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Study Abroad for Critical Multilingual Language Awareness Development in ESL and Bilingual Teacher Candidates

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Abstract

This article describes the ways in which study abroad experiences in international settings may help language teachers develop linguistic and cultural consciousness that ideally influence pedagogical practices in their home teaching contexts. Drawing upon the framework of critical multilingual awareness (CMLA; García, 2017), we describe three distinct study abroad programs designed to develop CMLA in pre- and in-service English as a Second Language (ESL) and bilingual educators. Findings indicate that, overall, participants in the three different programs demonstrated evidence of CMLA development with particular regard to awareness of language practices and sociopolitical contexts of language. We discuss how these projects, taken together, represent a unique focus for TESOL professionals engaged in international teaching experiences, and present considerations for those interested in designing and/or participating in such programs.

International settings are a rich context for language teachers to develop linguistic and cultural consciousness that, ideally, influence their practice when they return to their home teaching contexts (Marx & Pray, 2011; Menard-Warwick & Palmer, 2012; Nero, 2009; Pilonieta, Medina & Hathaway, 2017). The present study explores how *Critical Multilingual Language Awareness* (CMLA; García, 2017) can be harnessed as both a theoretical frame for researching

the impact of language teacher study abroad and as a way to design learning experiences for teachers via study abroad experiences. CMLA honors the plurilingualism of learners and communities, positions multilingualism as an asset, and acknowledges the historical oppression of linguistically minoritized communities (García, 2017). Due to the need for educators who work with language minoritized students, such as those who often participate in English as a Second Language (ESL) or bilingual education programs, to advocate for those students (Staehr Fenner, 2013; Linville, 2019), CMLA is a particularly needed component in U.S. TESOL and bilingual education teacher education programs.

To advance study abroad as a pedagogical tool for teacher learning and professional development, this article describes how three U.S. educator preparation programs incorporated study abroad in Mexico, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic, with the goal of developing CMLA among pre- and in-service TESOL and/or bilingual education teacher candidates. Rich description of each study abroad program, including goals, program components, and evidence of CMLA development among participants is included. In addition, implications of the use of study abroad as a means to develop a critical lens on culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy in TESOL teacher education are addressed.

Teacher Language Awareness (TLA) and Critical Multilingual Language Awareness (CMLA)

The construct of *Teacher Language Awareness* (TLA) (Andrews, 2007; Lindahl, 2019) can be understood via three aspects parsed by Edge (1988): how teachers use language (User), what teachers know about language (Analyst), and how teachers develop their students' language (Teacher of language) – CMLA adds a critical perspective on how language can be used to reinforce, perpetuate, or redefine existing power relations in society to these domains (Alim, 2005; May, 2013). Within the CMLA model, there is a focus not only on language itself, but also on those speakers of languages who are minoritized in schools and societies. The notion of dynamic bilingualism (García, 2009) is also a critical feature of CMLA, which necessarily promotes *translanguaging*, or use of the full linguistic repertoire of multilinguals, to make meaning, in this case, in school. Last, the model calls for teachers to be knowledgeable about the speakers' varied language practices used in school, of plurilingualism overall, of speakers' backgrounds and histories, and of the social construction of privileged language(s) in school (García, 2017). When teachers have an awareness of plurilingualism and linguistic tolerance for multilingual citizens, an understanding of how to redress the historical oppression of groups, and a critical understanding of how language use in society has been naturalized, they will more effectively develop the understanding that language is socially created, and thus, socially changeable, in order to give voice and educate all students equitably (García, 2017). According to García (2017), teachers today need to have skills that support CMLA in order to best serve the students in their classrooms to "change the linguistic hierarchies" (p. 270) and in effect, advance social justice.

