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## *Crossing Bridges of Culture, Color, and Language*

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### EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Through her work as a teacher researcher, Hanson explores the status of Latino students in her high school Spanish classroom. Concerned that her native Spanish speakers are disconnected from the school community and perceived as deficient, Hanson attempts to draw on these students' strengths. By "employing" native speakers as teaching assistants in her Spanish classes, Hanson examines the traditional roles that students typically play in schools and suggests ways to validate the knowledge of marginalized student populations. A powerful example of teaching for educational change, Hanson's study implores educators to reexamine the assumptions and biased practices prevalent in our schools.

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*"Knowing another language is always important in the world. It will always help you in other things. And I believe that it has been a beautiful experience. Besides that, I have met people in this class who are very nice . . . I met new friends . . . and now, well, I am happy, I see them in the halls and they greet me. I see that they are happy with the things that I taught them. You know I can tell that they like it that I*

*have been here teaching them . . . and this is why I feel content about the work that I have done."*

—Glenda, reflecting on her experience of being a teacher assistant in Spanish 1A

## INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will describe an innovative action research project using Spanish classes to help change the status of Latino students in the high school where I teach. The aim of this project is to provide native English speakers with Spanish-speaking models so that the native English speakers can improve their Spanish and their understanding of Latino culture. I believe this project is crucially important, for two reasons. The first is the alienation of many Latino students from our public schools, which is directly linked to poor grades and high dropout rates for such students. The second is that many English-speaking students graduate from high school without experiencing what it is like to communicate in another language with people from another culture. My action research project centered around empowering young Latino students as leaders, in part to ensure their ongoing investment in their own education.

## THE SETTING

I work as a high school Spanish teacher in the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD). I currently teach three sections of beginning-level Spanish at West High School. I also work at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where my duties vary from semester to semester, and include teaching instructional methods to undergraduates seeking certification in foreign language education and placing, advising, and supervising these students during their practicums and student-teaching semesters, as well as keeping in communication with their cooperating teachers in the field.

The city of Madison is considered by many to be upper-middle-class. It is regularly mentioned in publications such as *Money* magazine as a desirable place for the upscale family to live, and it has been called a "latte town" (implying upper-middle-class values and tastes) in books such as *Bobos in Paradise* (Brooks, 2000). Despite this reputation, Madison has the same type of economically and racially segregated educational settings as many other large urban areas. The ethnic and racial composition of each

school's student body in the district varies widely. Some schools in the district are more than 70 percent White, with fewer than 20 percent of the students classified as low-income (Madison Metropolitan School District, *Ethnicity*, 2007). Other schools have as few as 25 percent White students. In some schools, more than 80 percent of the student body is classified as low-income (Madison Metropolitan School District, *Income*, 2007). Achievement levels also vary.

The academic achievement gaps between racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups grow wider with each year that students attend school in the MMSD. Student scores on standardized reading tests provide a good example. The number of Latino students scoring as either "proficient" or "advanced" drops from 63 percent in fourth grade to 54 percent in tenth grade. (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2007.) Also, in both the fourth and tenth grades, many more White students received proficient and advanced scores than their peers.

Although the MMSD makes great efforts to ensure quality instruction for all students, anecdotal evidence indicates that many low-income and Latino students in the district are on the receiving end of what Haberman (1991) calls the pedagogy of poverty, a cycle in which many poor students and students of color are tracked into less challenging classes and too often fall far behind. At the same time, White, middle-class English speakers receive the intellectually challenging education commonly found in an upper-middle-class university town.

Madison as a whole has fairly high rates of high school graduation, ranging in recent years from 85 percent to 90 percent. West High School, with approximately 2,200 students currently enrolled, is no exception. It is a somewhat diverse school in terms of students' ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. In 2002–2003, the school's student population was 9.2 percent Asian, 16.2 percent African American, 7.4 percent Hispanic, and 66.5 percent White. During the 2001–2002 school year, the graduation rate for Hispanic students at West High was 64 percent—the lowest of all ethnic groups at West. During the previous year (2000–2001) the Hispanic graduation rate was 55.17 percent. Although West High School boasts an extremely high population of National Honor Society students, it also has shockingly high numbers of students of color who do not graduate.

