

# From Student to Teacher: A Successful Transition

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**Abstract:** *This article seeks to contribute to the emerging body of research on learning to teach a second language (L2). Specifically, it examines the learning-to-teach experience of a preservice German language teacher from her own perspective illuminating the contextual, biographical, academic, and cognitive factors affecting her development (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Freeman & Richards, 1996; Richards & Nunan, 1990). Multiple data collection instruments that generated relevant and rich data were used. They included open-ended interviews, participant observation, class videotaping and stimulus recall procedures, and lesson plans. Analysis of the data revealed that the interplay of factors, such as the learning background the participant brought with her added to her knowledge of the subject matter, her level of commitment, and an effective mentoring relationship contributed to the participant's successful, productive, and meaningful experience.*

**Key words:** *ACTFL/NCATE Standards, foreign language teacher education, learning to teach, student teaching*

**Languages:** *Relevant to all languages*

## Introduction

The present study seeks to contribute to our emerging understanding of how foreign language teachers learn to teach. More specifically, it examines the student teaching experience of a German language teacher candidate through her own eyes, shedding some light on how the participant's prior learning experiences and beliefs informed her initial practice, how she developed her teaching skills, what contextual factors affected her learning-to-teach process, and the sources from which she drew her knowledge. A qualitative study using the lenses of phenomenology was deemed appropriate to uncover the issues involved in the participants' transition from student to teacher. Surveys of the state of the art of language teacher education conducted in the last two decades show that the preparation of teachers has been based more on tradition and opinion than coming from theoretical and research-based approaches (Bernhardt & Hammadou, 1987; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Schulz, 2000; Vélez-Rendón, 2002a). This has led to the realization that to prepare language teachers better, it is essential to understand how they learn to teach by focusing on the teacher candidates themselves, their ways of knowing and their emerging practice. Inquiry into issues such as prospective teachers' previous language learning experiences, their professional education,

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their beliefs, their understanding of the subject matter they teach, their perception of their initial teaching practice, and the contextual factors affecting it, can shed some light into the complex task of learning to teach a foreign language (Freeman & Richards, 1996).

## Review of Literature

### *The Role of Previous Learning Experiences*

Research on learning to teach has sought to uncover the role that previous learning experiences, professional education courses, and field experiences play in the development of prospective teachers. Findings indicate that prior learning experiences are pivotal in shaping prospective teachers' beliefs. As a result of the *apprenticeship of observation* (Lortie, 1975), that is, the continuous exposure to teachers' work during the many years of schooling, prospective teachers develop deep-seated beliefs of what it means to teach. This belief system is paramount in the way new knowledge is acquired and interpreted and also has an enormous influence on what prospective teachers ultimately do in their classroom practice (Johnson, 1992, 1994; Moran, 1996; Numrich, 1996; Pajares, 1992). Research also indicates that the beliefs of teacher candidates tend to remain unchanged after their professional education courses (Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992). Additionally, a number of teacher candidates feel that education programs do not prepare them adequately for the challenges they face during their initial practice (Kagan, 1992; Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998). In the absence of exemplary role models, teacher candidates often fashion their initial practice after previous teachers. Although critical of the traditional images derived from their formal language learning experiences, which often conflict with their own self-images, some teacher candidates resort to those models in an effort to establish themselves in the classroom and gain authority (Johnson, 1994). It has also been found that student teachers go through various stages during their initial teaching prac-

tice (Kagan, 1992; Kwo, 1996; Mok, 1994). At the beginning, student teachers are more concerned with the image they present to students than with teaching itself. As the student teaching term progresses, they shift their focus to learning and learners and to being effective teachers.

### *The Role of the Cooperating Teachers*

The literature on learning to teach also suggests that the relationship that student teachers negotiate with their cooperating teachers can have a profound effect on their professional development (Fairbanks, Freedman, & Kahn, 2000). According to Koerner (1992), cooperating teachers are the major influence during preservice teacher education. Their role is crucial in the student teachers' socialization into the profession (Zeichner & Gore, 1990). Cooperating teachers can foster growth when they are aware of their student teachers' developmental stages and thus shape their role to address their needs. This entails serving as instructional models and sources of guidance (Fairbanks et al., 2000) and providing adequate amounts of support and challenge (Hawkey, 1997).

