

## A Preservice Teacher's Experiences Teaching English Abroad: From ESL to EFL

Experiencias de una profesora en formación con la enseñanza del inglés en el extranjero: cambio de contextos

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Although an international teaching practicum is assumed to broaden teacher candidates' cultural, linguistic, and pedagogical knowledge, the nature of this growth and its relation to teacher education practices have yet to be fully explored. Using a sociocultural perspective and drawing on the concepts of teacher socialization and a growth mindset, this qualitative case study investigates the experiences of a U.S. preservice teacher teaching English in a Mexican primary school. Analysis of teaching observations, the participant's reflections, and an interview revealed the teacher's growing sensitivity to the teaching context. She gradually recognized the differences between teaching English in the two countries, prompting a shift in pedagogy to one more compatible with teaching English as a foreign language. The importance of teaching context on teacher socialization is also examined.


*Keywords:* growth mindset, international preservice teacher, sociocultural perspective, teacher socialization

Aunque se supone que la práctica profesional de enseñanza de estudiantes internacionales amplía el conocimiento cultural, lingüístico y pedagógico de los docentes en formación, la naturaleza de este crecimiento y su relación con las prácticas de formación docente no se han explorado completamente. Desde una perspectiva sociocultural basada en la socialización docente y la mentalidad de crecimiento, este estudio de caso investiga las experiencias de una maestra estadounidense en formación que enseña inglés en una escuela en México. El análisis de datos reveló la creciente sensibilidad de la maestra hacia el contexto educativo y su reconocimiento gradual de las diferencias en la enseñanza del inglés entre dos países, lo que representa un cambio de su postura pedagógica. Se discute la importancia del contexto en la socialización docente.

*Palabras clave:* maestro en prácticas internacionales, mentalidad de crecimiento, perspectiva sociocultural, socialización docente

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## Introduction

Opportunities for study abroad are often limited for foreign language teacher candidates<sup>1</sup> in the US and Latin America, who typically have a prescribed course of study with little room for out-of-country travel and study. International teaching practicum can offer teacher candidates the dual benefits of living and teaching abroad while meeting at least partial requirements for teacher licensure at their home universities. It is often assumed that an international teaching practicum broadens teacher candidates' cultural, linguistic, and pedagogical knowledge. However, this growth and its connection to teacher education practices must be fully understood. Using a combination of survey research and qualitative methods, multiple studies have examined the impact of international field experiences on student teachers' personal growth as teachers and on their subsequent teaching (e.g., Egeland, 2016; Shiveley & Misco, 2015; Stachowski & Sparks, 2007). Several other studies describe study abroad or teaching experiences in a Latin American context by U.S. preservice teachers, primarily in Mexico (Marx & Pray, 2011; Santamaría et al., 2009; Sharma et al., 2013; Wessels et al., 2011) or in the US (Viáfara-González & Ariza-Ariza, 2015), where Colombian student teachers were working and teaching abroad. These studies used qualitative approaches to data analysis.

This case study also uses a qualitative paradigm to investigate the experiences of a U.S. student teacher teaching English as a foreign language (EFL)<sup>2</sup> in a primary school in central Mexico. A unique aspect of this study is that it draws on the concepts of teacher

socialization (M. C. Bronson & Watson-Gegeo, 2008; Zeichner & Gore, 1990) and a growth mindset (P. Bronson & Merryman, 2009; Dweck, 2007, 2017) from a sociocultural perspective (Moll, 2014; Ohta, 2017) to explore this student teacher's experience. In the following sections, we summarize the rationale for using a sociocultural approach and then outline the two theoretical concepts that guided the study. Next, we present our findings after describing the methodology and framework for analyzing the data. Finally, we discuss these results and consider the implications for understanding the impact of international teaching practicums and teacher socialization on educators and preservice teachers.

## Review of Literature

This study takes a sociocultural approach to study one preservice teacher's learning-to-teach experience in central Mexico. After outlining the major tenets of a sociocultural perspective, we examine two constructs that guided our study: teacher socialization and a growth mindset.