## LATINOS IN THE LITERATURE

Many researchers (for example, Baker, 2002; Zanger, 1994) have noted that English language learners (ELLs) are hampered both in their efforts to learn English and in their overall school achievement when they feel that their

home cultures are not valued in the school. This problem is alleviated or eliminated by teaching their native languages in the school. My action research project challenged the traditional White roles by giving status to the Latino teaching assistants (TAs). Latino students are empowered by teaching their language and culture. Furthermore, teaching a foreign language that is already spoken at the school encourages the interaction of languages and cultures. This gives both Spanish learners and English learners the social contact and exposure to each other's languages, as well as the understanding of the need to speak the target language, that are a crucial part of any language learning experience (Wong-Fillmore, 1991). Having Spanish-speaking TAs, who are also peers of the students in the class, prevents English speakers from learning a fossilized, stagnant Spanish. Keeping a language alive and vibrant is a two-way street, helping both English speakers and Spanish speakers.

It has also been established that many students from Latino cultural backgrounds are disengaging from school learning, because of stereotypes that they are not capable of academic success or, in situations in which they attend schools with some degree of integration, because they are culturally and socially marginalized within the school itself (Zanger, 1994). Latino test scores in the early years are relatively similar to those of their White, English-speaking peers. However, with every year that Latino students continue in school, the achievement gap widens, until by the time they take the standard battery of tenth-grade tests, they are far behind their more economically privileged classmates. This seems to reflect a general tendency on the part of the Latino student to become disengaged, and to value their culture negatively. In fact, Walsh (1991) has documented a process by which many ELLs develop an increasingly negative view of their native language and culture as they learn English. This devaluation of self and culture is not conducive to academic success. Ma (2002) and Hakuta and August (1998) point out that one of the most crucial factors in supporting the academic progress and self-esteem of English language learners is for native English speakers in the school to become more literate in their first language and to share the language learning process with their classmates.

## ORIGIN OF MY RESEARCH QUESTION

West High School has many international students. Students from roughly 40 countries are represented in the English as a second language (ESL) program; the majority of these students are Spanish speakers. There are more than 175 ELLs in the West High ESL department, representing roughly 20 languages. Spanish is the first language spoken by more than half of these students.

It has always concerned me that the ESL students in general, but particularly the Latino students, are disconnected from the rest of the school. My perception is that ESL students connect with each other, especially with other speakers of their native languages, and often they form close relationships with the ESL teachers and staff. However, they tend to remain enclosed in a small community within the school and do not easily form friendships with English speakers. One Spanish-speaking student who later became one of my TAs told me that he felt frustrated because all the other groups were included in school activities such as soccer and fine arts, while the Latino students—who, he felt, could excel in these areas—were not encouraged to take part. Like my TA, I am deeply concerned about the invisibility of these students in the larger school community. I see these students as a great educational resource that I know could be tapped into.

Currently, there are few or no native Spanish speakers taking Spanish IV or V at West High school and very few at levels I, II, or III. It is obvious that native English speakers take English language classes (literature, composition, theatre, language, and usage). We know that Latinos who engage in academic learning of their native language develop increased self-esteem, establish a positive identity with their ethnic group, and consequently gain an incentive to remain in school and succeed academically (Peale, 1991; Sheets, 1996; Trueba, Rodriguez, Zou, & Cintrón, 1993). Why then are native Spanish speakers underrepresented in high school Spanish classes?

Over the years, I have worked to open my classroom to these students and encourage them to take my classes. Unfortunately, my attempts to move native Spanish speakers into my classroom often backfired when the other students made comments to native Spanish speakers like "What are *you* doing in this class? You already *know* Spanish," or worse, "You *should* know Spanish." According to María Kellor, a retired MMSD Spanish teacher:

*At an age when peer approval is especially important, this could be psychologically devastating. Not only is this experience in the Spanish classroom harmful to the Spanish speaker's desire to learn his own language, it also has a tremendous impact on his self-concept. His chance to excel turns into a catastrophe; his "special talent" turns into a problem.*

—Kellor, master's thesis, p. 29

Kellor's research provides evidence that supports the value of Spanish classes for native Spanish speakers. Furthermore, she applauds Spanish

teachers who include Latinos in Spanish classes, if the teachers individualize education for the students by finding personally relevant literature and differentiating pedagogy in and out of class (Kellor, 1994). Though the native Spanish-speaking "recruits" I brought to my Spanish classes may have heard the types of damaging statements noted above, I have always tried to differentiate teaching and learning, with the ultimate goal of empowering my students. By this I mean that I have always individualized the educational goals and programming for my students as I—and they—see fit. This is not something specific only to native Spanish speakers; it is something that I believe in and do for other students as well.