### *Subject-Matter Content Knowledge in Foreign Languages*

The subject-matter content knowledge of foreign language teachers was viewed as encompassed by three components: target language proficiency, knowledge about the target language civilization and culture, and knowledge about how language works (Lafayette, 1993). However, recent developments such as the ACTFL/NCATE *Program Standards for the Preparation of Foreign Language Teachers* (ACTFL, 2002) are establishing new paradigms for foreign language teacher preparation programs and thus reconceptualizing and broadening the knowledge base teachers need in order to teach a foreign language. The recently approved standards clearly outline what foreign language teachers should know and be able to do as they enter the profession. The standards also require that teacher

candidates have an Advanced Low speaking proficiency by the time they graduate which needs to be demonstrated through official testing such as the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). An adequate proficiency level is crucial for effective language teaching because as Glisan puts it

a teacher who does not possess a high level of foreign language skill is unable to plan successfully for learner-centered instruction, provide accurate and helpful target language input, tailor language to the students' level, and engage students in interactive communication which advances their language development (2001, pp. 170–171).

## Methodology

The purpose of this study was to uncover and document a preservice foreign language teacher's emerging understandings of her own learning-to-teach process and how she viewed the situation in which she was immersed. A phenomenological approach was used to examine the participant's experiences as she made the transition from student to teacher. The data for this study was drawn from a larger investigation that examined the student teaching experience of three foreign language teacher candidates<sup>1</sup>.

The participant of this study, Melanie, was a 22-year old white female enrolled in the German teacher education program at Central University, a large research school in the Midwest. She was the only child of parents working in the teaching profession and was a nonnative speaker of German. Data collection took place at Morrison High School throughout the participant's student teaching term. Morrison is a Professional Development School (PDS) site for teacher preparation programs from Central University. Melanie had completed the field experiences component of her foreign language methods course at this PDS site the previous semester and was therefore familiar with the setting when she started student teaching. All proper names are fictitious in order to ensure anonymity.

The data collection instruments included: (a) Six open-ended interviews that were conducted with the participant. [An interview was carried out with the cooperating teacher as well. All interviews were audio-taped and fully transcribed for analysis. A sample of interview protocols is presented in the Appendix]; (b) Persistent observation of the participant's learning-to-teach experience. The author visited Morrison High School at least three times weekly during data collection and often stayed for the complete school day to ensure the observation of a wide variety of situations in which the participant was immersed. Field notes describing these events were written and expanded to provide a running account of what had happened during the observations; (c) Three 90-minute lessons taught by the participant were videotaped for conducting both analysis and stimulus-recall procedures. The latter involved watching videotape segments with the participant and encouraging her to comment on her recollections of the class. Her comments were recorded and transcribed; (d) Other pertinent data such as the participant's lesson plans and instructional materials were collected. The combination of the multiple data collection sources used in this study generated relevant and rich data and afforded the means for triangulation of sources.

Data analysis followed the procedures put forward by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and took place concurrently with data collection. During the collection phase, data was read every day to identify recurrent themes, assign labels, and write comments and reflections on the researcher's emerging thinking about the data. Once data gathering was completed, all sets of data were repeatedly and closely scrutinized to test and refine the categories generated initially and to group them into patterns. This process allowed the creation of the core categories of the analysis.

## Findings

Findings of this investigation are reported using a case study format in order to pre-

serve the integrity of the participant's experience and thus provide an in-depth profile (Yin, 1984). Melanie's verbalizations were increasingly used in the development of the case study narrative to capture her perspective and her voice.

### *Educational Biography*

Melanie's previous learning experiences provided effective teaching role models to guide her practice. The characteristics that Melanie held in high esteem in these role models and that remained core values in the development of her teaching persona, were knowledge of and love for the students, knowledge of and love for the subject matter, and an encouraging and engaging approach to teaching the subject matter.

