘simple’ tests of vocabulary comprehension, but are always entangled with cultural assumptions that may or may not be understood by the students (Gregory, 1996: 9). Gregory (1996: 10), however, does not frame this ‘strangeness’ to the new culture as a deficit. Instead, she leads us to consider the strengths that ‘emergent bilinguals’ bring to the task of language learning, as is evinced by their learning strategies and successes.

Methodology of Study

The paper is based on a university-school partnership grant involving three members of a cohort in an elementary teacher education programme and a partnership school, Walker Public School (this is a pseudonym). The year-long study looked generally at the role of culture in ESL teaching and more specifically at how teachers’ cultures intermingle and mediate with student cultures.

Participants and context of study

There were 12 participants involved directly in the study – six student teachers and six associate or cooperating teachers (with whom student teachers worked at Walker Public School). At the beginning of the 2003/2004 academic year, we surveyed the entire cohort (comprised of 74 students) to get a picture of the demographics of our student population. The survey allowed us to develop a sense of the cultural make-up of our cohort so that we could accommodate our
professional development around the cultural make-up of the classroom. We used this data to illustrate the heterogeneity of cultural backgrounds within our group of 65 students. Our students comprised 66 women and eight men representing a range of ages from 23 to 56, a variety of cultural backgrounds and languages. Six students reported being former ESL learners themselves with Korean, Mandarin, Romanian, Russian and French as first languages. Eleven students reported a language other than English spoken at home. One student reported two other languages spoken at home. Forty-one students reported having been in a context where they were second language learners. Because some students had been in more than one such context, the number of contexts represented exceeds the number of students who responded affirmatively to the questions. The contexts cited included French immersion, French class, visiting another country and coming to Canada.

The survey crystallised the relative homogeneity of the group in comparison with the heterogeneity of cultures and languages that they would be facing in a city known for ethnic diversity. In 2004, for example, the United Nations Development Program ranked Toronto second in its list of world cities with the largest percentage of foreign-born populations. As a result, we wanted to choose a context that was representative of downtown schools and one in which we had had a partnership for some time. Walker Public School was the ideal site given the ethnically diverse school community and our long-standing relationship with them. Walker Public School is Junior Kindergarten to grade 6 Toronto inner-city school with a high ESL population. Their student body is approximately 60% Muslim. The three associate teachers had a minimum of five years teaching experience and were teaching grades kindergarten to grade 6.

We selected student teachers who had their teaching practica in this school and their associate or cooperating teachers (six students teachers and six associate teachers). Of our participants, only one student self-identified herself as a former ESL student. The participants included six females of varying ages from early twenties to forties and for associate teachers, four women ranging in age from thirties to fifties and two men in their thirties.

**Research design**

As a research team, we identified ways to infuse an ESL perspective into all aspects of the university-based academic program rather than designating ESL as a three-hour topic within a specific course. We hoped to have a balance of theory-policy and practice in the courses so that teacher candidates would come to grips with all aspects of ESL teaching and learning.

**ESL intervention**

After administering the survey and selecting a partnership school and participants, we met as a cohort to discuss the project and ways of emphasizing ESL teaching and cultural awareness within our overall teaching during the 2003/2004 academic year. We identified ways to infuse an ESL perspective into all aspects of the university-based academic programme rather than designating ESL as a three-hour topic within specific courses. We hoped to have a balance of theory-policy-and-practice in the courses so that teacher candidates would come to grips with all aspects of ESL teaching and learning. Throughout
Losing Strangeness

145

the first term of the programme we also featured ESL Infusion videos and print materials/suggested articles as a support for the students’ ESL teaching and learning. We made explicit use of the ESL Infusion materials in courses called, Teacher Education Seminar (covering such topics as planning, assessing and implementing teaching and learning), Language (devoted to developing, planning and assessing language programmes), and School and Society (covering themes related to schooling and societal influences) courses – all involving the three researchers and writers of this paper. In addition, we offered the group:

- an overview of the Ontario Ministry of Education document on English as a Second Language; and
- a discussion on the sociocultural perspectives on English as a Second Language.