Before my current project began, I catered specifically to the needs of native Spanish speakers by individualizing my plans and expectations, giving them more appropriate literature, and most important, asking them to take leadership roles in order to help other students with oral practice. The benefits their presence brought to the class were plentiful in the years before I placed Latinos in teaching assistantships, but have multiplied since the implementation of this project. The learning occurred on many of the same levels as it does now: through recognition of each native speaker's distinct accent, through their cultural sharing, and through the inclusive community environment that I constantly try to establish. The contributions these students made to my classes in the past inspired my current project, in which I specifically target Latinos as a resource.

The benefits these students would bring to any Spanish class were clear to me. What was not clear was how to deal with the concerns I had about the native Spanish speakers' own frequent literacy deficiencies. I knew that these would come to the surface, and that I would need to address them. Many of these students have recently escaped from war-torn or economically ravaged areas of the Americas, where education took a backseat to food, shelter, and safety. The lack of a strong background in Spanish language literacy haunts them as they struggle with written exams, papers, and the like. It is important to note that until recently, foreign language classes nationwide have heavily emphasized writing skills, with grades being based mostly on traditional paper-and-pencil test scores. When tests are returned in this type of class, other students' eyes strain expecting to see the brightly colored "A" on the native speaker's paper, but to the non-Latino students' astonishment, the native speakers often receive less than stellar scores. The native Spanish speakers are then immediately—and mercilessly—devalued by their peers from the United States. And the taunting continues: "How could you get that grade when you *are* Spanish?"

This brings us to the unfortunate fact that the average U.S. teenager often does not know or acknowledge the difference between Spain and the Spanish language. Instead, he or she assumes that all Spanish speakers are Spanish,

rather than Mexican, Nicaraguan, Chilean, Peruvian, Venezuelan, or any of the other nationalities (21 in all) whose national language is Spanish. Due to the complexities of teaching Spanish to both native and nonnative Spanish speakers, I felt that individualizing the educational program for the native speakers was the only path of integrity I could take. Offering differentiated instruction to the native Spanish speakers in my Spanish classes required extra work and attention, but helped keep the students' self-esteem intact—a goal that I consider to be of supreme importance. However, my intentions, albeit worthy, were not always matched by a level of success I deemed sufficient, and many of these students were still left feeling separate from the other students and from the school as a whole.

I learned early in my teaching career that the native Spanish speaker was, quite simply, out of place in the average Spanish classroom—and my own classroom was no exception. Something was not right. It was clear that these students provided a wealth of knowledge to my classes that could not be found elsewhere. I also knew the native Spanish speakers were learning extremely valuable information about their first language. It was obvious that both the native Spanish speakers and the native English speakers were gaining cultural and linguistic knowledge due specifically to the integration of foreign students into our classroom community. Yet, I also feared that the negative impact of incorporating the native Spanish-speaking students into Spanish classes that were specifically geared toward native English speakers might outweigh the benefit.

It was for these reasons that I determined to do something new to meet the needs of both the native English-speaking and native Spanish-speaking students. Some scholars (Merino, Trueba, & Samaniego, 1993; Peale, 1991; Ramírez, 1992) have called for special provisions to be made for second language speakers in foreign language classes. I was determined to find a model that would work in our high school without making major changes in the school's curriculum. Although many MMSD teachers and administrators agree theoretically with the need for Spanish classes for Spanish speakers, the current economic crisis makes it difficult to implement this type of curricular change.

## FINDING A UNIQUE SOLUTION

With all this in mind, a solution occurred to me that, I thought, could maintain the positive aspects (both for the Spanish learner and for the native Spanish speaker) of having native Spanish-speaking students in the classroom while simultaneously protecting the native Spanish speakers' self-esteem. I decided to incorporate native Spanish speakers into my classes under the empowering title of "teacher assistant." It seemed to me a

very appropriate role for many reasons: (1) the native English-speaking students would benefit from authentic oral practice in Spanish; (2) the native Spanish speakers would naturally become more literate in written Spanish; (3) the native English-speaking students would become more familiar with the geography, history, and culture of the teaching assistants' countries of origin; and (4) the native Spanish speakers, given an opportunity to become a part of a classroom community within the school but outside the ESL department, would thrive in their own literacy in Spanish and in English but also as individuals in a country away from their homes. These TAs, like other TAs at West High School, receive credit (without a grade) for the class—another potential benefit for many Latino students because they are at high risk of dropping out.