Except for six weeks of exploratory Japanese, Melanie always took German in high school. German was the language of her ancestors, it intrigued her, and she just "had no interest in French or Spanish." Melanie had also heard positive comments about the German classes from her older peers. In her first German teacher, Melanie found a powerful figure who exerted a great deal of influence on the way she conceived teaching and was a decisive factor in her choice of career:

He was just . . . really enjoyed the subject and was really animated, and loved the students, and had lots of fun ideas, and tried neat things, and didn't always go by the book. I really enjoyed his class. And he also encouraged those who did really well. I think that was one thing that encouraged me the most, it was that he just tried to make sure that everybody was doing well. He encouraged us who were doing really well in the class to pull the rest of the class, so it motivated the whole class so much. I think he is the biggest influence. (Interview 1, 3/10/99)

### *Professional Education Experiences*

Melanie found her language coursework at Central compelling and challenging. She had

some outstanding professors, who "loved the language," were "animated in class," and were able to instill in her that "there is a lot more to the language than just grammar rules." She particularly loved the literature requirements of her program. Although the language coursework helped Melanie to develop her German skills further, it was the year spent in a study abroad program that ultimately allowed her to acquire a proficiency level in German that her supervisor from the university and her cooperating teacher described as excellent. During her junior year, Melanie went to Hamburg, Germany. There, she lived with four German roommates her age who constantly challenged her to use the language and gave her a taste of the German culture.

Melanie also took a few courses during her stay in Germany that enhanced her knowledge of the German language and culture. They included German grammar, German linguistics, German phonetics, and social history of Germany in the 20th century. Melanie attributed much of the confidence she now had in her language skills and cultural knowledge to her study abroad. Had she not done it, she "would have been struggling during this time [student teaching]." Melanie understood, however, that as a nonnative speaker of German, her grasp of the language was not perfect; it was a work in progress, and there would be occasions in which she would "mess up" and make mistakes.

### *Education Coursework*

Melanie found her education coursework at Central University too theoretical; it lacked the practical side. For instance, she never learned the "real applications for the classroom" or how to structure a lesson plan. She also failed to see the "bridge" between the education and the language courses until she took the PDS foreign language methods course during her senior year. This course eased Melanie's transition into student teaching by providing some ground for the development of her pedagogical knowledge and by setting in motion

a mentoring relationship that would affect her learning-to-teach experience in a positive way. Melanie reported that the PDS experience before student teaching provided a timely opportunity for focusing her attention on how a foreign language is taught from the perspective of a teacher candidate:

I could kind of see how the students reacted to the teacher, and what worked and what didn't work; what they liked and what they didn't like. It just gave me more of a bigger scope. I didn't have any idea of what it was like before, except for what my high school experiences were, so it kind of got me back into the thinking of what a foreign language classroom would be like. (Interview 4, 4/16/99)

Additionally, Melanie indicated that working closely with Mrs. Kern, her would-be cooperating teacher, not only gave her insights into her style but also facilitated the birth of a collegial relationship. Melanie admitted that the observation component of PDS, which consisted of observing Mrs. Kern teach, became repetitive and boring after a while. Exposure to a wider range of teaching styles and provision for more teaching opportunities could, in her view, enhance the PDS experience for student teachers.

### *Initiation Into Student Teaching*

Melanie's initiation into student teaching was a busy time but it set the tone for the pace she maintained throughout to make this a successful transition into teaching. She assumed her student teaching responsibilities with great determination and dedication. Upon realizing the enormous commitment inherent in learning how to teach, she faced it the best way she knew: "by constant work [at] a steady pace." The image that best captured her transition from student to teacher was in her words "plowing through." Melanie soon established an efficient work routine in the workplace. When she was not in the classroom teaching or observing Mrs. Kern

teach, Melanie spent most of her time in the foreign language conference room busily preparing for her classes, duplicating material, preparing transparencies, and grading. Melanie was also mindful of the importance of establishing connections with people in the workplace and took the time to get to know the other foreign language teachers better. She usually stayed for an "hour or so" after the official school day was over. It gave her a chance to finish her work and to talk with the foreign language faculty who "stuck around" after school. Her cooperating teacher commended Melanie's willingness to create good work relationships. She remarked about the importance of getting along with one's colleagues and perceived that to be one of Melanie's strengths.