One of the reasons why we added this particular dimension of the study into our design was to find out if increased teaching in second language learners, bilingualism and cultural awareness impacted student participants’ teaching (particularly in the second practicum when they have had more exposure to ESL teaching and instruction in cultural awareness and ESL teaching methodologies).

Focus group interviews

Three preservice teachers were placed with three associate teachers in Walker Public School in the first and second practica. Student teachers were separated from their associate teacher so that there were two separate focus groups taking place simultaneously. We did this so that both students and teachers felt at ease to say what they like without worrying about bias or judgement (i.e. they work so closely together). We divided the research team so that one researcher was with one group – and one was a floater who jumped between the two. The floater (the third researcher) had a more nuanced feel for both conversations and when the research team debriefed after both sets of conversations, she had a take on differences between each one. What framed both focus groups were a series of research questions, such as:

1. What second languages do students have in your classroom?
2. What other cultures are present in your classroom?
3. How does language play a role in culture?
4. Are you aware of your own culture when you work with ESL students?
5. What school policies are in place for ESL students?
6. How do you account for ESL learners in your planning and assessment?

The purpose of the first focus group, held during the final week of the first four-week school-based placement, was to identify ESL strategies used by Associate Teachers in the school and to explore the ESL experience of three preservice teachers and their three Associate Teachers. The team in attendance at the focus group was the research team and the six participants.

The purpose of the second focus group interview, held during the final week of the final four-week school-based practicum was to focus on socio-cultural factors in ESL teaching and learning and how they affected their teaching and
learning. Once again, student teachers were separated from their associate teachers to give more license to speak freely. Two researchers switched places so that they were with different participants for the second focus group and Jennifer remained as transitioning between the two groups.

We felt that individual interviews might feel somewhat uncomfortable and less natural. In recognition of the power relationship between the preservice teachers and the associate teachers who are responsible for their evaluations, we decided to interview the two groups separately. In this ‘peer supported’ environment, we thought natural conversation would be stimulated conjuring up stories of their teaching experiences. It was in these stories that we believed the ‘themes’ would emerge.

Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) defined group interviewing to be ‘limited to those situations where the assembled group is small enough to permit genuine discussion among all its members’ (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990: 10). Merton (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) coined the term ‘focus group’ in 1956 to apply to a situation in which the interviewer asks group members very specific questions about a topic after considerable research has already been completed. Kreuger (1988) defines a focus group as a ‘carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions in a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment’ (Kreuger, 1988: 18). Based on Krueger’s work, we decided to separate students from their associate teachers. In addition, Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) highlighted a need for a group forum instead of individual interviews (to capture complementary and contrastive perspectives on cultural awareness and ESL teaching).

Kreuger (1988) suggests that the key element in a focus group interview is the involvement of people where their disclosures are encouraged in a nurturing environment. Tapping into human tendencies, attitudes and perceptions are developed through interaction with other people. During a group discussion, individuals may shift due to the influence of other comments. Alternately, opinions may be tightly held. We wanted to hold the interview in a relaxed environment that would encourage the kind of informal, open dialogue that had characterised our class discussions three years before. We organised the focus group interviews over a provided luncheon in the informal atmosphere of the school library. The interviews were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed.

**Data analysis**

To analyse the data, we implemented what Harry Wolcott describes as ‘content analysis’ (Wolcott, 1994: 24). That is, in light of transcriptions, each researcher analysed content in the focus group data with a particular lens. The lens that we imposed on data, as teacher educators, was how can culture bridge an observed gap, by associate teachers and student teachers, between second language learners and their host classrooms (no matter how inclusive settings and people were)? We sought to develop some initial notions of a cultural pedagogy and accompanying languages and strategies that might invite funds of knowledge (Moll *et al.*, 2005) that students bring to the classroom. In our individual and collective interpretation and analysis of the data, we singled out themes tied to culture and ESL teaching.
Findings

In light of our content analysis individually and as a group, we isolate some key and recurrent themes in the data tied to our overall aim of harnessing culture to literacy work with ESL students. Collectively, we agreed on the following themes: Culture-Language Nexus; Literacy Shaped by Context; Literacy-Culture-Community; Multimodal Literacy Strategies; and, The Shy ESL Student.