## A Sociocultural Approach

Within ESL/EFL teaching, there is a rich tradition of research on teacher education that has evolved from the transmission of skills and techniques (e.g., Celce-Murcia, 1991) to a sociocultural perspective that emphasizes how the context of language teaching influences teacher thought and behavior (Freeman, 2016; Freeman & Johnson, 2004; Freeman & Richards, 1996; Johnson & Golombek, 2016). This approach is grounded in the belief that knowledge is constructed socially (Moll, 2014; Vygotsky, 1986) through dialogue and interaction with the help of others or through tools such as journals or reflection. Socially constructed interactions affect how we see and understand the world within the situated contexts in which they occur (Vygotsky, 1986). For student teachers, common sources of socially constructed interactions occur with

<sup>1</sup> In this article, we will use the terms "preservice teacher," "student teacher," and "teacher candidate" interchangeably to refer to teachers who are beginning to teach.

<sup>2</sup> EFL refers to English teaching in a context where the dominant language is not English—such as Spanish in Mexico—while English as a second language (ESL) describes English language teaching in a context where English is the dominant language, such as in the United States.

cooperating teachers, university supervisors who observe the student teacher, and other student teachers. Reflective tools and interactions between the student teacher and the cooperating teacher and between the student teacher and other observers provided rich language data sources in this study.

### **Teacher Socialization**

Teacher socialization is an ongoing process that starts with exposure to teaching in pre-student teaching field experiences, continues throughout the teaching practicum and one's teaching career, and ends when practicing teachers retire. It describes how preservice teachers become participating members of a group of teachers and learn classroom practices and shared norms of behavior (Zeichner & Gore, 1990). Through teacher socialization, career-entry teachers learn valuable lessons on "how to teach and all the demands associated with teaching" (Farrell, 2001, p. 49) about the specifics of teaching contexts, norms of interaction, classroom routines, and other daily practices. Staton (2008) characterizes teacher socialization as "a complex, communicative process by which individuals selectively acquire the values, attitudes, norms, knowledge, skills, and behaviors of the teaching profession and of the particular school or educational culture in which they seek to work" (p. 4990). This process begins with field experiences as part of their coursework for preservice teachers in Mexico and the US. It culminates in the teaching practicum leading to certification as a teacher. Additionally, as part of teacher socialization, preservice teachers of language must learn the pedagogy of language teaching and language use, or when and how to use the target language.

Mesa-Villa (2017) notes that teacher socialization has consequences if the process of socialization is incomplete or not accepted: "[It] involves a critical transition in which teachers may reject, accept, or adapt to the school culture, and its outcomes permeate

teachers' feelings and determine their decision of staying in an organization or in the profession" (p. 85). When preservice teachers ignore or are unaware of the accepted norms of behavior, the potential consequences can be severe. This critical transition is also relevant to international student teaching programs outside the student teacher's familiar teaching contexts. International student teachers need to be aware of differences between their home and host countries in school culture and norms of behavior, which contribute to teacher socialization. To summarize, learning how to teach and understanding school culture are tasks shared by all beginning teachers, but learning and using the target language is also part of the socialization process for language teachers.

### **A Growth Mindset**

The effects of growth vs. fixed mindsets on learning were introduced by psychologist Carol Dweck (2007, 2017; Yeager & Dweck, 2012) and popularized in psychology and education by Dweck and others (e.g., Bronson & Merryman, 2009; Romero, 2015). A growth mindset is characterized by the belief that intelligence is not static and can be developed through personal effort, practical strategies, or help from others when necessary (Romero, 2015). It is not the same as believing that effort alone, especially doing more of the same, is enough. It also requires a willingness to make changes and discern strategies that are likely to be effective. In contrast, a fixed mindset is the belief that intelligence is inborn and unchangeable (you are either smart or not). In schools, the importance of a growth mindset lies in its consequences for how students experience school and respond to adverse conditions and unexpected setbacks. As Romero (2015) reports,

Researchers have found that one way to help students develop a growth mindset is by teaching them about neuroscience evidence that shows the brain is malleable. In these programs, students learn that the brain is like a muscle—when you challenge it, it gets stronger.