**What is the impact of including native Spanish-speaking ELL students as teacher assistants into my beginning-level Spanish classes?** I hypothesized the following: (1) that this experience would help ELL students to feel part of the wider school community; (2) that these students would experience more success in school because of this leadership role; and (3) that the English-speaking students in the classroom would benefit (both in terms of their Spanish language skills, as well as gaining a clearer sense of belonging in today's global society) from the connection with the native Spanish speakers.

Instead of Spanish class being a mere exercise in learning grammar and vocabulary that has no immediate use for most youth today, students are able to put their skills to use immediately in interacting with classmates. The TAs, who are also English language learners, gain self-confidence and feel supported in their language learning process, because their school values and supports linguistic and cultural diversity. This allows them to become a resource to the school community, rather than being seen as having a deficit that needs to be remedied. My research question evolved into a question of whether self-contained foreign and second language programs work together to produce significant benefits for both English language and foreign language learners.

## DEVELOPING THE PROGRAM

As I look back at my years of teaching, it is clear that the achievement gap has long consumed my thoughts and burdened my heart. My attempt to find a solution builds on the thoughts of scholars such as Paulo Freire, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Jose Martí, and Lidia Turner Martí. The works of this group of scholars have given me a sort of runway, from which I could take off and continue my quest to make a difference for the students whose lives I touch. From the very moment I began teaching, I saw all too clearly the ways in



which many students ended up being excluded from the academic successes that were easily attained by others. English language learners carry multiple burdens, and I turned to scholars whose work and practice were rooted in ways that practitioners could alleviate some of those burdens.

These scholars all call for a model of social justice, as well as student- and community-centered teaching. As these scholars themselves have done, I have rooted my project in community involvement, a desire to work toward the needs of all my students, the need for cultural relevancy, and, above all, the concept of teaching with *love*.

### Recruitment and How I Employed Teaching Assistants

With this research and theory supporting my style and belief systems, I buckled comfortably into the pilot seat, and the school year took off. My "passengers" were the 28 students in each of my classes. Because my project was not fully formed, I initially had two English-speaking TAs, as opposed to native Spanish speakers. Meanwhile I was looking for other solutions (i.e., native Spanish speakers). An educational assistant in the ESL department who liked my idea helped me find ESL students who were in study halls during the hours I had class. By late September, I had signed on two native Spanish-speaking students per class, for a total of six students representing five different Spanish-speaking countries. Four were boys and two were girls. Two were from Argentina, one from Mexico, one from Perú, one from Ecuador, and one from Spain.

These TAs participated in the classes in multiple ways. The following are a few examples of the important and growing role they played in our classroom. I immediately gave each individual TA the floor and offered the students in each class the opportunity to ask the TAs anything they wanted to know, as long as they did it in Spanish. This provided the students the opportunity to hear the distinct accents of each TA and to get to know biographical information about them: where they were born, their age, their family size, and their first and last names.

Each TA had small jobs, such as keeping track of participation or taking attendance. The objective was for each TA to get to know who was who. In October, I asked each TA to recall a typical school day schedule for a high school student in his or her respective country. The TAs either typed this up or wrote it by hand. I made copies of each TA's hypothetical schedule, and we used them in class as we were studying the theme of schools, schedules, and subjects. This theme of class schedules was also connected with time-telling, which allowed students to ask one another as well as the TAs more specific questions about their current schedules, and other topics. By mid-October I began to give the TAs mini-plans telling them what

I wanted them to do during class. I gave them each a copy of the seating chart, which had each person's name and seating location. Each day I gave the TAs two or three questions I wanted them to work on with the students in the class. They were to go around the room one by one to ask these questions, as well as to ask each student to ask *them* each question. I told the TAs that whenever I was not teaching a new concept in front of the class, they were to move through the room with their charts, working from their lesson plans. They began to engage all the students in the classroom.

They became the "flight attendants" of the class while I remained the "pilot." By using these student teaching assistants, I had great help in achieving my goals of keeping my students extremely engaged and interested by pushing them to use authentic language in context—imparting knowledge as our Spanish voyage continued. Each student had more of a chance to be engaged in Spanish more of the time. Achievement in these activities was defined simply, by the mere act of answering and asking the questions, by reading a children's book aloud, or by simply speaking in Spanish with the TA. I placed value on involvement, connection, and growth, along with the acquisition of knowledge and skills. The native Spanish speakers started to find their places within the Spanish class. They knew they played a very important role in our classroom community. They taught skills in a way I could not have. While they were circulating, communicating, connecting, and sharing about themselves and their cultures, a community was emerging, and all students had the opportunity to work individually on their oral communication skills. The TAs were able to teach in a nonthreatening way that did not involve formal assessment or grades. This interpersonal way of learning a language is similar to what occurs in first language acquisition and in second language acquisition in natural settings. Students were provided with a sense of what they could accomplish each day, and they were learning that what they could do was communicate in Spanish. The beauty of this was that they did not have to be put on the spot in front of the whole class to do so. Everyone else was engaged in whatever the task was: oral, reading, or written work in pairs; individual reading or writing; or vocabulary study. In my view, more was being accomplished within the same amount of time. I was able to work with more individuals or pairs during the course of any given activity.

## DATA COLLECTION AND METHODS

### Teaching Assistant Surveys

I gave a questionnaire to each of my six teaching assistants in October. They had a class period to complete the survey while the other students

were working on a written assessment. All questions were written in both Spanish and English, and I told the TAs that they could answer in either or both languages. The questions requested information including current address; phone number; family members' names; the name of the TA's counselor; the TAs' full class schedules; and whether they had any classes outside the ESL department. I also asked why they decided to become teaching assistants; what, if anything, they were learning in class and how they were learning; what they enjoyed most and least about the class; and what their goals were for personal and academic improvement, including how I might be able to help them achieve those goals. Finally, they had the opportunity to comment on any other issue.

### Teaching Assistant Interviews

I interviewed each teaching assistant during March and April. All interviews were private (one-on-one with me). I explained that the purpose of the interviews was to gain insight into how they felt this method of Spanish study was working in our classes, what its strengths and weaknesses were, and how the system could be improved for future students. All interviews were taped and transcribed. For the purpose of this chapter, each TA was given a pseudonym.

### Surveys With English-Speaking Students

I surveyed the native English-speaking students early in March. I told the students that they could respond to questions in either Spanish or English. All questions were provided in both languages. I asked the following questions:

1. When the teaching assistant talks to me, I feel \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Do you enjoy having the opportunity to speak with the native speaker when she or he comes around to ask questions?
3. What is the most valuable/interesting part about having a native speaker in the classroom, and why?
4. Question four was a check-off list of all the activities the TAs do during the class period. Students were asked to check off each one they felt was useful.
5. What was it like to read books aloud to the teaching assistant?
6. How would you change the system if you were the teacher?
7. What other comments do you have?

## Outside Observer Reflections

I asked two West High School administrators, the ESL Department chair, and one ESL staff member to come into my classrooms to observe. I asked them to respond to an open-ended question: "What is the effect of the inclusion of native Spanish-speaking ESL students as teacher assistants into my beginning-level Spanish classes?" I urged them to tell me any impressions they might have had during the brief time they spent in my classroom. I also asked them if they saw any benefits or pitfalls of this system and what they were. Finally, I asked them what effect, if any, this program might have on the school as a whole.

## INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

I grouped my results into three categories: (1) the TA perspective; (2) the Spanish student perspective; and (3) the administrative and ESL staff perspective.

### The TA Perspective

While I was transcribing and coding the data that reflected the TAs' perspectives, I identified several themes that came up repeatedly. Most of the TAs reported some sort of interest in teaching, or said that they experienced an "aha!" moment when it dawned on them that they could be teachers—perhaps Spanish teachers. Half the TAs reported that their experiences in the cafeteria were different and better after they became TAs. Five of the six TAs brought up something about their new experiences in the hallways—the students in our classes regularly greeted them in the hallways. All TAs reported that since this experience began, they feel much more valued as members of the West High community.

#### *"I Can Teach"*

The teaching assistants reported to me that they began to think of themselves as teachers, and adept ones at that. Evidence of this comes from the TA interviews, in which five out of six mentioned something about either their ability to teach or their consideration of teaching as a future career. I heard comments from TAs similar to the following from Joaquín:

At first it was like playing, without importance, but once I saw that the students actually wanted to learn my language as I want to

learn theirs, I took it seriously . . . I liked it . . . I know that now I can teach also.

Comments like these indicate that the TAs increasingly recognized themselves as a resource to the class and that they gained self-confidence and self-esteem.

### *Cultural Crisscross in the Cafeteria*

A couple of the TAs brought up their concern about the social structures of the cafeteria. They noted that the African American students sit in one area, the European American students sit in another, the Asian Americans in another, and the Latinos in another. They reported that, much to their chagrin, there was little cultural crossover and that it was difficult for students from one population to break into another cultural group. They even pointed out that these cultural groups were not only physically separate but also judged the other groups without having spoken with their individual members. The following is Alejandro's interpretation of what being a TA has done for him and his peers in the lunchroom.

This helps us a lot . . . I know a lot of kids who are afraid of speaking with an American. Because of my being a tutor, people open their eyes and make friendships, friends everywhere, and something that I don't like . . . I feel part of them because I am Latino also, but at the same time I am not part of them. You can see it everywhere. You always see Latinos on one side, Americans on another, Blacks on another, and like that, and you go ask them why and they say the Americans are bad . . . But when you go where the Americans are and converse with them, they want to be your friends. But you have it stuck in there that you don't speak much English . . . but this doesn't have anything to do with it. For example, there was a bunch of kids who approached me and they speak little Spanish. And the others who were seated with me speak little English. And they asked one another questions, and they began to speak in Spanish, and some in English, and they got along mutually.

### *Hallway Hellos—A Sense of Belonging*

Almost all the TAs reported, with happiness, that they are now being greeted regularly in the hallway by the U.S.-born students, and they no longer feel so isolated. Joaquín states:

Well, there were two girls who were friends, they were Black . . . Well, they thought that I was well, like bad, right? And that I wasn't going to teach them anything, and they just ignored me, and when they approached me they said bad things . . . and I . . . and in the halls they looked at me and they bothered me, and I paid them no attention . . . but little by little, they started to be nice and I taught them and well, they didn't want to ask me questions because they thought I'd be bothered . . . but no, it's normal. I can help them. No problem and now I help them once in a while at lunch. Sometimes they look for me, but they look at me, like with fear, like that I remember what they did to me. But I see them as young . . . because I did things like this too with lots of people—treated them badly because I didn't like their face, but then I didn't know what they had inside . . . And now, the majority of them come to me, they greet me, and I like it because they don't just come to me and say "Hi Joaquín" and nothing else. They say "Come . . ." they are affectionate, they give you their hand or a hug or they joke with you or they pass by you in the hall and they are with their friends and they say "Look, my friend Joaquín, my Spanish teacher." And, that's it . . . I like it.

It is evident that their status as TAs and tutors gave these students a position within the high school that they had not had before.

### *Bicultural Friendships—Diversity Valued*

Every TA had something to say about feeling more valued by peers. For example, Carmen said, "I experienced changes in this class . . . I met more people. I learned to speak a little more of the language—English. I don't know, I met more friends." Joaquín also notes that:

Now when there is a party or something, the kids, at least, tell me, well, if I am going or if I want to go with them. Sometimes I go, sometimes I can't. With some, I go out to lunch, or go for a walk or I help them with some things, with what I can.

When I asked the TAs if they have new friends due to being in this classroom community, all of them said "Yes." Some went on to say that they had met many new friends. As Glenda said, "Now I feel more a part of West High School." Pablo reported that both cultures will benefit from these shared friendships:

For me, I believe that being a TA for Latino students like Joaquín, Alejandro, and me is a very big and great opportunity because before when I started at this school, I thought that I would never have North American friends (laughs). And now, I think I have more North American friends than Latino friends. I got to meet people and also learn how the students learn about our culture, and we learn from them.

### **The Spanish Student Perspective**

The data also reveal how the native English-speaking Spanish language students experienced this project. A total of 72 of my 84 students returned the signed permission form, allowing me to survey them about this program and its impact on them. Most of the questions were open-ended, giving students the chance to respond as they wished. All questions were provided in Spanish and in English. I told students that they could respond in either or both languages.

#### *Question #1*

Question #1 asked: "When the Teacher Assistant talks to me, I feel \_\_\_\_." I was looking for a concrete feeling that could be described in one or two words, and so I left only enough room for a one- or two-word response. Thirteen of the 72 students responded that they felt "great," "happy," "special," or "important." Another 22 students replied that they felt "good," "fine," or "comfortable." Five students filled in the blank with "normal," "regular," or "same." Six used the term "helped" to respond to this question. Twelve students reported feeling "pressured," "awkward," or "confused." One student said simply "attentive." Three of the 72 students did not answer this question. The remainder of the students went beyond the one-word answers I was seeking and made comments such as the following: "Classes without TAs miss out on all the fun!" "Happy if I do good and stupid if I screw up!" "I'm talking to someone who knows what she's talking about!"