### *Melanie and Mrs. Kern: An Effective Mentoring Relationship*

The dynamics of the mentoring relationship established between Melanie and Mrs. Kern contributed markedly to Melanie's successful transition from student to teacher. Melanie liked Mrs. Kern as a person and looked up to her as a professional. In her cooperating teacher, Melanie found a mentor invested with attributes that closely echoed those of the teachers she admired. That is, Mrs. Kern liked what she did, "enjoy[ed] the language a lot," trusted and encouraged students to do their best, and did "fun" and "exciting" things in the classroom. On her part, Mrs. Kern found Melanie "very easy to get along with, flexible, conscientious, punctual, and dependable." By providing structured guidance appropriate for addressing Melanie's developmental needs, Mrs. Kern positively affected her learning-to-teach process. In Melanie's view the guidance provided both the support and the autonomy she needed to grow. It was neither a "lot" nor "a little either," it was just "the right amount." Mrs. Kern's assistance was evident during both the planning and the teaching process. During the planning process she acted as a fine-tuner of Melanie's lesson plan and as information and teaching materials resource. During the teaching process she assumed

the roles both of observer of Melanie's teaching, and of feedback source.

One aspect of teaching that Melanie felt totally unprepared for when she came to student teaching was lesson planning. None of her education courses had taught her how to structure a language lesson. Cognizant of this, Mrs. Kern gave Melanie some handouts and assistance about "what is expected of a basic lesson." Melanie carried out most of the planning on her own but could always count on Mrs. Kern for advice and ideas. She could also make use of the myriad resource files her cooperating teacher had accumulated over the years. After Melanie had a lesson plan in place, they went through it jointly. By asking questions that served as prompts to activate Melanie's thinking about her lesson plan and the decision making behind it, and by making suggestions of alternative ways for introducing a concept, Mrs. Kern assisted Melanie in revising and refining her lesson plan. This process contributed to the development of Melanie's pedagogical reasoning skills.

During the teaching process, Mrs. Kern acted as an observer of Melanie's teaching and as the feedback source for her performance. Particularly at the beginning of her student teaching practice, Mrs. Kern remained in the classroom sitting quietly in the back and occasionally taking notes. Afterwards, they sat down for a feedback session about the lesson. The focus of the feedback was both on the implementation of the lesson plan and on management issues. According to Melanie, Mrs. Kern shared her perception of how things went, "how the students responded" and how the "things [she] did maybe helped them [students] learn or maybe didn't help them."

Mrs. Kern also provided Melanie with the room that she needed to grow. Melanie reported that she "pretty much [could] do whatever she want[ed]" in her classes. As Melanie's planning skills developed, she became more independent in the decision-making process involved in lesson preparation. Similarly, Mrs. Kern's presence in the classroom started to decrease as Melanie

exhibited more confidence in her teaching. Melanie thought that her cooperating teacher "was in the classroom when she needed to be" and attributed Mrs. Kern supervising style to her experience:

The fact that she is very experienced, and she is very experienced! allows me more leeway. Because I think she's had enough student teachers to know that student teachers don't need to be supervised every minute of the day, or they don't have to be watched every class period or whatever, that she can give them the space to do what they want to do or they need to do. (Interview 4, 4/16/99)

### *Beliefs About Learning and Teaching a Foreign Language*

Melanie's beliefs about learning and teaching languages were forged mostly by experience. Her previous experiences as a language learner and her exposure to foreign language classrooms during PDS were the main sources informing her beliefs about how foreign languages are taught and learned. Regarding foreign language learning, Melanie believed that people acquired languages through immersion and through repetition, but not boring or rote repetition; it was essential to understand the concepts behind the repetition. Learners should also be knowledgeable about the target language's rules and patterns. In Melanie's view, motivation and dedication were paramount for learning a language as well. She strongly recommended "sticking with it even if it's frustrating." Melanie also believed that culture was an important dimension of learning a language. The inclusion of culture in the classroom contributed to making "the language more real" for students.