Importantly, students also learn that sheer effort is not enough. The right strategies and advice from others are equally important for strengthening the brain. (p. 3)

A positive consequence of a growth mindset is that students are more likely to be resilient when faced with challenges. Resilience overlaps with a growth mindset and has been widely studied by teachers. It can be defined generally as “the work teachers do to positively adapt to adverse situations” (Clarà, 2017, p. 83). A growth mindset, however, goes beyond productive adaptation to viewing intelligence as dynamic and malleable. Because teacher candidates who teach abroad frequently encounter expected and unexpected challenges, both constructs—growth mindset and resilience—are relevant, but our focus here is on a growth mindset. Student teachers may respond differently when confronted with teaching challenges abroad, exhibiting a growth mindset in some challenges but not in others.

## Method

In this qualitative case study, we explore the experiences of a student teacher, “Elena,” in two contexts: the US, where she completed her teacher education program, and Mexico, where she taught EFL as a student teacher for eight weeks. As noted by Richards (2003), two tenets of qualitative research are to “study human actors in natural settings, in the context of their ordinary, everyday world” and to “seek to understand the meanings and significance of these actions from the perspective of those involved” (p. 10). We aimed to understand Elena’s development as a preservice teacher in Mexico, including her challenges and responses to them.

Three techniques provided the data for the case study: (a) weekly reflections, (b) teacher observations, and (c) a semi-structured post-teaching practicum interview. These sources triangulated the data (O’Donoghue & Punch, 2003). Elena’s eight weekly reflections, which were part of her assignments during her stay in Mexico, consisted of a general description of her EFL teaching context (Week 1), a narrative of highs and

lows for that week (Weeks 2–3, 5–7), a mid-point reflection (Week 4), and an end-of-teaching-abroad reflection (Week 8). The weekly reflections were emailed to the U.S. university supervisor, who responded with comments and questions. Three teacher observations were completed in Mexico, two by the in-country program director in Mexico and one by the university supervisor while on a professional visit there. The university supervisor conducted the semi-structured interview in early December (audiotaped and later transcribed) after Elena had returned to the US to finish her teaching abroad (see Appendix for the interview questions).

## Participant

At the start of the study, Elena was an Elementary/Middle Education and ESL undergraduate at a medium-sized U.S. university in the upper Midwest. Elena’s mother is from Hungary, and her father is from Argentina. Elena grew up in the US, speaking Hungarian, English, and Spanish. Her multilingual and multicultural background differed from most students at the university, who are predominantly white monolingual English speakers. However, she attended schools in English and considered herself to be English-dominant. In the fall, Elena spent the first nine weeks of the semester in Mexico, where she taught EFL for eight weeks. After teaching abroad, she returned to the US for the remaining nine weeks of her teaching practicum in an ESL context, completing the practicum in January of the following year.

## Teaching Context

Elena’s school placement was at a public primary school in a medium-sized city in central Mexico, where she taught EFL in 50-minute periods in Grades 5 and 6. She worked closely with an experienced cooperating teacher in EFL, “Carlos.” In contrast with educational settings in the US—where classrooms usually have all the materials at the teacher’s disposal—EFL teachers in this state of Mexico travel from classroom to classroom, carrying their materials with them. Thus, they must carefully consider the time when setting up the classroom.

## Data Analysis

After collecting the data at the end of the teaching practicum, we followed Clarke and Braun's (2013) thematic approach for analysis. This flexible approach consists of six steps: (a) familiarization with the data, (b) coding, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) writing up (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p. 121). We read through the three data sources various times to understand the data. Next, we coded the data and we came up with relevant patterns. Then, we conferred to discuss and compare themes and identify any patterns before defining the final themes for the write-up. Three global themes were identified: (a) the beginning of teaching abroad, (b) lessons learned while teaching abroad, and (c) the recognition of contextual differences in teaching. Using the same thematic approach discussed above, several subthemes within the themes of "lessons learned" and "contextual differences" were also identified and discussed in the next section.

Having established these themes, we recognized that they suggest a chronological order, with examples illustrating the first theme, "beginning to teach," occurring before the two other themes. However, examples of "lessons learned" did not always occur chronologically before the third theme, "contextual differences." For the sake of convenience, however, they are presented in this order in the following sections: (a) the beginning of teaching abroad, (b) lessons learned while teaching abroad, and (c) the recognition of contextual differences in teaching.

## Results and Discussion

The three themes mentioned above helped organize the reporting of results and frame our discussion of the key findings. Because we looked at growth mindset and teacher socialization in one student teacher over time, it logically follows to report the results chronologically, even though the three themes do not consistently follow this order. Limitations of the study are considered at the end of this section.