#### *Question #2*

The second question was the only yes-or-no question I asked. It stated: "I enjoy having the opportunity to speak with a native speaker when he or she comes around student by student to ask us questions." Ninety-four percent of the students surveyed answered yes, 2.7 percent wrote in "sometimes," and fewer than 1 percent (one person) said no. The others did not respond. Many students made comments like the following: "It is

interesting and a good learning experience to learn from them because it brings a new perspective to learning the language."

### *Question #3*

The third question was open-ended and read as follows: "The most valuable/interesting part about having a native speaker in the classroom is . . . why?" I categorized responses to this by looking for key words and themes. Forty-seven of the 72 students surveyed reported that the most valuable part for them was to get a better chance to "learn the language" or "have a better accent." Seventeen other students wrote that the best part was that they got to "learn about customs," "learn about culture," or "learn about other countries."

They tell you things that are not said in the book, you get to hear and learn to understand the native speakers because learning a language and speaking it are two different things. Also, in my class they shared their ideas and differences in different countries, and talked about how different words can mean different things in different areas. These assistants bring life and reality to what we are learning.

One student answered "confused." Another four students mentioned that the TAs "help" when the teacher is busy and that this leads to more practice more of the time. The students had so much to say that I had a hard time deciding which comments to quote in this chapter!

### *Question #4*

This question was essentially a checklist, in which I requested that students tell me which activities that TAs had been involved with during the year were useful and which were not useful. It was worded: "It is useful when TAs . . ." A: "Assist with dialogues." B: "Work as a pair with someone in the class." C: "Come around one by one asking specific questions for oral practice." D: "Help on written work." E: "Help Ms. Hanson with grading." F: "Lead a 'workstation.'" G: "Others???"

Most students checked off four or more of the possible responses. The response most frequently checked off, however, was option C. This indicates to me that the students do enjoy the one-on-one attention from their native Spanish-speaking peers, and that the practice is—at the very least—comfortable for them. Students provided many additional comments. One student checked off all but item B, and added that she sees "many" other ways TAs can be useful: "It is good to just hear them having conversations with each other. It immerses you in hearing, learning and seeing all at the same time."



I found this comment very reinforcing because although it hadn't occurred to me to put this possible response on the list, I knew that conversations between TAs often took place before, during, and after class. The fact that English-speaking students hear conversations between native Spanish speakers reinforces the national movement in foreign language education to balance classroom teaching, learning, and assessment time among three essential types of communication: interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational. Historically, foreign and second language teaching nationwide has been stuck in the traditional form of presentational communication, a format in which the teacher does most of the speaking.

### *Question #5*

In question #5, students were asked: "Describe the experience of reading a children's book aloud to the TAs." One of my favorite comments in this category indicates that learning is reciprocal during this activity: "It's kind of neat because it gives us both opportunities to learn."

The theme of "learning the language," "learning accents," and "learning pronunciation" was the most prevalent; 50 of the 72 students surveyed used one of these phrases in their responses. Another recurring theme was "fun"; 10 students used it in their responses. A third theme was simply that the "TA helps." I found 32 responses stating that the activity of reading aloud to the TA was helpful. There were, however, four individuals who either did not respond or who said that the activity was "bad." One student commented that it is "Nerve-racking yet fun!"

### *Question #6*

The last open-ended question was: "How would you change the system if you were the teacher?" Twenty-five of the 72 students responded that it should be left as is. Ten students urged me to include more TAs. One wrote: "Make sure every class has at least one TA." Another responded: "I would make it so there were more in the class." Twenty students thought there needed to be more TA interaction with students. One suggested:

I think a good thing to do would be, each day a TA would tell us a story in Spanish. Not reading it, but just a story off the top of their head . . . then you could give us a worksheet on how well we understood. That would really help in actually beginning to understand Spanish . . .

Nine students left the space blank. Many students made other suggestions and comments; I have since begun to employ some of the suggestions.

### Question #7

The final question asked for other comments.

