



Reflective Practice as a Tool to Support K-16 World Language Education

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According to a press release from the National Center for Educational Statistics, as of October 2024, 74% of U.S. schools expressed challenges around filling teacher vacancies for the 2024–2025 school year (“Most U.S. Public”). The most difficult positions to fill have been special education and ESL/bilingual education, including world languages (WL). For decades, the US has been plagued by significant WL teacher shortages (Acheson et al. 523; Burke and Ceo-DiFrancesco 334; Moser et al. 880; Swanson and Mason 252), only to be exacerbated by teachers’ increased emotional labor and burnout as a consequence of the global pandemic (Chang et al.). The pool of qualified WL teachers is shrinking, resulting in districts hiring underqualified individuals buoyed by emergency or provisional credentials (Kearney et al. 23) and teacher preparation programs scrambling to support them. Keeping K-12 language teachers engaged and motivated in their work is a key concern for the sustainability of WL programs in higher education. A majority of WL teacher education majors were inspired to pursue their degree because of effective and engaging WL teachers at the secondary level (Burke and Ceo-DiFrancesco 351). In addition to high-quality teacher preparation

and substantive contact with school administrators, a condition that favors teacher retention is ongoing collaboration and mentorship from content-area colleagues (Ingersoll and Strong 225; Kearney et al. 27). In this reflective essay, I argue that WL faculty in higher education are uniquely positioned to support K-12 WL teachers through collaborative inquiries, especially through (critical) reflective practice frameworks.

WORLD LANGUAGE TEACHER SUPPORT

Peter Swanson and Shannon Mason insist that more attention be paid to teacher recruitment and retention at the local level, involving active engagement from multiple stakeholders (254). Their list of stakeholders includes:

1. WL teachers
2. School administrators
3. Parents and community members
4. Teacher education providers
5. Language teacher associations
6. Policymakers

Their suggestions for engagement from each of these groups involve advocating for better

pay, inquiring about and supporting good WL programming, offering WL-specific professional development and networking for current teachers, prioritizing meaningful WL-specific clinical field experiences for pre-teachers, and funding WL research initiatives. While Swanson and Mason suggest important contributions from each individual group of stakeholders, more collaboration is needed across these groups. Community building, especially between K-12 and university settings (ed prep *and* world languages and cultures departments) can support teacher recruitment and retention. In regions where K-12 WL administrative support is lacking or non-existent and/or where community support is not strong, the practitioner-researcher relationship might offer field-specific support for those who collectively believe in the value of multilingual education.

According to survey results presented at the ACTFL Conference in 2017, topping the list for WL teacher turnover and attrition is job dissatisfaction, which, unlike retirement or family moves, is something that can be creatively addressed (Kearney et al. 26). Job dissatisfaction can include student discipline issues, poor salary and benefits, issues in school culture, and lack of influence and autonomy (Kearney et al. 26). Professionals in higher education might feel that unfavorable workplace conditions in the K-12 environment fall outside of their purview, but opportunities for professional support and development, and establishing professional learning communities can be a productive way to serve WL education spanning elementary, secondary, and higher ed. As Tasha Austin and Erin Kearney point out, language teaching, just like language learning, “has a strong interpersonal dimension” (20), and through intentional actions, we can establish communities of support, solidarity, and collective agency in language teaching.

Research has demonstrated that providing additional support for teachers

can combat burnout and attrition. This support involves interacting with learning communities (Neubauer and Wesely 2), providing specialized learning opportunities (Moser and Wei 2), and helping teachers to feel effective in their work, amongst other actions (Acheson et al. 534). Tennessee, for example, is comprised of 147 public school districts (“Districts”), yet only four have WL coordinators at the district level (Knox County, Metro Nashville, Memphis Shelby, and Williamson). These four districts are equidistantly distributed across the state, leaving significant pockets without support even in adjacent communities. Overall, this indicates a minimal cohort of language teachers with an administrator designated to organize content-specific feedback and professional development opportunities for WL teachers. State, regional, and national teacher organizations such as the Tennessee World Language Teaching Association (TWLTA), the Southern Conference on Language Teaching (SCOLT), and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) offer opportunities for language teachers to idea-share, collaborate, question, and motivate in their practice. However, these organizations may only meet once annually, and teachers may not have the time or resources to participate. Local colleges and universities are well-positioned to fill the gap throughout the year, particularly in school districts that might not have robust WL administrative support and resources.