## The Beginning of Teaching Abroad

As a second-year student at her university, Elena first heard about international preservice teaching options in a class that was part of her ESL licensure program. It captured her interest and remained an ongoing goal throughout her undergraduate program. As she shared, "when I was a sophomore, someone brought it up...and I remember hearing [about] it and thinking, 'I have to do that; I *have* to do it'" (Interview).

Once in Mexico, Elena started her teaching abroad experience in the first week of September by observing EFL classes taught by her cooperating teacher, Carlos. From the start, she noticed the small size of the classrooms and the large number of students: "There is not a lot of extra space, sometimes barely enough for the teacher to squeeze past the students to get to the other end of the room" (Weekly reflections, Week 1). She also noted the minimal classroom materials. In her words,

The students are required to have a notebook specifically for English lessons, an English-Spanish dictionary, and a "desire to learn." . . . This I see as a positive challenge, one that will make me think outside of the box when it comes to lessons and assignments. (Weekly reflections, Week 1)

In the excerpt above, Elena shows early evidence of a growth mindset (Dweck, 2007, 2017; Yeager & Dweck, 2012) in embracing classroom challenges and openness to creative solutions. Most classrooms Elena and Carlos taught were overcrowded, making movement and group work difficult. Classrooms were equipped with limited materials, such as textbooks and whiteboards. Interactive whiteboards were sometimes present but often not functional. In the EFL context, Elena was flexible and worked hard to find alternatives.

During her first week, Elena observed classes and began to help out with teaching. Then, she experienced a critical incident, which influenced

her teaching from that point on. Widely used in research on teaching, critical incident narratives are stories that are accessible and instructive, often related to what happens when expectations go awry and preconceived notions no longer hold (Farrell & Baecher, 2017; Tripp, 1993). Although critical incidents in teaching can lead to self-questioning and discomfort in individuals, they can also promote critical learning and paradigm shifts that spur new ways of thinking and behaving.

Knowing that her 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders had taken EFL classes since Grade 1, Elena assumed that their English level would be above a basic level and talked to them at a higher level. She soon realized that this expectation did not hold:

The first week I was handed the classes. I was very unaware of how low the students' English level was. I had observed it, but I didn't think it would impact my teaching so much. And I got up in front of the classes thinking, if I spoke just slower, they would understand. And it was a big mistake on my part. (Interview)

Elena was caught off-guard and then questioned her assumption that students would understand her instruction in English if she only spoke more slowly. Realizing her misconception, she soon used some additional strategies to remedy the situation: speaking more straightforwardly and using cognates, gestures, and repetition. By the third week, she had incorporated the strategies of gesture and mime into her teaching, as evidenced in the first teacher observation of her classes. In subsequent observations, her teaching included using more straightforward terms, cognates, and repetition. This critical incident and Elena's subsequent adjustments show that she was able to identify and implement more effective strategies to promote student understanding, another indicator of a growth mindset. In the next section, we explore the lessons that Elena learned.

## Lessons Learned While Teaching Abroad

In Week 8, Elena was asked to reflect on her teaching abroad experience and identify lessons that struck her as valuable. The theme of "lessons learned" arose partially from her responses to this final weekly reflection but also includes other "lessons" that she recounted earlier in her weekly reflections and later in the interview. Within "lessons learned," we identified three subthemes: adapting to teaching in Mexico, putting a spin on teaching, and less is more.

### Adapting to Teaching in Mexico

During her eight weeks of teaching abroad, Elena gradually moved from a U.S.-based ESL pedagogy to a foreign language pedagogy (EFL) grounded in the local public-school context. This shift was partly due to adapting to the teaching conditions in an EFL context: large class sizes, small classrooms, and limited technology. Her adaptations were evident in her weekly teaching reflections and post-teaching practicum interview. We focus on the practices of "signing off" and "making do" to illustrate Elena's shifts in pedagogy.

In the second week, Elena signed students' notebooks to indicate they had completed the homework. Signing off was done to "credit" students for completing the homework without necessarily evaluating it, a practice born out of necessity. EFL teachers in this Mexican school and other public schools often teach five classes of 35–45 students, or at least 175 students, until mid-day, and then, in some cases, teach at a second school in the afternoon where they have a similar load. As Elena shared: "This week I checked the homework assigned from the previous week, which was to complete the sentence 'I should be patient when...,' and then had the students, if they wanted to, share their sentences aloud to their classmates" (Weekly reflections, Week 2). Signing off was a practice Elena continued to use throughout her teaching, as evidenced in the second and third teacher observations.

Another practice that Elena adopted, again out of necessity, was “making do.” As an example, the EFL teaching materials had not yet arrived well into the second month of the school year, which is not uncommon in Mexico (Ramírez-Romero & Sayer, 2016). Elena’s response, not surprisingly, was one of tempered frustration.

I will continue to prompt the students in English and begin working alongside Teacher Carlos more in the upcoming week, focusing on lessons and themes in their workbooks (which have not arrived yet). If the books still have not arrived by next week, Carlos and I will work through his book and do examples and practice on the board, in their English notebooks, and verbally as a whole group, in smaller groups, in pairs, and individually. Basically, we will work with what we have to keep the students learning and practicing . . . a challenge I continue to find to be a test of educational creativity and patience, true to the month’s very value. (Weekly reflections, Week 2)

This excerpt shows Elena trying to put the best construction on a pedagogical challenge: teaching without books. Later, when reflecting on her teaching abroad experience, Elena would positively view these bare-bones teaching conditions. Both the practices of signing off and making do illustrate how the Mexican teaching context affected Elena’s socialization as a teacher; she began to adopt local practices into her teaching. Although some of these practices were rooted in necessity, adopting local practices in the first few weeks of preservice teaching provided early evidence of Elena’s gradual pedagogical shift from ESL to EFL, an important outcome of her teaching in Mexico.

#### **Putting a Spin on Teaching**

While adapting some of her teaching practices to a Mexican context, Elena remained committed to using her approaches and ideas. An early example of putting her spin or stamp on teaching was choosing

to teach almost entirely in English. As she shared in her Week 2 reflection,

My goal is to teach an entire lesson solely in English and have the students responding in English as well. I do not think it is too much to aim for, but it will be a challenge to get the students comfortable enough with the language to do so on their own.

However, at times, teaching only in English proved to be a struggle. Her students were accustomed to using Spanish and producing only a minimum of English in their English classes. As she noted in her Week 3 reflections,

I know, however, that it is difficult to adjust to working . . . solely in a new language, but it still surprises me how many of the students understand and answer in Spanish but will refuse to use English. I think they have become accustomed to my cooperating teacher reverting to Spanish when he sees that the students are not understanding or putting in the effort to try to use their English during the lesson. I fear that if I use my Spanish the way my [cooperating teacher] uses his, that the students will stop attempting to use English all together since they will think that I know enough Spanish to use that instead.

After reading this reflection, the university supervisor encouraged Elena and offered ways to support her decision to use mostly English in her classes. Later in her Week 3 reflections, Elena acknowledged that she sometimes reverted to Spanish “in times of real need,” which shows how she revised her pedagogical goal to teach in English only so that students could understand instructions. Elena clearly articulated this modification in teaching in her Week 5 reflections:

I wanted them to feel as comfortable as possible using whatever English they did know, and whatever Spanish I knew. This worked well, and with each week, the students opened up more and more, offering answers and

translations to one another and to me. They successfully language brokered the classes so that everyone could understand and participate.

Elena found a middle ground where she and the students sometimes used Spanish to maximize comprehension and class participation, showing Elena's flexibility.

A second example of putting her spin on teaching occurred in Week 7 when Elena incorporated student/student dialogues and teacher modeling with Carlos into her teaching.

The students, in all sessions, completed a partner activity involving a sample dialogue as well as a self-created dialogue that they shared with their partner(s). . . . Students were able to ask and answer simple questions about each other's families by using their family terms, pronouns, and family trees throughout their conversations with each other. These conversations happened after Carlos, and I modeled the dialogue I had written on the board for the students to be able to follow along with. (Weekly reflections, Week 7)

From this reflection, it was evident that Elena was learning to use paired dialogues with students and to use her cooperating teacher to model oral language together. Previously, these were not standard practices in the EFL classes at the school.

By Week 3, Elena was ready to go beyond what her cooperating teacher was modeling and put her personal stamp on teaching. At the same time, however, she was mindful not to deviate too far from her cooperating teacher's style.

I do not want to stray too far from my cooperating teacher's teaching style since he will be left with the class for the rest of the year once I leave for [the US], but I do want to try some things out [on] my own to see how they do. . . . The plan is to follow Carlos' activity and lesson guide and the text chosen by the government while incorporating my own spin on how to present the

information and assignments to the students, and I can't wait to see how it goes. (Weekly reflections, Week 3)

Elena knows that her teaching time in Mexico is limited. However, she still wants to explore her practice and experiment, showing her sensitivity to the teaching context and her cooperating teacher.

### Less is More

The belief that "less is more" refers to Elena's reliance more on her "self" than on teaching resources, which became a guiding principle in her teaching. In the interview, she revealed:

I feel like I would be able to teach without being given anything, any supports. I liked that you had to feel like you were free-falling a little bit as a teacher [in Mexico]. I feel like there is a lot of support [from others], which is really helpful, but I *like* that I feel more empowered now. I feel like I would be able to teach without being given anything, any supports.

The supports, or resources she refers to above, include those commonly used in her university education courses and U.S.-based field experiences: textbooks, supplemental materials, manipulatives, technology, and videos, as well as other colleagues. Later in the interview, she acknowledged that adjusting to her "self" as the primary support system in teaching, that is working "out of your brain," was at least partly due to limited resources available to EFL teachers in the school:

There's a lot that's given to us [in the US]. And in Mexico, there's a lot of adjustment to working just out of your brain and maybe a book that they give you, *one book*, and a whiteboard, or a chalkboard. (Interview)

In this last excerpt, Elena seemed to understand that she had to approach her teaching from a "less is more" standpoint instead of what she was used to in the US. She also realized that this reliance on "self"



occurs over time, requires personal effort and resilience (Romero, 2015), and must be experienced to learn. Over time, the challenges of adjusting to teaching in the EFL context of Mexico, although creating temporary setbacks, strengthened her self-efficacy as a teacher and helped hone her teaching skills.

### Recognition of Contextual Differences in Teaching

The last theme that we identified, the recognition of contextual differences in teaching, is divided into two topics: (a) differences in teaching in Mexico and the US and (b) the role of technology in teaching.

#### Differences in Teaching in Mexico and the US

After returning to the US, Elena identified several ways that teaching differed in Mexico and the US, singling out the structure of classes and classroom discipline as two main differences. Elena described EFL classes in a public school in Mexico as structured by the curriculum and the textbook and, more importantly, limited by the heavy workload of many EFL teachers.

I think Carlos worked at three different schools, so let's say 120 students per school, three schools...that's a lot of students, a lot of work to grade, to take home, to look at. So, I think the English teachers realize that it's easiest if they just follow their curriculum that's given to them. And do just the minimum amount of work to get them through their jobs, which also then reflects onto the students because the students then see they can get away with not doing their work. (Interview)

Elena understood how the challenging teaching context in Mexican public schools affected pedagogical decisions. In such a teaching environment, the textbook becomes the syllabus for a class, and the heavy workload of EFL teachers in public primary schools drives what can realistically be taught, assigned, and graded.

In addition to workload, the issue of English as a non-graded subject in primary schools also emerged. This impacted how students viewed English as a school subject area and their motivation to complete assigned homework in her Grade 5–6 classes. As Elena noted,

I think the expectation of completing homework on time is not set in place, especially with English. To finish homework in an English classroom really yields no positive or negative consequence for the students, grade-wise...because a lot of the times, if there is a homework assigned, which it rarely is...they will just get a check even if the homework is right or wrong. (Interview)

The above two excerpts underscored Elena's awareness of the problematic effects of English as a non-graded subject and teachers' heavy workload on teachers and students. For teachers, these effects include constraints on their ability to teach the established curriculum and to assign and grade homework, and for students, the motivation or incentive to complete it.

In another area, classroom management, Elena saw stark differences between Mexican and U.S. classrooms. She was able to reflect on these differences after returning to the US to complete her preservice teaching.