### The Administrator and ESL Teacher Perspective

Of the four individuals who visited our classes for the purpose of giving me feedback about this project, three filled out my form. All three mentioned something about the "mutual benefit" or the "benefit for both the American students and the ESL students." One of the ESL staff members who observed made the following comment. Like the TAs, he is foreign and therefore brings a unique perspective:

The first thing I noticed when observing a native Spanish-speaking student interacting with mainstream students is the connection they have among themselves. It was obvious to me that there is a common factor among American students . . . that helps them to be inserted into the learning process, and that is *curiosity*. They feel curious about this person who is a peer but from a different culture . . . Another good aspect of this relationship is that students are more comfortable with a peer and don't feel that barrier they might have working only with a teacher. The benefits I noticed are not only for American students, but also for the TAs who, through this role, feel more inserted into the school environment and have that feeling of belonging which, for a Hispanic student in an American school, is not easy to find.

The theme of inclusion in the greater school community is prominent in the comments above. The other ESL teacher similarly noted: "I think this is a great way for ESL and regular education students to work together and get to know each other!"

Respect and dignity came up in two of the three response sheets: "I think the students showed the TA great respect; this doesn't happen often for ESL students." This comment, for me, is very profound, and reconfirms just how powerful the use of native Spanish-speaking TAs in Spanish class is, and could be on a larger scale. The following comment by an administrator goes beyond respect into self-esteem: "Use of the ESL student as a vocabulary resource demonstrates a level of respect, which could build self-esteem and peer respect."

Finally, the themes of community and cultural awareness rose to the surface, as seen in the following: "I think this will make the school community more culturally aware; they can see ESL students are 'normal.' "

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The most important recommendation came from Alejandro, who concluded that Latinos need to have more experiences like this one so that they can have a chance to be leaders more often and in more venues in the school:

But the first thing I'd like is that we the tutors not be just three, nor four, because there are a ton of tutors (in the school) but they are Americans, and it is not because I want to say bad things about them, but our Spanish is better—more pure. It would be good to have a meeting with kids from ESL, we should speak with ESL staff, do it in the auditorium, in the cafeteria, wherever, right? For those that would like to come, one hour, right? First period, and bring them in and talk to them . . . because this is something, it is like the presentations they had for the elections of the presidents. It is important. And also it is important because it is in line with the teaching at the school. Or we could go and talk with the principal. But, I don't know myself . . . if you are in agreement. What I am going to do is talk with the principal . . . and tell him my idea . . . and put up like posters, advertise . . . such-and-such a day there is going to be a meeting for the Latino students . . . come, it will be in the auditorium . . . What I am going to do, too, is speak with the ESL teachers to see if they are in agreement.

It is evident from remarks like this that the TAs are very motivated and would like to see this program continue and expand. Several of them visit me regularly, ask me about plans for next year, and make suggestions for expanding the program. This level of engagement shows that the TAs have gained something valuable from the experience, and that it has been deeply meaningful to them. They would like other Latino classmates to share the experience. Furthermore, many of the native English-speaking students have also mentioned how meaningful the program has been for them and how much they have gained from having the opportunity to talk to and to establish authentic communication with native Spanish speakers.

In summary, members of both groups have reported that this program has been an extremely positive and transformative experience for them. This makes a strong argument for continuing the project and expanding it to other Spanish classes around the nation.

## EPILOGUE

As I reflect on this project and its successes and limitations, I feel certain that I will continue to use this method of teaching in the future. I am convinced that the cultural benefits are significant and should not be ignored. Those benefits, as I suggest in this chapter, go two ways. The TAs are given an "in" to mainstream school culture, and begin to see themselves as part of the larger school community. They also learn to recognize their own language ability as something positive and gain confidence in themselves as knowledgeable, even expert, in their language and their culture. The students who are studying Spanish get to know their Spanish TAs on a personal level—often, the TA might be the first Spanish-speaking student they have any sort of relationship with—and benefit greatly from being able to speak Spanish with someone their age. Their sense of their capability as language learners is also strengthened, as they have the opportunity to practice the language in a more real-life setting.

In the future, I believe that this program could have a powerful impact, not only on the lives of the individuals involved in my classes as students or as TAs, but also on the greater school community. The biggest problem I faced was finding students who were available to be TAs during my different class periods. I believe that I solved this problem by connecting with ESL department members and administrative team members, who fully supported the program and collaborated with me during the summer to set up this program for the 2003–2004 school year.

Other schools could certainly look to this program as a model, especially those schools that have experienced recent and significant increases in the numbers of Spanish-speaking students. This program creates effective bridges of understanding and communication between different groups of students and offers an innovative way to really secure Spanish-speaking students' place in the school community.

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