A belief that, by Melanie's own admission, changed as a result of her student teaching experience had to do with the use of the target language in the classroom. At the beginning, she was not sure about the feasibility of conducting the class in German. As the term progressed, however,

Melanie realized that she could “use the target language and still have students learn.” Melanie further noted:

I think I'm realizing the importance of using the target language more and more. Realizing more and more that it can be used all the time and that students can do that too. I thought that they would become discouraged or they wouldn't want to listen because it was in German, or they would get burn out or something. But I noticed that using the language a lot makes them listen more and when they do understand it, it seems like they are very proud of that. (Interview 3, 4/9/99)

### *Representation and Presentation of the Subject Matter*

The translation of the subject matter into instructional form was one of the most challenging aspects of learning to teach for Melanie. Devising effective and appealing learning activities to present the language to students took labored thinking and time. As she explained,

Things that are challenging are being organized and ready for class and coming up with new ideas, and taking these ideas and making them into something that . . . because the idea may be OK but turning that into something that students will enjoy and that they will benefit from, that I think is challenging; and making sure that they are learning through that idea. Because I can have an idea about a game or about a way to present the lesson that may seem fine to me, but when I get up there, it's obvious to me that I did something that isn't getting the material across to them or I think about the activity for three days in a row and still it's not enough. And then to make sure that I'm really teaching them and it's not just an idea that I want to do. (Interview 2, 3/18/99)

Melanie was also mindful of the importance of presenting simple material in appropriate ways:

I've found that things like teaching someone to say, “How are you?” or “What is your name? My name is . . . ,” is simple material but you need to be able to present that to high school students in a way that isn't boring and in a way that isn't too simplistic. (Interview 3, 3/9/99)

With the advanced classes, Melanie was concerned not only about the mechanics of subject matter presentation but also about having sufficient subject matter knowledge. That implied using the language accurately and explaining complex grammatical rules in a clear manner. In Melanie's words, that meant having the “background to back up for the activities, knowing how the language works.” Melanie's cooperating teacher gave some insight into her emerging skills at explaining grammatical concepts at the beginning of her student teaching practice:

I think she wasn't as good at explaining things at first. I think she was a little bit nebulous when she explained things. She knew what she meant but it wasn't always on a clear level to the kids. (Mrs. Kern, Interview, 4/28/99)

### *Developing a Teaching Approach*

Melanie fashioned her approach to teaching German both after her previous German language teachers and after her cooperating teacher. In Melanie's view the former offered acceptable models she could access to guide her teaching practice. As she explained,

I have been able to see good professors and good teachers in the way they've taught me and how they've responded, and I can think about that and use it in my teaching. (Interview 1, 3/10/99)

Melanie's cooperating teacher provided the most accessible teaching model. Melanie “picked up a lot of her teaching

styles just because [she] like[d] them.” It “seem[ed] like she like[d] to get the kids involved with the language and do fun things like skits and games” and she definitely subscribed to this kind of approach to language teaching. For Melanie, a fun approach did not necessarily mean casting herself in the perpetual role of entertainer drawing from a magic bag of tricks, but rather it meant developing a set of practices that truly engaged the interest of students and “still help them practice and thus learn aspects of the language.”

The atmosphere in Melanie’s classroom was quite engaging. She used a varied array of interesting activities within each lesson and across lessons. For her, both variety and pace were key elements for addressing students’ learning styles and needs. When asked how she dealt with these issues in the classroom, Melanie responded that it was by:

doing a variety of activities. Just doing different things and having them work with other people who are maybe at different levels than them. It helps to see what they need to improve on or what they need to help others with, but I give a pretty general lesson for everyone. I think my pace is the thing I totally regulate the most, as far as if people are learning it or not. Because for some people the pace is too soft and for some people the pace is too fast, so I try to go kind of in the middle. But as far as special needs and things, I give just pretty much the same lesson for every one. (Interview 5, 5/28/99)

Melanie’s approach to presenting culture, however, was limited to providing factual information about the German culture mainly using the textbook as a resource. She indicated that her supervisor from the university challenged her “a lot to incorporate culture more into [her] lesson plans.” Melanie understood that culture was a broad term that encompassed many different dimensions. She also was aware that she needed to develop her skills for teaching

culture further. When asked what kind of teaching situations she needed to try in the future, Melanie said:

I think I need to try more getting culture incorporated into my lesson. I think I can talk about my own experiences in Germany, but there are definitely other experiences in Germany to tell about that I didn’t experience personally and that go on in different areas in the country and that are important. (Interview 6, 5/5/99)