In Mexico, they don't give the students a chance to act out. And if the students do act out, then the teachers are very quick to point out the student who is creating the disturbance. They'll make it very uncomfortable for that student and the students around them. I think it's one way of getting the students to stop. Here [in the US] I have found that classroom management techniques are kind of whole-class scale, so it's not really pointing the finger, but it's just kind of letting the whole class know that someone is creating a disturbance, but I'm not going to say who, because you don't want to make them feel uncomfortable...the disciplinary issues in Mexico are very teacher-oriented, like it's their discretion how they use their classroom management, whereas in the States I think it's very controlled by the school, by the system. (Interview)

This excerpt points to perceived cultural differences in responding to disruptive classroom behaviors. It is important to note that these are Elena's perceptions; cultural differences between the two countries are more complex. As a young preservice teacher in Mexico, Elena necessarily based her perceptions on her teaching experiences there, without the more nuanced understandings that come with a more extended stay. In Mexico, Elena saw that the misbehaving student is often called out and that the teacher calls on the collective good will of students to curb the problem behavior. She observed that calling out a student in the US is not sanctioned. Instead, a more systematic approach is emphasized through school- or district-wide classroom management programs or by incentivizing good behavior. This is another example of how teacher socialization and norms of classroom behavior change in different teaching contexts.

Elena related these differences in how teachers react to disruptive behaviors in Mexico and the US to her perceived differences in the level of respect ascribed to teachers in the two countries. As she stated,

The level of respect for teachers in the United States is horrendously low compared to what I saw in Mexico. Kids might talk in Mexico, they might goof around, they might be funny because they're kids, and—if the teacher commands their attention—they will listen. They'll listen again; they're easy to regroup. The issue is the number, the quantity of students. (Interview)

This comment again speaks to Elena's perceived cultural differences between the two countries. We see a student teacher grappling with the intersections between teacher workload, homework and grading policies, cultural and individual differences in classroom management, respect for teachers, and their impact on student learning. By the end of her teaching practicum, she is no longer thinking of it only in glowing terms and has acquired more nuanced views of teaching in Mexico and the US.

### The Role of Technology in Teaching

The role of technology and access to it varies widely in schools across the globe. This is also the case in Mexican as well as U.S. schools. During her stay in Mexico, Elena was immersed in classrooms with limited technology access (e.g., "one book and a whiteboard"). At the end of the interview, she shares her view on the role of technology in teaching:

I think that technology, if used correctly, can be very, very helpful within a classroom. But not even having access to it, and still teaching...effectively, that, I think, is the true test to see if you would be ready to teach at all.

Elena's view is unexpected and surprising as part of the "plugged-in" generation. Far from being committed to technology in the classroom and its importance as a teaching tool, as many of her peers would be, she assigns it a secondary, almost peripheral role. For Elena, teaching is primary. We see this in her brief description of "non-Chromebook days" when teaching back in the US.

I feel now that, with the preservice teaching that I'm doing, every student has a Chromebook, and I feel more comfortable teaching the days without the Chromebook at all. . . . Because when they have their computers, I see that the students get distracted, they're not doing what they need to do, they're not on task, they're not focused, they're not following the lesson plan we created. (Interview)

This is the voice of a student teacher who has learned not to rely on technology for teaching but to focus on the realities of the EFL context. It is also a comment on the distraction and potential limits of learning with electronic devices, mainly if not used optimally.

How did Elena arrive at this rather unconventional attitude towards technology in education, especially for a young teacher? We can only speculate, but we believe it is partly related to her limited access to technology during her teaching in Mexico. She learned by necessity to do without, so she used this to hone her teaching skills. She considered learning how to teach independently, a

strength no one could take away. This shows a confident, willing-to-work, and resilient beginning teacher in the early stages of teacher socialization, where she becomes aware of classroom practices (Zeichner & Gore, 1990).

### **Limitations of the Study**

In this case study, we have sought to portray Elena in a richly detailed manner through the twin lenses of (a) her voice in the weekly reflections and the post-student teaching interview and (b) our descriptions and perceptions in the teaching observations. In several ways, however, Elena is not a typical student teacher from a regional U.S. university in the Midwest and may not represent her predominantly white, monolingual student-teacher peers. She is multilingual (in varying degrees) in English, Hungarian, and Spanish; she is an experienced international traveler; and she possesses a degree of personal confidence unusual in preservice teachers that enabled her to meet substantial teaching challenges with resilience.