Our collective project highlights how three universities promoted study abroad in TESOL teacher education, and how the CMLA of participant preservice and inservice teachers developed as a result of the experience. The three sites include two in Texas and one in New York, two of the states with the largest populations of K-12 Emergent Bilinguals (EBs) in the U.S. Texas has 17.1% of the nation's EB students, and New York has 8.7% (National Center

for Education Statistics, 2019). Each of the three programs had differing goals and student demographics, with one serving inservice teachers of TESOL at the graduate level; another serving both inservice and preservice teachers of ESL and bilingual education; and yet another, future bilingual teachers of English and Spanish. However, all teachers were engaged in training focused on working effectively with EBs (sometimes also referred to as English Language Learners, or ELLs) in U.S. schools.

Research Questions

As such, the aim of the current project was to determine the impact of the study abroad experience on the participant teachers' developing CMLA. Thus, the research question for the study asks: In what ways does a study abroad experience (including language study, homestay, volunteering in schools) affect teachers' CMLA? and, In what ways do the principles of CMLA serve as a useful frame to understand both study abroad program design and its impact on participants?

The Sites and Context

The three sites, participants, program goals and program duration are described in Table 1: Program Sites and Context.

Table 1. Program Sites and Context

Site	Participants	Program Goals	Program Duration
Costa Rica	Spanish/English bilingual pre-service teachers from North Texas (*N=27)*	Understanding of second language principles; developing academic Spanish; raising teachers' multicultural awareness through coursework, homestay, and reflective practice in schools	Three weeks
Dominican Republic	In-service teachers seeking TESOL Certification in New York (*N=20)*	Better understanding of teaching English in global contexts; deepening an appreciation for Dominican history, education, and culture through engagement in schools and cultural experiences	Five days
Mexico	Pre-service ESL and bilingual teachers and future teacher educators from South Texas (*N=9)*	Participating in culture and language classes (Spanish or Zapotec); identifying "glocal" diversity of cultural and linguistic practices; relating multilingualism to schooling	Five weeks

Procedures

The data for the current project were collected in conjunction with study abroad programs at the three institutions over two academic years. While participants in each of the study abroad programs had varied responsibilities in the program, they all studied language in situ and had some university responsibilities, ranging from a full university course of readings, assignments, and assessments, to nominal work such as completing surveys based on their learning in the

study abroad context. All of the participants carried out some level of fieldwork in local schools in the study abroad countries.

All participants completed surveys based on the CMLA approach (García, 2017) and responded three times: Pre-trip, Mid-trip, and Post-trip. The Pre-trip survey included two parts. The first included demographic information related to the participants' beliefs and backgrounds in advance of the trip, including their language learning experience (in their L1, primary L2, and any others), proficiency in languages, and hopes and expectations about the trip. The second part of the pre-trip survey asked questions parsed out within the categories of CMLA, beginning with the three categories of TLA: Domain 1: User, Domain 2: Analyst, and Domain 3: Teacher; as well as CMLA specific questions: Domain 4: Plurilingualism, Domain 5: Linguistic Imperialism, and Domain 6: Social Use of Language.

Mid-trip survey questions were organized within the same categories, and asked questions regarding what participants were learning with regards to language structures and systems (Analyst domain), what teaching methods were observed in the local schools (Teacher domain), and what were language attitudes or varieties present among the local people and linguistic landscape (User domain), among others. Lastly, the Post-trip survey connected Pre-trip responses to the study abroad experiences with questions related to each domain, and asked how the participants' opinions regarding language, teaching, plurilingualism, etc., had changed over the course of the experience. Surveys were administered through Google docs and participants were expected to respond as a component responsibility of their study abroad experience. Depending on the university site, surveys were assigned as class work for university courses, or as an optional task to document participants' learning. Responses were short answer and open ended and participants had the option of writing as much or as little as they desired.

Data were collected via the online platform and combined. Iterative coding cycles (Saldaña, 2013) using *a priori* codes from the CMLA literature were undertaken by the research team, with discussion of codes among researchers to promote joint probability of agreement. Via the iterative cycles of *a priori* and emergent coding, related themes were derived from the data. While a substantial amount of data were generated by these projects, for the present study we focus on two key themes that correspond to the CMLA literature base: language use and practices (User Domain) and greater sociopolitical awareness of the power dynamics that shape the aforementioned language practices.