(1) Culture and language nexus

In response to the question ‘How has culture played a role in your ESL teaching?’ teachers were more likely to point to the students’ perceived cultural background, than their own. Teachers’ attempts focused on creating an inclusive classroom through cultural celebrations and using diverse materials (such as books and toys). They also related it to their experiences of other cultures while they were travelling. For instance Mark, a grade six teacher with 10 years experience, explains,

I guess you try to find connections in stories that you’re reading, travel experiences that I’ve had to where the students have been as well and making connections there, finding links between other cultures. We’ve got a lot of Muslim students here, so it’s usually easy to discuss the traditions that those students have and share them with the other students from other cultures that are in the classroom as well. Those are some ways. (03/11/04)

Melissa, a teacher, has a similar approach to the question of culture. She connects culture to religious celebrations and holidays and the fusion invites funds of knowledge:

And just getting ESL students from different cultures, to talk about their stuff. Like if there’s a holiday or a celebration as opposed to just finding things on it. Things, when they talk about it they feel they have some ownership over it, that they’re helping other kids in the class. (11/04/03)

In the data, there were instances in which teachers would speak at length about ‘stuff’ students valued from home that served as ties to home and to culture. In order to create an inclusive classroom, associate teachers make use of culturally diverse materials such as Middle Eastern themed books about China and India. Responses from the students suggests that this is an effective strategy.

I have one little Chinese girl in my class this year, very shy, very great little girl, but really hesitant to speak, I think she would be even if it were in English though. I think it’s her personality … But she loved … I could see her pick up [the book] … like when we did, it was that Chinese New Year and it was just a book and it was … we’d done other books with Asian cartoons or the figures, but she really noticed and it was we cooked rice and I brought in a wok and I said to Kim ‘Does your mommy have this?’ … I do simplified language when I speak to them and she said ‘No, no’, but for her she had to tell me no because mine was electric, and hers
In this case, a ‘shy’ student becomes more outgoing upon encountering an event in class with which she could identify. Ruth’s anecdote leads us to consider a point that was salient in all of the focus groups: the shy or silent ESL student.

(2) Contexts shape literacy

To return to our theoretical framework, we reiterate that we operate from the perspective that speech and cognition are mediated by social interaction and cultural practice, we saw in the data recurring themes tied to the notion of literacy as shaped by schooling specifically and by contexts more generally. Suzanne, another student teacher, underscored the fact that language learners are not always sharing the same cultural context when she was reading a book to one of her students:

... when I was trying to read a book to one of my students and it was pointless trying to decode. I can’t even remember what it was now, but he’d never seen it before. So you’d try, it’s like ‘OK, but get the picture’ and they were just like ‘I don’t know what’s in the picture’. And you can’t even use the picture, right. So then it’s like well this is kind of important to the book, the entire subject is on this particular thing, I don’t know what it was. It wasn’t a dinosaur, obviously, it was an animal, I think, and he’d never seen this animal before. This whole book was about this animal. So he was not getting anything out of this book. He couldn’t decode the word, he couldn’t use the pictures as a support. So, why are we reading this book to this little boy? It doesn’t make any sense. (11/05/03)

Linking up words to a picture does not help if the student has no reference to it in their own language. As Gregory (1996: 8) points out, bilingual children ‘must lose their “strangeness”, not only to the new language, but to a strange culture through experiencing everyday new routines and ways of life’.

Viv Edwards claims that schools must ‘demonstrate a serious commitment to diversity’ if students and their parents are to feel included (Edwards, 1999: 15–16). This means going beyond celebrating ethnic holidays. It may involve reaching out to parents via interpreters, inviting parents to the school personally (written flyers may not be effective), and letting them know that it is their school as well.

