

*"I kind of just learned it – you know, by my Mom."*  
- Ysabel<sup>1</sup>, Latin@ college woman

When I stop to think about the ways I have come to understand how students learn to use language in its many different forms, perhaps the most poignant lessons stem from students themselves. Ysabel, a Latin@ college woman, was at first quick to diminish her Spanish language skills, because her academic experiences had been conducted exclusively in English; she never had the opportunity to study her heritage language in a school setting, and therefore assumed that her Spanish writing skills were substandard. Nevertheless, she penned a detailed, comprehensible Spanish translation of a literary text, as a participant in a translanguaging research study. I asked Ysabel how she learned to write in Spanish, and she replied, "I kind of just learned it – you know, by my Mom." Some years later, her response continues to impress upon me the need to merge students' home literacy practices with the learning objectives of individual courses. Given the appropriate framing, students like Ysabel can begin to recontextualize the highly sophisticated language skills they already possess, proudly cultivating an awareness of being bilingual. In the M.Ed. and Ed.S. classes that I teach to students enrolled in English Language Learner (ELL) education programs, I place stories like Ysabel's at the center of analysis, challenging my teacher-learners to come up with strategy-oriented methods to support the literacy development of linguistically minoritized students.

At Vanderbilt University, I have worked with Master's level teacher-learners to identify and critique traditional methods of literacy instruction, with the ultimate goal of illuminating the life experiences, prior knowledge, and strategic abilities that second language learners bring with them to the classroom. My teacher-learners develop lesson plans that demonstrate the theoretical foundations of second language literacies, while simultaneously subscribing to a culturally sustaining pedagogy that leverages students' language and cultural backgrounds. Similarly, at Lipscomb University, I have developed grammar courses for ELL teachers that underscore the grammatical structures of different languages of the world, connecting these features to basic linguistics principles related to phonetics, pronunciation, and native language transfer. My ELL teachers have the opportunity to extend these principles to the greater Nashville community by planning and leading a Family Literacy Night for middle school students and their families. Each semester, we celebrate a diverse selection of young adult literature, highlighting some of the 130 countries that Nashville Public School students represent. In all of the courses that I teach, I emphasize the role of literature as a conduit to improving literacy outcomes, harkening back to my humanities training as a scholar and instructor of Hispanic languages and literatures.

Apart from the range of university level courses I have taught, I believe I encountered some of my most influential experiences as an educator while leading K-12 students on tours of the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) in Salem, MA. At the PEM, I developed and implemented lesson plans for special exhibitions, adhering to MA state guidelines for academic field trips. Witnessing firsthand the absolute joy that my students experienced, simply because they had the opportunity to step outside the confines of a traditional learning environment, has left a lasting impact on my perspective toward learning in general. In conversations with my students' classroom teachers, they would marvel over the creative output of students who were deemed "low-performers." These experiences taught me that when students can connect learning objectives to meaningful, real-world applications, their understandings are made richer by the social interactions giving rise to their knowledge uptake. As a teacher educator, I reinforce this belief by connecting theory to practice, and by integrating the voices of countless students like Ysabel, that have so greatly influenced my teaching practices over the past nine years.

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym