



# TESOL Connections

Keeping English language professionals connected

## **Facilitating Transformative Intercultural Learning**

by [Roxanna M. Senyshyn](#)

At the 2018 TESOL Convention in Chicago, Illinois, USA, I presented a session on how to prepare for intercultural learning partnerships. The session attracted more than 75 participants, a testimony to the interest in the topic in both language education as well as the teacher preparation field. In this article, I build on that presentation and briefly share my experience implementing intercultural learning partnerships between advanced English learners (nonnative-speaking international students) and preservice teachers (native speakers of English). I justify why such active out-of-class experiential learning is beneficial in teacher education and share an activity/intervention that can serve as a way to engage in discussions about intercultural (with focus on interaction and communication) and cross-cultural (focus on comparing and contrasting) experiences and learning.

## **Partnerships With International Students to Support Intercultural Learning in Teacher Education**

Early in my career as the English as a second language (ESL) specialist, I taught first-year college composition courses designed for a recent immigrant population. My intent was to provide meaningful opportunities for my students to engage in writing reflective journals about their college experience. I soon discovered from the journals that students were lacking a sense of belonging on a commuter college campus and that they had powerful stories to share about themselves and their culture-crossing journeys. Collaboration with a colleague, who taught an upper level intercultural communication course, provided a meaningful opportunity to pair my second language (L2) composition students with her mostly senior business majors (and native-language [L1] speakers) for an out-of-class intercultural learning and transformation (see Senyshyn & Chamberlin Quinlisk, 2009).

As my career shifted toward teaching TESOL courses for preservice and in-service teachers, I still kept teaching a course or two for college English learners; presently, I teach concurrently a course for first-semester international students on intercultural communication and a course for undergraduate preservice teachers that centers on introduction to teaching English learners. This teaching match is intentional, and working with two groups of students who can benefit from each other has allowed me to bring the two cohorts together in intercultural learning partnerships.

I first implemented such an interclass partnership experience for international students and undergraduate preservice teachers in 2012 (see “[Abington International Conversation Partners Make World of Difference](#)”). The partnership project is based on one-on-one regular meetings over the period of several weeks where both partners involved are equally active participants in learning about each other and one another’s cultures and languages. This in turn provided an opportunity to research the impact of this transformative experience on both cohorts of students (see Senyshyn, 2018; Senyshyn, in press). Despite some resistance or hesitation and discomfort that L1 teacher candidates often experience initially and some logistical issues, such as finding a commonly suitable time to meet on a commuter campus, the intercultural learning experience proved to be beneficial for both cohorts.

## **Transformative Intercultural Learning**

Transformative intercultural learning is a journey, and I strive to provide opportunities for my preservice teachers to experience transformative learning moments both in and outside of the classroom. There are many reasons why such learning is important in teacher education, especially when one of today’s major goals is to prepare professionals who are capable of teaching and learning in linguistically and culturally diverse spaces and advocate for equity and inclusion for diverse students, including English learners.

### **Raising Awareness**

Demographically, the K–12 student population has been increasing significantly, while the cadre of teachers has largely remained stable over the years. Moreover, both social justice and critical teacher education require that prospective teachers engage in self-reflection and build awareness of their own identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, language), develop curricular and pedagogical practices that recognize and draw on their students’ linguistic and cultural diversity, and engage effectively with students (and their families) who are different from themselves. Finally, becoming a more globally aware professional, as stated in TESOL’s 2018 [Action Agenda for the Future of the TESOL Profession](#) (Priority Five), is equally important.

### **Recognizing Biases**

In addition to the aforementioned reasons, a major motivation for designing and implementing an intercultural learning partnership project for preservice teachers was to address unconscious biases and perceptions of differences both culturally and linguistically, such as attitudes of L1 speakers toward L2 speakers. Studies have shown that before teachers even have a conversation with a student, they have already formed their opinion about that student (Dee & Gershenson, 2017). In my experience in the classroom with preservice teachers, when it comes to language, L1 speakers sometimes have negative attitudes toward L2 speakers. For example, when asked to describe a typical (stereotypical) native and nonnative speaker of English, students generally provide more negative descriptors for nonnative speakers.

Studies also show that language awareness and language attitudes influence L1 speakers’ ability to understand L2 speakers (Grey & van Hell, 2017), that accents shape our perception of a

person (Rakic, Steffens, & Mummendey, 2010), and that L2 speakers benefit from interaction with L1 speakers who have more positive attitudes toward L2 speakers (Lippi-Green, 2012).

## **Engaging and Collaborating**

Raising awareness about accents and language in the classroom with my teacher candidates is important, but engaging in conversations with L2 international students over a sustained period of time allows them to raise their language awareness and learn how to adjust their own communication style and negotiate meaning with L2 speakers. In addition, providing structured contact spaces—as supported by Allport’s (1954) contact theory, which suggests that negative attitudes can be reduced through intergroup contact—allows L1 and L2 speakers to interact and work collaboratively toward common goals, which has a positive effect on both counterparts (see Kang, Rubin, & Lindemann, 2014).

## **Planning Interventions**

Meeting these goals when preparing a rather homogeneous group (predominantly White females, monolingual native speakers with little cross-cultural experience) of undergraduate students in an elementary education program for linguistic and cultural diversity can be a challenging task, especially if that is done within one course. Some interventions to raise awareness can be completed in 20 minutes, and others require more time. I strive for both: small active learning opportunities in class and more long-term intercultural learning outside of the classroom, all involving debriefing and written reflection.

## **Preparing for Intercultural Learning in Partnerships: An Exercise**

I initially designed the following activity to help students who were planning to travel abroad experience culture shock without leaving the classroom. I have since adapted the activity for my teacher education courses and have used it as a starting point or a midproject activity to facilitate student learning in their intercultural partnerships, and it can be adapted for other audiences as well. The activity is called The Numbers Exercise ([Appendix](#)).

The idea for the activity also came because many people think that math is a universal language and that it is easy to do math in another language without delving deeper into it and its symbolic representation.

## **Purpose of the Activity**

The main purpose of this activity is to help teacher candidates understand, empathize, and experience perspective-taking. Perspective-taking techniques, according to the research, are a way to address attitudes and reduce biases in L1 and L2 communication (Subtirelu & Lindemann, 2014). Specifically, The Numbers Exercise is intended to spark discussion regarding several different aspects of intercultural communication, including working with international students and language learners, recognizing and being aware of linguistic and cultural differences, and experiencing what it might be like to try functioning in a new social context. The unique feature of the exercise is that the symbols with which students are familiar do not

carry the same meaning any longer, and they have to adapt to something new and work on completing the activity under time pressure, as explained in the activity directions.

## **Completing the Activity**

**Time:** 15–20 minutes

**Materials:** Copies of [the activity](#) distributed to students face down

Once all students receive a copy of the activity, direct them to turn the page and begin working on the activity. Do not remind them to read directions, and there is no need to time the activity, unless you will ask them to do it again to check how practice leads to better outcomes. Walk around and observe how students complete the activity and how they react to what they are experiencing. After two or three students complete the task and raise their hands, tell the rest of the group to stop. At that point, invite all participants to reflect on what happened and on their experience in the actual doing of the activity.

There are always a few participants who do not read the directions and proceed to complete the exercise only to realize, often by observing the reaction of their classmates (e.g., amusement, disbelief), that they have committed mistakes because they assumed similarity and did not familiarize themselves with the new rules for doing the activity. This, too, raises some important discussions about individual differences and assumptions.

Reflection is the key step. The activity is only as good as the processing that takes place afterward.

## **Debriefing the Activity**

Display debriefing questions for students to reflect on individually and then share with a partner or in a small group:

1. How did you feel when completing the exercise? Why did you feel this way?
2. What strategies did you use to complete the activity?
3. Why did we do this exercise? What does it relate to?
4. What did you learn by engaging in this activity?
5. If you had to repeat the exercise again, would the results be better? Why?

At this point, it is important to engage all participants (e.g., utilize think-pair-share) and allow time for learners to reflect on and share their thoughts, emotions, and experiences. I also suggest that a good strategy to capture reflections is asking participants to write their responses to the debriefing questions before they share with the group.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

Over the years I learned that students benefit the most from activities that take them out of their comfort zone and expose them to different ways of making and negotiating meaning. Though they are time intensive, intercultural learning partnership projects fulfill this purpose well. To

help students make critical connections to the course topics, the theoretical ideas, and practical pedagogical strategies, these projects require effective planning of outside-of-the-classroom practical experiences and facilitation of in-class discussions about the intercultural learning. As one student noted, for example,

We learned in class how most of the world is bilingual and many countries teach English along with their native language. So why isn't it required for American students to learn a certain language early (besides foreign language that we usually can't speak fluently in middle and high school)? Is it ethnocentrism? We think our culture is better and we don't need to learn the language of others? Certainly, all of the international students are bilinguals and I respect them for speaking such good English to the point that they can learn college level curriculum.

I consider such partnerships an alternative to study abroad with many advantages: It takes advantage of local resources (international students), allows education students to engage in transformative intercultural learning, and supports integration of international students into the new linguistic and cultural academic community.

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## THE NUMBERS EXERCISE

In the following simple math problems, a “ $\times$ ” means to multiply. A “ $\div$ ” means to add. A “ $\div$ ” sign means to divide, and an “ $-$ ” means to subtract.

Complete these problems following the above instructions. Do not change the signs on the paper. Hold your hand up when you are finished. Hurry! This will be timed.

$$8 - 2 =$$

$$9 + 1 =$$

$$9 + 11 =$$

$$20 \div 10 =$$

$$4 \times 3 =$$

$$5 - 6 =$$

$$6 \div 2 =$$

$$2 \times 1 =$$

$$9 + 3 =$$

$$10 + 5 =$$

$$7 \times 4 =$$

$$12 - 2 =$$

$$4 - 2 =$$

$$6 - 6 =$$

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## THE NUMBERS EXERCISE: Answer Key

$$8 - 2 = 16$$

$$9 + 1 = 9$$

$$9 + 11 = 0.82$$

$$20 \div 10 = 30$$

$$4 \times 3 = 1$$

$$5 - 6 = 30$$

$$6 \div 2 = 8$$

$$2 \times 1 = 1$$

$$9 + 3 = 3$$

$$10 + 5 = 2$$

$$7 \times 4 = 3$$

$$12 - 2 = 24$$

$$4 - 2 = 8$$

$$6 - 6 = 36$$

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