Continuing with the example of Tennessee, none of the school districts in the northeast corner, the tri-cities region, have a WL administrator with expertise in and dedicated to world language education. The nearest comparable post is Knox County. The Tri-cities’ state university, East Tennessee State University (ETSU), my home institution, welcomes approximately 50% of students from the upper eight East Tennessee counties and the Virginia/North Carolina border counties. As faculty

researchers and fellow WL specialists, extending collaboration and support to K-12 schools in these surrounding counties has great potential to strengthen our WL programs since these surrounding districts feed directly into our university classrooms. Synergistic collaboration can provide multifaceted benefits, including building a support network for teaching professionals and attracting and maintaining students within language programs across the lifespan of their academic education. Students who stay, enthusiastically, in language education will, in turn, feed our teacher pipeline.

INCREASING UNIVERSITY COLLABORATION TO SUPPORT K-12 WL TEACHERS

Asking university faculty to assume an additional role is no small feat. The demanding institutional expectations on research faculty regarding knowledge production through publications can “perpetuate a disparity between knowledge producers and knowledge mobilizers” (Kubota 13). Ryuko Kubota reminds us that

Academic research exists in its own right as a scholarly endeavor to discover, explore, or explain what exists or what people experience. We as academics make a living by producing and sharing knowledge within our academic circle. However, as a field closely linked to the social practice of language teaching, learning, and use, applied linguistics carries a practical mission that is different from basic research in the natural sciences or theory generation in the humanities... The knowledge that we produce ought to contribute to making positive change in the real world (5).

As scholars, we must ask ourselves what social contributions can our research make? How can we use our positions as

“knowledge producers” with high expectations around publishing to also critically advance practice in WL teaching and learning? As an applied linguist and critical language scholar, I strive to center the notion of praxis in my work, which can be understood as *committed reflection* and *action for transformation* (Kubota 7). The former (reflection) is often easier to attain than the latter (action).

Increasing collaborative efforts across primary, secondary, and post-secondary WL educators has the potential to serve the profession in many ways, benefiting researchers and practitioners by holding each other accountable for positive change. However, these collaborative efforts, especially those promoted or initiated by university researchers, require careful reflexivity regarding methodology and ethics (Banegas and Consoli 3). Darío Luis Banegas and Sal Consoli discuss the risks and rewards of practitioner research in language education. University researchers, who benefit from dedicated time and funding for research endeavors, are responsible for identifying the necessary support for teachers in order to encourage their participation in mutually relevant inquiries. These supports are critical, given that collaborative research most likely falls outside the professional duties of K-12 teachers. Furthermore, as academic researchers, we might also be well-positioned to promote collaborative inquiry that is inclusive of all stakeholders, as Swanson and Mason list, in “research-practice partnerships” (RPPs) (Banegas and Consoli 4). We can address real-world problems by creating long-term relationships between stakeholders, intentionally upending the notion of researchers as knowledge producers (Banegas and Consoli 4; Kubota 13). Through these collaborative efforts, we might recognize more clearly the individual contributions each party makes to a shared cause and mobilize strengths effectively to

promote change in language teaching and learning at all levels.

REFLECTING ON MY OWN RESEARCHER/PRACTITIONER COLLABORATIVE STUDY

During the 2022-2023 academic year, I initiated a research study examining four high school Spanish teachers' beliefs and practices regarding language alternation in their classrooms (Detwiler, 2024). This study investigated how teachers rely on English>Spanish or Spanish>English interpretations or alternative multimodal supports (gestures, visuals, writing on the board, etc.) to aid student comprehension. I utilized Thomas Farrell's framework for reflecting on practice for language teachers to determine, together with the participating teachers, whether their beliefs (principles) regarding the use of the target language (TL) aligned with their classroom practices. Farrell's framework consists of five stages of reflection: philosophy, principles, theory, practice, and beyond practice. While all stages should be considered as a whole and contribute to a fuller reflective practice experience, teachers and researchers can explore stages individually in order to focus on specific aspects of their practice at any given time (22).