Costa Rica

Program Design

This grant-funded study abroad program was created for pre-service bilingual teachers– undergraduate students who plan to become elementary or middle school educators in dual language (Spanish/English) contexts. The bilingual certification these future teachers are pursuing includes teaching ESL as well as language arts, math, science, and social studies content in grades Pre-kindergarten through 6th or 4th through 8th. The larger program in which they participate in is called PIONERAS, which stands for Professional Improvement through Optimization of Native-language Education and the Realization of Academic/familial

Symbiosis. The PIONERAS program is a concerted effort to address the shortage of highly qualified bilingual educators, particularly in the state of Texas. Because most of those future teachers seeking initial bilingual teaching certification have not had access to high quality dual language programs that aimed for full biliteracy development, the teacher candidates were developing confidence using Spanish for academic and professional purposes. That is, although many of the future teachers in the program were enrolled in bilingual classes in early elementary school, they were transitioned to all-English classes by second or third grade.

To support the future bilingual teachers' language development, the PIONERAS program consisted of five teacher education courses taught in nearly 100 percent Spanish. The first of 5 (three-credit hour) courses presented the academic language needed to teach all content areas in grades PreK-8 in Spanish. The following four courses focused on bilingual education programs and methods, second language acquisition, bilingual processes, and assessment. Study abroad is the culminating experience of their one-year of participation in the PIONERAS program.

After completing the coursework, the students spent three weeks in a small beach town in Costa Rica where they lived with families, took Spanish courses for twenty hours a week, and volunteered at local schools. The two faculty participated alongside the students during the time abroad and sought to model various aspects of language learning. The data presented in the current study came from two cohorts of students: one group in 2018 and the other in 2019.

Participants. All identify as Latina and are bilingual to different degrees. Although most of them considered themselves English-dominant, a small minority were still acquiring English as an additional language due to moving to the U.S. during the past few years. They represented simultaneous, sequential, and balanced, bilinguals. They attended a Hispanic-Serving Institution where they were within one-two years from graduating with a Bachelor's degree and bilingual teacher certification.

Evidence of CMLA development

Awareness of Language Practices. Based on responses, Spanish is considered an L1 for most of the participants, while some are simultaneous bilinguals, yet all of their parents and caregivers spoke Spanish when they were young. The pre-survey indicated that they wanted to improve their Spanish skills as well as gain cultural experiences, yet it also suggested that they view language and culture as two distinct entities. At the end of the trip, students expressed how they had gained awareness of Spanish grammar and how they had grown their vocabulary. One survey response states: "After learning about verb tenses in Spanish, I have realized that the language is very complex." The participants shared that they also gained confidence in their ability to use Spanish: "Before this experience I was scared to talk or write in Spanish because I thought people would judge me because I would not write it or speak it correctly." This comment suggests that there is a need to redress historical oppression many have experienced as Spanish-speakers in the U.S.

Regarding language, students also noted how they learned new language varieties and became more aware of dialects, including their own, during their trip. One remarked on the dialectal

differences she noticed in the speech of the locals, while another noted: "I just find it very interesting how the people around town can tell by the way I talk that I am not from here. They usually always say to me that I am from Mexico or Viva Mexico. I do not know how they do it or how they can differentiate because I can't."

Awareness of Sociopolitical Contexts of Language. Before the trip, students related issues of language and power to their own personal experiences–Spanish-speakers in the U.S. who sometimes felt discriminated or stereotyped when they spoke in Spanish. However, after the trip, they related sociopolitical issues of language on a more global scale. One student explains:

After visiting a country that holds the Spanish language in high esteem, ***I am much prouder of my bilingual abilities****. In Costa Rica, people value Spanish and consider it a large part of their cultural identity, and I am glad to be part of the Spanish-speaking community. In a country like the United States, in which a second language like Spanish is seen with contempt, it is crucial that bilingual students understand that* ***knowing another language is not something to be embarrassed about****. I hope to bring a feeling of pride to my future classroom and teach my students that they have the power to change the way the world sees them. [Emphasis added]*

They noted ways that they could influence the power language/s hold in their classroom as bilingual teachers. This is a first step to them becoming language activists, which is a key goal of CMLA.