### *Language Use in the Classroom*

Consistent with her growing belief that teachers could “use the target language and still have students learn,” Melanie increasingly spoke German in her classroom. She used German both for instruction and for classroom management purposes. Occasionally, responding to students’ needs for clarification, Melanie switched into English. She also used English to reinforce instructions and criteria for assigned tasks or to provide feedback when deemed necessary. Melanie estimated that she used German approximately 80% of the time at the beginning of student teaching. One of her goals was to increase its use more. As the term progressed Melanie began to understand the importance of increasing student-talking time as well. Her reaction when watching her first videotaped lesson indicated her realization of the importance of providing more opportunities for student talking. In evaluating the videotaped lesson Melanie said

As far as teaching the material, I think there are ways I can make it more focused on them, instead of on me constantly. I talk a lot, and I think getting them to talk more would be better. (Stimulus recall 1, 4/15/99)

Melanie began employing more pair and group activities to maximize students’ engagement with the language. She later contended that using “a variety of things where students use the language and communicate with others” was the most impor-



tant part of creating a learning environment in the classroom. Activities observed in Melanie's classroom contributing to maximize student-talking time included information-gap tasks, descriptions of pictures, skits, role-plays, and games. Melanie found students' ability to generate language a most satisfactory and rewarding aspect of teaching a foreign language: "[It is] so neat just to see them learning different concepts and for me to ask them a question that they probably never heard before in this language and them being able to respond." (Interview 3, 4/9/99).

### *Developing a Management Style*

As with many novice teachers, Melanie entered student teaching with much self-doubt in her ability to establish authority. Although she felt ready "to stand in front of the students language wise," she worried that her "nonthreatening" and "non-authoritative" demeanor would keep her from gaining students' respect. Melanie reported feeling "kind of intimidated actually" at the very beginning. Also as with many novice teachers, Melanie sought to stick to safe strategies such as a focus on planning instruction aimed at preventing student misbehavior at the start of her teaching practice. As Melanie felt more confident in her role as teacher, she was able to focus more on student instruction than on student control. She developed an understanding that mutual respect was the key for classroom management, that there was more to it than enforcing rules. She also realized that student behavior was not always a reflection of how they truly felt; therefore, it was necessary to learn how to interpret and respond to students' actions without alienating them.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The findings of this study suggest that for the participant, student teaching represented a crucial stage in the journey to becoming a German language teacher. The findings also underline the notion that learning to teach is an ongoing and complex process

and the sum of many cognitive, individual, educational, experiential, and contextual factors (Freeman & Richards, 1996). In Melanie's case, the background she brought to the learning experience, particularly in terms of subject matter knowledge, coupled with the level of investment and an effective mentoring relationship made her student teaching successful, meaningful, and productive.

The participant reported that her education coursework, excepting the PDS methods course, did not appear to have had a significant impact on her development. The education program reportedly did not provide Melanie with opportunities to make meaningful connections between theory and practice and examine her belief system in the light of theory until the very end. The set of beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning that the participant brought with her were shaped mainly by her previous experiences as a language learner and by her PDS field experience. This finding lends some support to previous findings about the negligible impact of education coursework on prospective teachers (Johnson, 1996; Kagan, 1992; Wideen et al., 1998). These researchers argue that teacher education programs fail to assist students in making the connection between the theoretical and practical components of their coursework. Calls have been made in the last few years to move from the prevailing transmissive approaches, in which sets of codified knowledge are passed onto teacher candidates, to more reflective and inquiry-based approaches (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Freeman & Richards, 1996; Richards & Nunan, 1990). A reflective approach would provide teacher candidates with the theoretical foundations of the profession and the reflective and critical thinking skills to bridge the gap between theory and practice. It would also provide increasing opportunities for prospective teachers to examine their beliefs in the light of theory and develop their own theories. As Johnson (2002, p. 8) put it, teachers' theorizing, that

is “the knowledge produced out of teachers’ own lived realities” is also crucial for their development.

It was also found that study abroad was a determinant factor in the participant’s acquisition of the German language. Reportedly the year spent abroad enhanced Melanie’s cultural and linguistic proficiency to an extent that would not have been otherwise possible. This enabled her to use the target language in a confident manner during student teaching and allowed her to focus on developing her pedagogical skills. This finding supports claims by Lafayette (1993) and Schulz (2000) about the crucial role of study abroad in the achievement of the proficiency level required for teaching in the classroom. Many questions have been raised over the years about the ability of university language coursework to provide prospective language teachers with an adequate proficiency level (Huebner, 1995; Lafayette, 1993; Lange & Sims, 1990; Schulz, 2000). The traditional model places the burden of language acquisition in the first two years.