Because this research is a single case study, the findings cannot be generalized to other student teachers. However, Elena's challenges as a student teacher are typical of public schools in Mexico and other similar countries: small classrooms, large class sizes, and limited access to materials and technology. Her responses to these challenges show the range of possibilities that student teachers can experience in an EFL context in public schools in Mexico. Further research could expand the number of student teachers studied in Mexico or other countries, contributing to its generalizability.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Using a sociocultural perspective, this article explored the experiences of a US student teacher carrying out her teaching practicum in Mexico and how she adapted to the challenges of teaching abroad in an EFL context. A sociocultural approach emphasizes how a locally situated context influences thought and behavior; in this case, the thought and behavior of a beginning student teacher in a public primary school in Mexico. In the data, we found

a complex evolution of a beginning teacher educated in the US but began the teacher socialization process in an EFL context in Mexico (Zeichner & Gore, 1990). She became aware of the daily timetable and teaching routines, which included moving from classroom to classroom. She was challenged by the different teaching contexts (overcrowded classrooms, limited materials, and the low English level of her students). She changed her teaching practices to meet her students' needs, reflecting her ability to adapt to the changing teaching context and a growth mindset (Dweck, 2007, 2017).

Realizing the need to go beyond her university coursework and resources, Elena shifted her pedagogical stance from one rooted in ESL to one more compatible with the EFL setting. Two critical shifts in belief were that students should be exposed to and expected to use more English and that in classrooms with limited access to materials and technology, "less is more." These changes prompted Elena to reflect on her knowledge and belief system from an ESL perspective and take on a more proactive role as a teacher. She adjusted her teaching to an EFL context, starting from an ESL pedagogical base. Through self-reflection on her knowledge and belief system and her cooperating teacher's help, she adapted her teaching practices in many ways, including signing off, making do, and using cognates, gestures, and games. In addition, Elena developed her decision-making abilities, reflectivity, and confidence in teaching, as well as a greater awareness of her students' home culture and learning preferences. From these experiences and lessons learned, she became a much stronger teacher with a solid teaching and reflective skills repertoire, demonstrating her developing growth mindset and ability to navigate entry into the teaching profession in an EFL context.

Although the lessons Elena learned in this case study are not generalizable, understanding the context of her teaching in a Mexican public-school setting is relevant to other student teachers, teacher educators, and teacher supervisors at home and abroad. For student teachers, this study provides valuable insights into teaching in a

country from which the most significant proportion of English learners in the US come. Of crucial importance is teachers' awareness of their students' home cultures and preferred learning contexts and how both can affect learners' classroom behaviors, such as the willingness to interact with others. As part of the teacher socialization process, teacher educators and teacher supervisors can encourage teacher candidates to learn about their future students' home cultures, norms of behavior, and school settings to understand how immigrant students' experiences at school in their home country can affect their learning and expectations in the adopted country. Another possibility is to explore in-depth the differences and similarities between EFL and ESL during conversations of teacher education and even come up with possible solutions for challenging scenarios.

Because opportunities for international teaching are increasing, we encourage teacher educators and supervisors to host discussions of ESL vs. EFL teaching contexts so that teacher candidates better grasp the complexities between the two. Understanding the differences between these two contexts will help prepare beginning teachers to develop the necessary teaching skills, decision-making tools, reflectivity, and resilience to meet the challenges of teaching.

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## Appendix: Post-Teaching Practicum Interview

1. Reflect back on the pros and cons of the practicum in Mexico. What were the pros and cons?
2. Think of the process of being observed by two supervisors, working with your cooperating teacher in an international context, and preparing materials for the edTPA [an evaluation instrument for preservice teachers published by Pearson]. How did that go for you?
3. Were there any critical incidents that pushed you to make changes in your teaching practice? If so, explain.
4. What are 2–3 things you learned about yourself or about your teaching in Mexico?
5. What kinds of knowledge are needed to teach EFL successfully to upper elementary students in a Mexican school?
6. How do these types of knowledge compare to the U.S. context for teaching ESL in elementary or middle schools?
7. How do expectations for behavior and classroom management practices in the Mexican school compare to those of U.S. elementary or middle schools?
8. Do you have any recommendations for future teachers who would be placed in a similar school in Mexico?