The Dominican Republic

Program Design

The participants in this study were engaged in a five-day, faculty-led, immersive experience in the Dominican Republic (DR), designed for in-service ESL teachers by a Masters TESOL program at a large urban school of education in New York City. The three objectives for the course were (1) developing greater awareness of the DR to inform them when working with the large Dominican population of ESL students in New York; (2) enhancing their appreciation of the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language vs. English as a second language; and (3) making principled observations of a different education system and drawing inferences for the home curriculum. The content of the program included a combination of cultural and professional components.

While in-country, participants spent five days immersed in cultural activities, guided tours, school site visits, presentations and panel discussions with prominent figures in the Dominican educational scene. Presentations from local experts served to provide participants with information about the social, cultural, and educational context of the DR. A key component to this program was school site visits in the host country, in which the participants, working teachers from the US, were paired up with working EFL teachers from the DR at a school site that attempted to be reflective of the participant's interests and teaching experience/grade level. Participants first toured and observed all participating schools. They then spent 4 days at their assigned school site, allowing them to shadow and ask questions of their host teachers.

Additionally, participants took an excursion to different regions of the country to appreciate its natural beauty, community challenges along the Haitian border and learn about settings outside of the capital city, where the program took place. Participants stayed in hotel lodging in the colonial center of the capital city, Santo Domingo. Two local educational development groups, Educa and the DR TESOL affiliate, provided support with logistics for travel and cultural excursions and supported the participants with incidental needs and questions.

Participants. All participants taught English learners in either K-12 or adult settings, in ESL self-contained classes as well as in special education and/or content-area courses. 17 of the participants had worked with Dominican students before the study abroad program. Four of the participants had visited the country only on vacation or in a resort and the others had never traveled there. Participants were majority Caucasian (13, 12 females, 1 male), 2 participants were African American, one was Haitian-American, 1 African (male), 2 Asian, and 1 Dominican. About 5 of the participants were native or highly proficient Spanish speakers, another 10 had from low-intermediate to intermediate levels of proficiency, and about 5 had not studied Spanish.

Evidence of CMLA development

The aspects of CMLA that were most salient in the data of participating teachers in the DR course appeared to be that of an increased appreciation for bilingualism/plurilingualism and for the hegemonic role of English in global settings. Due to the design of the program which was short-term and not inclusive of Spanish language lessons, these are two areas which seem to have been most impacted.

Awareness of Language Practices. One of the benefits of their time in Dominican EFL classrooms was the chance for participants to experience a sort of walking through the mirror version of their own experiences as ESL teachers in the U.S. They commented on how they related to the English teachers in the DR who tried to get students engaged with learning a second language.

Our school visits allowed me to accomplish that goal and to see that we share many of the same challenges. My host teacher struggles with getting her students to appreciate the importance of learning English just as I struggle to help my students understand the benefits of learning Spanish, and ***we each must constantly be working to find ways to help our students use the language they are acquiring in meaningful ways*** *while also balancing second language learning with instruction in the home language. [Emphasis added]*

Participants also found that there was much to learn about Dominican history and culture that often gets subsumed into a monolithic "Latino" category. Even the one Dominican teacher who participated shared that she had never once learned some of the facts about early settlers in New York being Dominican, going back to the 1600's.

I believe that there is a huge lack of understanding about Latino culture and about the immigrant experience, as well as a great deal of ignorance about the importance of speaking more than one language, and the value that having another culture and other life experiences brings to the classroom. We have to do everything we can to combat these negative stereotypes.

In this example, the participant, who in the program is positioned as an English language teacher, notes the importance of multilingualism, as well as understanding the immigrant experience. This lends itself to evidence that study abroad promotes teacher thinking beyond simply, "how can I teach my students English?" to the factors that underpin the language learning experience holistically.