The findings of this study also indicate that Melanie’s background knowledge added to her level of commitment, and this coupled with an effective mentoring relationship allowed her to move steadily and efficiently through the stages student teachers typically experience during their time in the field and make a successful transition into teaching. The initial phase is characterized by a focus on themselves rather than on pupils, a preoccupation with their self-images, and an emphasis on class control and instruction geared to discourage misbehavior. Then, as the term progresses, student teachers standardize their routines, automate their procedures, and adjust their self-images. This finally enables them to shift their attention to instruction and then to students (Kagan, 1992; Numrich, 1996; Wideen et al., 1998). Although Melanie’s transition through these stages did not appear as clear-cut or linear as depicted in the literature, it was apparent that she reached a phase in

which she was increasingly focusing on students and student learning, rather than on herself. For Melanie, the development both of her teaching skills and of a caring relationship with her students was at the core of the development of her teaching persona, as was the knowledge and love for the subject matter that she had admired in her former instructors and desired to instill in her students. Melanie clearly understood the level of commitment required of student teachers and put in the time and effort necessary for meeting the responsibilities placed upon her. The level of commitment has been identified as a critical factor in the success of the student teaching endeavor (Bullough, Knowles, & Crow, 1991). It is crucial that teacher candidates understand beforehand the practical demands posed by teaching. This finding also suggests the need for language teacher education programs to examine teacher candidates’ dispositions early in their course of study to ensure that they are willing to undertake the immense responsibilities placed before them.

The findings also indicate that Melanie developed classroom practices that progressively incorporated the elements she had come to view as important in the foreign language teaching/learning process. Melanie’s emerging approach to teaching exhibited many of the features present in classrooms deemed communicative. She understood the importance of providing comprehensible input in German, promoting meaningful communication in the classroom and sought to create a learning atmosphere where the German language was utilized increasingly. On the other hand, Melanie found the integration of culture in her classroom more difficult to achieve. She was aware that this dimension of her teaching was just emerging and needed further development. Having lived and studied in the target culture for a year, Melanie undoubtedly had the cultural experiential knowledge desired of language teachers, however her approach to teaching culture was limited to teaching facts

from the book. This finding is not surprising, given the lack of appropriate culture training components in teacher education programs. Moore (1996) argued for a more intensive and articulate approach to preparing teachers for teaching culture. This is particularly crucial as the profession strives to implement the Standards for Foreign Language Learning (National Standards, 1999) that places the teaching of culture and cross-cultural understanding at the center of language learning.

The findings also point to the positive impact that PDS experiences and effective mentoring have on the participant's development of pedagogical content knowledge. Varghese (2002, p. 3) suggested that much of the knowledge base of teachers is situated; the author argues that "learning and understanding occur as people participate in activities where they increasingly become participants." Well-conceived clinical programs, such as PDS, that engage teacher candidates in meaningful participatory field experiences can result in the development of the pedagogical skills and the acquisition of relevant contextual knowledge about schools and schooling. Similarly, the centrality of the mentoring relationship in the learning-to-teach process has been documented by a number of researchers (Agee, 1996; Fairbanks et al., 2000; Hawkey, 1997). Cooperating teachers that define their role in terms of their student teachers' developmental needs and are committed to their guidance contribute immensely to their growth, as occurred in Melanie's case. This finding suggests that serious attention needs to be paid to the negotiation of effective relationships between student teachers and cooperating teachers. The responsibility of language teacher education programs is to build and nurture the collaborative partnerships that would ensure meaningful, productive and a varied range of learning experiences for teacher candidates.

## Conclusion

This study examined the student teaching experience of a German language teacher

candidate from her perspective. It shed some light on the biographical, cognitive, academic, personal, and contextual factors affecting the participant's development. It illustrated how the interplay of these factors contributed to her productive student teaching experience. This type of inquiry is vital to inform the development of a more principled theoretical base for teacher education. However, the situated nature of student teaching and the fact that this is just but one case study must be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings. Although the study provided a richly complex description of a successful experience, the findings are not necessarily a reflection of the state of the art of foreign language teacher education. In fact, concern about its low standards has led the profession in a quest for reform, resulting in such developments as the Program Standards for the Preparation of Foreign Language Teachers (ACTFL, 2002). The standards draw upon the growing knowledge base on learning to teach and upon research on second language acquisition to provide both a vision for high quality teacher education and a clear framework for language teacher preparation programs to guide change.