This study's aim was to mobilize reflective practice as a tool to increase self-awareness and encourage alignment between belief and practice, especially around pedagogically supported teacher-talk and meaningful TL/L1 alternation in the WL classroom. Each of the four participating teachers allowed me to video record three class sessions within one of their lower-level Spanish courses during one academic year. All instances of teachers' interpretations or uses of multimodal language supports were noted and transcribed. These utterances or moments were categorized into unique pattern sets per teacher, dependent upon their instructional tendencies. For example,

one teacher's pattern set identified two types: procedural and vocabulary instruction, while another teacher had three categories: procedural, bimodal, and complementary. After the researcher-generated patterns had been established, each participant engaged in a semi-structured interview to discuss his or her beliefs regarding TL and L1 language use in the classroom. We then reviewed the patterns and transcripts together to discuss whether they aligned with the stated beliefs. I reference and reflect on this study here as an example of researcher/practitioner collaboration. The study in-full was published in *Pedagogies: An International Journal* in 2024.

Regarding challenges in researcher/practitioner investigations, accessing the K-12 field requires careful consideration. Districts and schools make a concerted effort to protect their teachers and students from outside distractions. Therefore, as the researcher, building relationships with stakeholders is essential. In this study on teacher-talk, I had the privilege of benefiting from a close working relationship with one of the four Tennessee public school districts' WL administrators. I refer to this administrator, colleague, and friend as an *intermediary* (Gobo and Molle 125) because of our established rapport and shared values regarding WL education. The intermediary is one who facilitates contact with or within a particular organization (126). It was necessary to align research priorities with this administrator before proposing the idea to the district's board of Research, Assessment, and Evaluation (REA) (the *guarantor*). Gaining formal permission from the school district's REA board as well as the University's IRB was the first major and required formality in initiating the project. It was then up to the building principals (*gatekeepers*) to grant permission to access classrooms and collaborate with teachers (*informants*) (Gobo and Molle 127). Some building principals were more welcoming

than others, which limited my pool of informants. I recognize that the advocacy and support I received from the WL district coordinator helped me move forward with this project. With so few WL administrators across the state of Tennessee, the likelihood of having this field-specific support within the district is not the norm, nor is it guaranteed. More extensive relationship-building and value-propositioning might be required in districts where this WL-specific administrative position does not exist.

Some advantages of conducting this study were the participating teachers' reports of feelings of affirmation regarding alignment between their beliefs and practices, setting action-oriented goals, and establishing productive practitioner-researcher relationships. For example, two teachers found the process to be very affirming. They found that their WL teacher training and personal beliefs were aligned with their practices. The other two teachers established clear action-oriented goals based on the researcher's findings and the collaborative reflection process. One of these teachers identified instructional moments where re-wording in the TL, providing double or triple the input, would be more productive than direct translation. The other, who highly valued maximizing TL use, was motivated to apply some of her strategies for immersive vocabulary instruction to procedural moments, such as task instructions and classroom management, where she primarily relied on English. With this teacher, a 25-year veteran of the field, evidence of establishing a productive practitioner-researcher relationship appeared in the final semi-structured interview. She shared the following:

I think, actually, the way you have them classified helped me realize, "Okay. So... I like how I'm working with vocabulary. It works for them. Why aren't I doing that more with instructions? Why am I going to English immediately when no

one has even said 'What?'" I didn't even realize that. Yeah. And if you always do that, if you always say something in Spanish and then immediately say it in English, there's no motivation for them to try to figure out what you're saying. They just wait until you say it in English. So, I know that's wrong, but sometimes you don't realize you're even doing it. So, to have someone say, 'Hey? Look.', without you know, and it's a very comfortable...it's not like your Dr. [School Principal] telling me, you know, during my formal observation [Laughs].