Awareness of Sociopolitical Contexts of Language. At the Museum of the Dominican Man (the natural history museum), participants were struck by a particular exhibit focused on the Taino language. They learned more about the Taino words we use in everyday English–such as hurricane, hammock, canoe–and could see how Spanish had virtually extinguished this indigenous language. The power of English to do the same to the immigrant communities where they teach in New York was reinforced.

I notice power dynamics between languages. I believe it exists because of the history of conquerors, which caused the "powerful" languages such as English and Spanish to exist today. It is both oppressive and beneficial to speakers of certain languages because these speakers must learn the "powerful" languages, and sometimes forget or not speak their mother tongue. These speakers are also benefiting from learning these languages because they are given better opportunities.

There ***are absolutely power dynamics between languages****, and in my experience, they favor speakers of English. Teachers who do not share a language with their students will often insist that they use English, even when speaking to peers who do speak their language. Intentionally or unintentionally, this reinforces the idea that English is the language of dominance. The mere fact that so many teachers are monolingual English speakers also sends a subliminal message to students that English is the only language worth speaking. [Emphasis added]*

Examining teachers' reactions to their classroom observations as well as observations made in other spaces such as museums, at meals, and with Dominican colleagues through the lens of CMLA enabled the participants themselves to become increasingly aware of their own critical consciousness.

Mexico

Program Design

Participants in this program studied abroad in Oaxaca City, Oaxaca, Mexico over a four-week summer course which included three components: language learning (Spanish or *Zapoteco*, an indigenous Mexican language), service learning (teaching ESL at a local school or working with a cultural organization), and learning through cultural excursions (including local villages and archaeological sites such as *Monte Alban* and *Hierve el Agua*). The program was co-organized through the Facultad de Idiomas of the Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca (UABJO), the main public university in the state. Participants stayed with local homestay families so that they could both practice their Spanish proficiency and learn about Oaxacan culture and daily life. Primary objectives of the program included identifying key aspects of Mexican culture and experience them first-hand in country, developing an appreciation of the diversity of cultural practices and languages present in Oaxaca; connecting

cultural practices to schooling practices in general; applying ESL methods and strategies in classroom settings in Oaxaca through experiences in Mexican schools; and considering how knowledge of immigrant students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds may help teacher candidates address similar challenges that EBs may face in US schools.

Participants. Having three doctoral level students combined with six Master's level students and undergraduate students for a total of nine participants made this program unique. Due to their varying levels of preparation, mini-cohorts were established with each doctoral student leading a team of MA and undergraduate students. Throughout the month-long experience, students (six women and three men) met in these cohorts to discuss and reflect on their experiences, as well as plan and construct their final projects. In this way the Ph.D.-level students were able to practice their roles as future teacher educators by mentoring the MA and undergraduate students. Three of the participants self-identified as English-Spanish bilingual students from Mexico studying in the US, three identified as English-Spanish bilingual students from the US of Mexican-American heritage, and three others reported no specific cultural, linguistic or family ties to Mexico and thus wanted to improve their Spanish proficiency as a particular goal.

Evidence of CMLA Development

Due in part to the unique composition of the participant group, much of the evidence for CMLA development among the students who traveled to Oaxaca had to do with the dynamic, intersectional, sometimes contradictory development of identity as speakers/users of language. Participants in this group also demonstrated increased awareness of their own language practices as bilinguals, and how those might inform their future teaching contexts.

Awareness of Language Practices. Some students realized that their own bilingual language practices could be leveraged both to learn an additional third language, as well as increase their own empathy toward English learners and newcomers to the U.S.

My previous knowledge of learning English gives me the ability to comprehend the difficulty of pronouncing words as they are…learning Zapotec is more tricky due to the fact some words' pronunciation is hard [compared] to what I am used to. ***This reminds me more of what I have gone through with learning a second language. This gives me a fresher understanding of what students experience.*** *[Emphasis added]*

Awareness of Sociopolitical Contexts of Language. Two different students noted how both their physical appearances and language practices contributed to the ways in which people in Oaxaca responded to them. They noted both the ways in which language identity, and therefore language practices, appeared to be context-dependent, as well as how the dynamic nature of identity afforded them the opportunity to develop empathy for EB students attending US schools and/or living long-term in the US.