However, implementing the standards is not simply a matter of making a few surface changes. Consequently, it poses enormous and pressing challenges, particularly for departments of foreign languages, which are now accountable for the quality of their work in ways they have never been before. The expected goals for language teaching majors regarding their content area expertise are outlined in great detail in Standards 1 (Language, Linguistics, Comparisons) and 2 (Cultures, Literatures, Cross-Disciplinary Concepts) (ACTFL, 2002). The responsibility for implementing these standards lies with foreign language departments<sup>2</sup>. To meet them, faculty must introduce the curricular changes necessary for the desired outcomes and to devise assessment systems that would generate the performance-based evidence required for NCATE review. Similarly, departments

of foreign languages have to respond to the mandate of the standards which raised the proficiency language level required of prospective teachers from Intermediate to Advanced-Low. As Melanie's case study illustrated, an adequate proficiency level is crucial for developing effective language teaching skills, thus the new mandate is a move in the right direction to ensure that teacher candidates are better equipped to teach the target language and culture in ways that incorporate the Standards for Foreign Language Learning. In order to guarantee this outcome, foreign language faculty must devise an ongoing assessment system to measure teacher candidates' proficiency levels at several points and provide them with feedback and the necessary correctives if they do not achieve the required level (ACTFL, 2002).

The inclusion of a rigorous study abroad program for language teacher candidates is highly encouraged by the ACTFL/NCATE program standards. Participation in this type of experience is essential for achieving the expertise required for effective language teaching as current thinking suggests and Melanie's case study indicated. Therefore, efforts need to be made to provide such an opportunity for all teacher candidates. We need to recognize, however, that making study abroad a requirement may result in an exclusionary practice particularly for nontraditional and minority teacher candidates that do not possess the economic resources to participate in such programs. Foreign language departments in schools that enroll students with fewer resources must either allocate funds to alleviate the additional hardships posed by study abroad or devise good immersion alternatives for teacher candidates who cannot afford this type of experience. Globalization and the Internet have opened a myriad of contexts in which language learners can come together with speakers of the target language to practice their skills in meaningful ways and in authentic settings. By incorporating technology and methodologies such as service learning, department of foreign

languages can facilitate learners' access to different communities of practice available through these mediums. Additionally, language teacher candidates must be made aware from the outset that their own agency and investment in the learning process is crucial for success. Language learning is a long, complex process and much of language acquisition happens outside the confines of the classroom, therefore, language teacher candidates must seize every opportunity available to them to enhance their competencies.

It may be some time before the actual impact of ACTFL/NCATE program standards can be fully observed. In order to fine-tune the standards and assess their effectiveness is necessary to collect data and disseminate findings. It is through such systematic process that we can advance in our pursuit of a more principled and theoretical approach to language teacher education.

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## Notes

1. For a related case study, see Vélez-Rendón (2002b).
2. Standards 3, 4, 5, and 6 are mainly the domain of education coursework, specially the foreign language methods course. It is crucial that the faculty member in charge of this course works collaboratively with the school of education and the foreign language department to coordinate efforts to align the teacher education program to the standards.

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## Appendix

### *Sample of Participant's Interview Protocol*

1. What is the source of your ideas about language teaching?
2. How are you developing as a language teacher?
3. What are your strengths as a language teacher?
4. What are your limitations at present?
5. What do you think you need to improve on?
6. Are there any contradictions in your teaching?
7. Tell me a positive teaching experience that you have had?
8. Tell me a negative teaching experience that you have had?
9. What satisfaction does language teaching give you?
10. What is the most valuable thing about language teaching that you have learned so far?
11. Previous ideas or beliefs that have been challenged or changed as a result of your experiences in the school and classroom
12. Previous ideas that have been reinforced as a result of these new field of experiences
13. What are the characteristics of an effective foreign language teacher?
14. How has your continued work (PDS and student teaching) at Morrison influenced your approach to teaching foreign languages?