This quote demonstrates the comfort that the teacher felt knowing that this reflective exercise was not performance-based or high-stakes. This research would not impact her performance evaluations or job expectations at the building or district level, and that lack of pressure was notable. For her, engaging in this process allowed her to reflect on vocational techniques in a safe and conversational space with a like-minded professional. Ultimately, all participating teachers were willing to collaborate on future research inquiries.

As I reflect on this study, I would argue that I did not lean enough into the notion of Action Research. Banegas and Consoli (9) encourage us as academic researchers to "be more vocal about the bumps, rocks, and potholes we find along the road as these will help us grow, invigorate PR [Practitioner Research] itself, and perhaps make it more attractive to practitioners because they may find it more real(istic), more critical, more meaningful" (9). In this project on teacher-talk, *my* goals were what guided the inquiry. I entered the classroom looking for something and left with that information. While it was my intention to maintain a positive rapport and collaborate with the teachers, understanding language alternation was ultimately my idea and my objective. To build a sense of community and shared space, and combat any sense of

hierarchy, I would need to balance the teachers' priorities with my own. What would the practitioners choose to examine in their practice if given the opportunity for collaborative and/or critical reflection? How might they interpret right vs. wrong if the collaborative foundation was methodologically different?

To support collective leadership among practitioners and research faculty, an action-based research agenda is necessary. One possibility is Critical Reflexive Action Research, or CRAR. Developed by Susan Weil, CRAR integrates on-site and off-site reflection and action. In off-site gatherings, a community of professionals troubleshoots "felt dilemmas" in their practice, given a strong foundation of support and trust (46). What is identified in off-site CRAR stimulates and sustains action and reflection on-site. In other words, the research collective collaborates to determine which areas require examination and troubleshooting for improvement. CRAR proposes "constructive deconstruction" (58) within a community of practice in order to advance social and organizational learning. Coupling a CRAR research methodology with Banegas and Consoli's suggested 5-step "reality check" for practitioner research (12) can assist academic researchers in prioritizing ethics of care that are essential to this type of collaboration.

CRAR might be an elusive ideal, requiring a committed community of inquiring minds ready for action with extended time to commit to the process, but the approach has potential to be powerful. Additional versions of participatory action research that are relevant to second language teaching and learning are YPAR, or Youth Participatory Action Research, which centers youth as critical research participant-leaders ("Public Science Project"), and Teacher Action Research (TAR), which is a method for educators to question, understand, and improve their own practice ("About PAR").

CONCLUSION

Classroom teachers and faculty members, parents and students, school administrators and policymakers are vested in making our classrooms effective, exciting, and relevant spaces for all. Nurturing collaboration, networking, and vertical alignment across all of these stakeholders promises to strengthen WL education as we know it today. Universities and their faculty are well-positioned to be leaders in coordinating these efforts, specifically focusing on how our research efforts can support and directly involve WL classroom teachers. Collaboratively, we can foment progress through reflective practice. Timothy Reagan and Terry Osborn discuss three levels of reflective practice, all of which are suggested in this paper as tools for collaborative efforts toward professional networking, student engagement, and strengthening the WL teacher pipeline (200). At a primary level, reflective practice helps us effectively apply our technical knowledge in the classroom. At a secondary level, reflective practice involves examining underlying assumptions, benefits, and consequences of specific methodological or pedagogical approaches in order to hone our craft. Finally, through the third level of *critical* reflective practice, we can create safe spaces to question moral and ethical decisions around equity, social justice, and ethics in WL education, and lean into Austin and Kearney's call for fostering engaged socioculturally grounded pedagogies (20). By working together as K-16 WL stakeholders, we can strengthen our abilities to dig deep into the reflective process. We can learn from each other's unique contexts and needs, ensuring better alignment and experience across all students' educational lifespans.

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