I think this [CMLA] might be an interesting topic for me being a Latino brown person who looks like the people here in Mexico. I believe that people think I am Mexican and therefore treat me as such, however, when I want next to [be] like a white person, people here perceive me as being a foreigner just like my colleague. That is an interesting dynamic to see because ***my***

identity seems to adapt or change depending on who I hang out with and what I do. *[Emphasis added]*

Another student noted:

With walking and going on excursions with my classmates the attitude of the local people changes with treating me as a foreigner with no connection from Mexican descendants. For example, they start talking to me in English. Compared to my experience when I am surrounded with my Mexican family I get treated as one of them. This treatment makes me feel odd but ***I get to understand how individuals feel in the United States that get assumed that they don't know English.*** *[Emphasis added]*

In both cases, the students are reflecting on how they are framed as having a certain linguistic and ethnic identity in the United States as Mexican-Americans, and then how that identity shifts as they spent time in Mexico.

Discussion and Implications

In the Costa Rica experience, participants' comments revealed a disconnect between their understanding of language and how language is learned, and how they actually learned new linguistic concepts. While participants indicated a lack of understanding of the connections between language and culture in the pre-trip survey, their post-trip responses showed they believed culture was intimately intertwined with the development of language and language learning. Moreover, participants shared how the experience in Costa Rica served to invoke pride in their native language and culture, and indeed, broadened their awareness of power dynamics between languages and language varieties (García, 2009) with the aim of using such awareness as a tool to support their EBs in future classrooms.

In the Dominican Republic, participants who believed themselves to be socially and politically aware and active, as well as familiar with international travel and Latin America, still were surprised at much of what they saw in Dominican schools and recognized the deficit lenses they held when engaging with Dominican students and families in New York schools (Shapiro, 2014). The lack of access to English learning in most public schools in the DR reinforced the understanding that power, privilege, and bilingualism are connected in some contexts and not in others.

In the Mexico context, participants were ultimately able to draw conclusions about how members of dominant language groups benefit from social structures of power—in this case, the relationship between Spanish and the indigenous languages of the region (Alim & Paris, 2017), and realized how their identity shifted relative to the socio-political context in which they found themselves (Varghese, Motha, Park, Reeves & Trent, 2016), as well as relative to their own bilingual language practices (i.e., when they chose to use English and Spanish, and why).

Conclusion and Implications

In each of the three study abroad experiences, there was evidence of participants developing and growing in their CMLA. Greater awareness of language practices and their sociopolitical context(s) emerged as relevant topics that revealed change and salience between the time periods before and after the study abroad experiences. These findings suggest that study abroad experiences may be additional means to promote the development of CMLA among current and future educators of language minoritized students, as they will need to be particularly aware of language practices and the influence of sociopolitical factors on language use and dynamics in school systems both in the United States and abroad.

These projects, taken together, represent a new type of mission and focus for TESOL professionals engaged in teaching abroad experiences. In particular, they reinforce the need, within program design, to consider:

- The need for skilled faculty facilitation. If teachers sojourn on their own, there will be less opportunity for them to engage in critical reflection. This could result in students being able to enter and exit their experiences merely reinforcing their biases.

- The importance of critical prompts. Teachers can challenge pre-existing beliefs if the program is designed to do so. Whether through journal inquiries, questionnaires, or seminars, teachers can enhance their CMLA if the prompts invite them to do so.

- The context of home and visited countries. Choosing who will be the audience for the TESOL teacher study abroad course (those with less opportunity to access these experiences) and selecting where the course will take place (identifying less-frequently visited spaces) can generate great energy for professional learning.

- The role of colonization in English language teaching. Against any backdrop, program designers must full-on address the history of imperialism and the monetization of English language teaching as a field. This honesty creates the possibilities for language awareness that is critical and consciously multilingual.

English teachers in the U.S. stand to particularly benefit from study abroad experiences that possess such design elements, and can then make direct connections back to their own multilingual learning contexts.

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