(3) Lived experience as key to ESL teaching

Personal experience emerged as a theme in fostering ESL teaching and secondary language learners’ connection to literacy learning at school. Chi Mai, a student teacher, draws on her history as an ESL learner to conceptualise language acquisition as an ongoing process and struggle:

I have a lot of ESL experiences, myself, all my life. I started English when I was 12, so it’s not like I started early. I started in junior high, so I’m an ESL learner, and something interesting about an ESL learner is once you
are an ESL learner, it doesn’t matter how old you are, and how many years you have been speaking English you are an ESL learner all your life, so sometimes labelled to a lot of people ... According to the theory ... for me it would be a little bit difficult, it’s quite difficult because I’m coming to a profession that I have to use and I have to ... like people expect me to use the language as a native speaker of English. So there’s a lot of pressure. (03/11/04)

Chi Mai’s comments attest to the powerful impact of language on identity formation. As an ‘ESL learner all your life’, Chi Mai feels that she has been categorised in a way that makes her ‘less than’ a native-speaker. Naturally such an experience at a formative stage in our development affects her sense of self. While her struggle to ‘use the language as a native speaker of English’ can be considered ‘natural’ if we conceive of ‘standard’ English as the only appropriate language within our schools, Dei et al. (2000) lead us to consider how schools may be implicated in fostering a sense of linguistic ‘inferiority’ in those who do not sound ‘native’.

With respect to linguicism in schooling, the use of a standard language variety in any educational site is tantamount to legitimising and validating that language is relative to, and above all other linguistic forms practices in the school ... The resulting power dynamic supports the muting or negation of any cultural/linguistic capital that minoritised people might bring to their schooling experience. Further, it establishes a very powerful language/discourse that speaks through the marginalised (Dei et al., 2000: 102).

As a non-native speaker, Chi Mai is able to provide the insight that language competency in students can sometimes mask a lack of understanding (also found by Lincoln, 2003). While another candidate believes that students sometimes ‘fool’ teachers into thinking that they are learning, Chi Mai points out that this is a coping strategy. The students do not want to be stigmatised:

This relates also to what Melissa just said for this ESL student trying to fool the teacher. I don’t think they want to do that, and probably again, it’s not consciously doing it. A lot of times they want to make their own life easier because if they can get things done they don’t really have to know every word anyways. So they don’t think that’s necessary to ask questions whenever they have any difficulties as long as they can work it out in different ways. And that’s the strategy. They use the strategy and a lot of times, like I said, once you’re an ESL learner, you’re an ESL learner all your life. A lot of people ... I don’t mind now, but they don’t like the label. So they would try to be, act like the rest of the class. So even though they probably don’t totally misunderstand something, but they will say ‘I’m fine. I know. I know how to do it. I don’t have to ask questions today. I don’t have to say anything’. So I think, in a way, psychologically, they want to be just like other kids. (03/11/04)

Melissa, a teacher, feels that her experience as a Ukrainian as a second language learner has informed her pedagogical approach. As a student, Melissa found that being exposed to decontextualised vocabulary did not facilitate her learning.
I learned Ukrainian growing up. When I went to Ukrainian schools, you learn how to say giraffe, like you never use in everyday language (general laughter). No, you wouldn’t. We’d learn those words, so I guess I try to be more aware not to . . . more just conversation with them. Normal, everyday conversation is the way to learn, because to me that was why I didn’t learn it that well because we would do textbook stuff. Yeah, the vocab, but how to relate that to real life and talking wasn’t very successful. (03/11/04)

(4) Multimodal literacy strategies

Multimodality represents a view of meaning making wherein we understand texts as made up of multiple modalities that can be written but equally visual, gestural, and as having texture and these modalities are combined in ways that facilitate our meaning making. In the data, it was clear that ESL students were more multimodal than linguistic (not surprisingly because they were still developing their host language). The teachers and student teachers involved in the study spoke of a variety of strategies that they use and challenges that they face in attempting to address the needs of ESL students. Generally speaking, the teachers and candidates’ comments supported the idea that good ESL strategies were good teaching practices period. For example, the use of visual materials was helpful to new language learners and visual learners alike. This was cited as a particularly effective strategy in the younger grades, when all students are learning to read and write. Routines were cited as an important tool, so that students can learn what to expect in the class. Suzanne, a student teacher, observed that her use of manipulatives in math class was helpful for both the ESL and native English-speaking students. Likewise, integrating art into the programme seemed to benefit all students. Ruth, a teacher, commented on the use of drama:

And in fact, the ones that are strongest are the ones who are able to use drama and music and storytelling and they all love it. It’s not an ESL strategy, it’s just a really good teaching strategy. (11/05/03)

Rita, another teacher, connects the question of culture to how she can help kids connect with the dominant culture through song:

I think too, for me, I have a lot, not that you’re not supposed to have a good strong focus on oral language, but I find that the really little ones, that I think it’s even more important to make sure that they start to do a lot of the poems that maybe they’re never seen before, but it helps them become familiar with the language and how the language sounds and the rhythms of the language and the grammar of the language without … it’s not dry. They love the songs and they love the poems, just like everybody else. So that’s one thing I noticed. (11/05/03)

Rita had the most pronounced sense that culture enhances ESL teaching. It is hardly surprising that Rita has had the most extensive educational background in language acquisition.

(5) Literacy-culture-community

Walker Public School is particularly inclusive. Certainly the teachers feel that efforts are made to include all families. For example, there is an Ambassador’s
Losing Strangeness

Club – a peer support group that the teachers can call upon to help recent immigrants to Canada in which,

Members of the teaching staff show the students around and they’re kind of like a big buddy for the students so they can get around the school. So that’s a good club. I’ve used that before. (Mark, a teacher, 11/05/03)

Speaking of another school, the Ambassador Program is identified as an example of a positive integrative practice because ‘it provides students with an opportunity to identify their own abilities and work toward a common goal with other students’ (Dei et al., 2000: 117). However, despite the existence of this support club, Mark and Rita feel that new parents do not receive enough guidance about the school.

Nobody tours the school and nobody sits down and talks and I don’t think there are the resources. Then you’re going to have to have multi-language resources to talk, to be able to give to parents, and to talk to them. I don’t think our administration is capable of meeting the needs of the many different languages … (Rita, teacher, 11/05/03)

There is a clear aim in the school to forge a relationship with the community and parents. Throughout both focus groups, teachers and some student teachers spoke of the importance of working with ESL parents. As Rita, a teacher, expresses it,

I would say link with home. No matter how hard it is, try and make contact with the parents, because I think, once they feel that there’s a link and you can talk to the parents, and problems do come up, or they don’t understand. If there’s some kind of dialogue that can be done … a lot of people too, coming from different cultures and they aren’t aware that you get to talk to teachers, that it’s not something that you can do. And I think that’s important, and then you have to have a sort of consistent message anyways. I think it helps a lot. What I would say is to give kids time to learn the language. (11/05/03)

Rita recognises, however, that her efforts are limited, by factors such as a lack of translation.

I had a parent tell me this year, and she was upset because something came home that was English, but not other languages, and it was something from the school, but I feel badly myself. They always want you to communicate with newsletters and do this and talk to parents, but every time I send something home, I’m aware that only some of my parents will understand. And some say they do, but their English skills are not as strong, because they say OK. But I’ve kind of made those connections for parents, say ‘OK, I want you to read this to her’, but I see them because they’ll pick up their little kids. Like ‘You take this and make sure that she knows what it says, OK?’ But it’s not the best way. (11/05/03)

Rita’s comments echo Viv Edward’s message in Building Bridges. Weak attempts to communicate with parents (such as an English language letter that must be translated by the child) may send the wrong message to parents. ‘When all the
non-verbal signs tell parents, “Stay out, this is our territory”, it is hardly surprising that invitations to parents’ events have a disappointing response. Until parents feel welcome, little progress can be made’ (Edwards, 1999: 25).

Teachers in both focus groups noted the significant role played by other teachers, student teachers and teaching assistants who can speak multiple languages, suggesting the importance of the bi- or multilingualism of school staff. Chi Mai, a student teacher, observed that her presence was important, not just linguistically, but also as a role model:

I would say a lot because I think sometimes … not this practicum, my first practicum, I had 2 ESL students. One is a Korean girl. One, I’m not sure her nationality, but I know her mother’s Asian and her father is partly Indian. I don’t know. She was transferred from a French immersion class. So she’s very shy. So I work with them, in a way we look the same, two girls, they are both Asian. So when they work with me, they actually feel, I think, they feel more comfortable working me alone, one-by-one, than by working with their own teacher in a way. Maybe just because of my look. I don’t know. Or maybe because I represent something in their own family, the way I talk … So I actually work with them very, very well, and they’re actually joking with me and laugh with me, and my associate teacher, June Smith, she was really, really surprised because one of the girls, she didn’t talk for the first 4 months. (03/11/04)

Perhaps students in this scenario felt validated and more comfortable seeing someone with whom they could identify in their class. As Dei et al. (2000: 263) suggest equity in staffing can make students feel not only ‘represented but also present within the curricular practices of the school and the school culture’. Interestingly the students spoke to Chi Mai in English, suggesting that language was not the only issue affecting their comfort level.

**6 The shy ESL student**

The storyline of the shy, quiet ESL student recurs throughout focus group data. Often teachers attribute these traits to a child’s culture, gender, or personality. The following account by a teacher at Walker Public School supports this claim:

Well just the example that I gave, I guess, with the female in my class who’s very shy and knowing that giving her that space is important because in her culture women aren’t always necessarily given those opportunities to speak up or expected to speak up and participate as often. (03/11/04)

Lincoln suggests that language learner’s silences need to be understood with far more complexity. Particularly problematic are prevalent assumptions about Islam that frame the way Muslims are read. What this means is that attributions to gender or culture may be masking some of the ways that silence is constructed within the space of the classroom. For example, Lincoln (2003: 158–159) suggests that there were several ways that ESL students were silenced in the class she studied: a focus on monolingual English literacy; a focus on the students’ weaker skills rather than their strengths (i.e. written over oral language in her case); a lack
of commitment to bilingualism; and the dominance of mainstream cultural content. Like the rest of the contributors to *Continua of Biliteracy*, Lincoln believes that supporting children’s bilingual education strengthens their literacy in both languages. This is an issue that goes beyond the commitment of the individual teacher to the educational policies that either support or suppress the development of biliteracy (Lincoln, 2003: 159).

**Implications for Practice**

Culture invites our ESL students into our classrooms. Culture and cultural awareness personalises ESL teaching. Just a sampling of themes that emerged from this modest study show that if we treat culture and language as linked, we invite students in; if we mobilise and operationalise our students’ lived experiences, we invite them in; and, if we open up our teaching to different modalities, we allow the language and culture nexus to flourish. As three teacher educators and researchers, the study allowed us to appreciate the degree of mediation that can and should take place when we have students from different cultures within our classroom spaces.

We lose our own strangeness when we accept that entering and exiting contexts requires constant, insistent mediation. All of our students and, arguably, particularly our English as a Second Language students have a tacit awareness of language and how it moves when we move. We set out in this study to make a clear, tangible link between cultural practices and language acquisition in an effort to help student teachers in teacher education programmes to understand that ESL teaching is not governed solely by linguistic competence, but it is a complex process of identity formation in a new place.

Indeed, culture and cultural practice inform much of our understanding of language and how to use language within given speech communities like schools. In light of the study, there were some discoveries that we had not anticipated: (1) that culture and language cannot be divided and seeing them as interwoven leads us closer to a more informed understanding of the learner; and (2) ESL learners frequently feel silenced – especially in their use of a first language.

Certainly what we gleaned from our year-long study of Bachelor of Education students and their host teachers is that culture is the lens through which they teach language, yet it is seldom spoken about on a practical and policy level as fundamental to ESL teaching and learning.

**Correspondence**

Any correspondence should be directed to Dr Jennifer Rowsell, Graduate School of Education, Rutgers, The State University, 10 Seminary Place, New Brunswick, NJ 08901-1183, USA (jrowsell@rci.rutgers.edu).

**References**


