

# Preparing Preservice Teachers to Work with Emergent Bilingual Students: Highlights From an Exploratory Service-Learning Trip to Central Mexico

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## Abstract

*It is important to build preservice teachers' self-efficacy in working with diverse learners. During summer of 2021, faculty from a mid-sized public university in the southwest took a small group of preservice teachers into central Mexico to provide opportunities in working with diverse learners and/or emergent bilingual students. Although this foray into central Mexico was an exploratory trip to plan for future International Field-Experiences for preservice teachers, the trip involved a lot of service and a lot of learning. Jacoby (2015) defines service-learning as "a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs" (p.1). While this project to central Mexico was not tied to any coursework, preservice teachers and university faculty engaged in service-learning that was mutually beneficial to all stakeholders. At the same time, preservice teachers gained self-efficacy in their ability to support the needs of emergent bilingual students. Students and faculty from the university worked with approximately 22 children in a remote village in central Mexico, with support from translators. Through this experience, a unique bonding experience took place. For five consecutive days, faculty and preservice teachers worked with emergent bilingual students ranging in age from four to fourteen. Only a few translators assisted with communication, but they were able to support the faculty and preservice teachers during literacy and educational technology instruction. The second author received support for translations as she conducted vision and hearing screenings for students, parents, and community members. The experience was life changing. Faculty, through this experience, recognized their own bias towards another cultures' fundamental beliefs about education and medical needs, a humbling experience. However, it prepared students and faculty to learn and grow from others with differing views.*

*keywords:* service-learning, Ed Tech, vision screenings, hearing screenings

## Introduction

During summer of 2021, employees from a major university system in the southwest traveled to Mexico with preservice teachers to engage in literacy instruction, educational technology lessons, and vision/hearing screenings with EC-8 students in a small, remote village in central Mexico. Of the many obstacles facing this venture, the primary obstacle was Covid-19 and the Delta variant, which was hitting parts of the world at the time of travel. Through this experience, faculty and preservice teachers learned about a community of students who faced

struggles that were quite different than their own; but through helpful translators, and mass vision and hearing screenings, students in the village received medical screenings and literacy instruction.

Along with real-life learning lessons that included cultural similarities and differences between the two countries, faculty and preservice teachers also saw first-hand distinctions in educational practices. Preservice teachers instructed emergent bilingual students of varying ages in a one-room schoolhouse. Instruction took place from approximately 8:30 a.m. until noon Monday through Friday. The shortened instructional day during a summer month did not seem odd until it was revealed that a three-to-four-hour school day was typical for these students. The first and third authors are faculty working with preservice teachers in an Educational Preparation Program. State standards and state mandated testing of students and preservice teachers (i.e., certification exams) are constant stressors. The idea of a shortened instructional day was alarming from this stance. However, both authors have mixed views on testing and believe an over-abundance of emphasis is placed on assessments.

The second author is a certified teacher and a registered nurse. Her primary purpose was focused on conducting vision/hearing screenings. Results of screenings were not surprising, but the response from families was surprising and another learning moment for the authors. The experiences and lessons learned during this exploratory service-learning project will be shared for others who may want to venture out into the world for a culturally rich learning experience, while also building capacity in emergent bilingual students and preservice teachers.

## **Planning and preparation**

For the travelers, planning and preparation were critical. The university system partners with a research facility in central Mexico, which had been hosting other faculty and college students to work with emergent bilingual children and adolescents in a nearby small town, covering topics like literacy, agriculture, business, and English language instruction. The research facility is under the direction of a married couple with ties to the university system. Both have dual citizenship. They work closely with the community on access, equity, and inclusion. Some of the towns in the area lack access to paved roads, making travel to and from smaller towns a lengthy ordeal, especially during the rainy season. Likewise, city buses cannot travel down the dirt roads due to foliage, deep ruts in the road, and other natural phenomena. This makes travel difficult. Providing services to persons living in the smaller towns is essential. The facility hosts work closely with townspeople. Every year, a theme is identified by faculty and personnel working at the research facility, along with input from local educators and parents. This builds support for the project and allows all stakeholders to have buy-in and a voice.

All researchers bringing groups of college students to the area incorporate the identified theme into the overall learning experiences and/or desired student learning outcomes (SLOs). During this project, a theme of wellness was developed, due in part to the ongoing pandemic everyone in the world was experiencing. In summers' past, college students and faculty worked in the areas of business, education, and agriculture, depending on students' majors, but there had never been any instruction in educational technology. This occurred to a greater extent than originally planned prior to arriving on site. Using tech was a popular tool for the older elementary and middle school students. The first author has introduced technology across multiple grade levels in the United States and has found students easily learn how to code

through trial-and-error. Students in Mexico just as easily picked up the coding and deftly worked with the technology in a manner like their American counterparts.

Like the technology, outreach for medical screening or assessments had not been proposed by previous researchers. The second author, a registered nurse and educator, worked with community members in the United States to obtain equipment and have permission forms translated into Spanish to ensure parental permission was obtained prior to assessing any students in Mexico. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, more stringent measures for approval were in place for all activities. Once every department provided its required international safety trainings and clearance, the preparation was underway. Faculty and students gathered to further develop lesson plans, assessments, English instruction for emergent bilingual students, and engaging hands-on activities. The theme of wellness and community were incorporated into every facet of the plans to fit into the larger research system theme for the destination.

### **Cultural Immersion**

From the moment the group landed in Mexico one warm summer evening, cultural immersion was in full bloom. With only one translator divided between five people who kept getting separated, things were difficult. Going through customs to enter a foreign country was a new experience for many in the group, and there were difficulties with some of the educational technology brought into the country for use with the students. Fees/taxes to cover the cost of the technology, along with other paperwork was unexpected. All information and directions occurred in Spanish, and there were no additional supervisors to talk to for further explanations or translations. Ultimately, all taxes and fees were paid, documents were filled out, and entering the country was completed.

Despite initial difficulties, faculty and preservice teachers experienced the beauty of the people and colorful landscapes for the duration of the trip. Mannerisms, clothing, and language barriers made it obvious to local inhabitants that a small group of foreigners were traveling through their towns and cities. Nevertheless, people in the communities were welcoming, greeting everyone in a friendly and engaging manner, smiling, waving, and giving directions to various parts of their beautiful country. The community members demonstrated a robust pride in their country's culture and heritage, along with pride in the lives they had built for their families and communities. An overwhelming feeling of welcome pervaded conversations, encounters, and excursions. When traveling to Mexico, or another country, it is critical to immerse students and faculty in a true cultural experience. Although this group of travelers experienced touristy cities, many of the excursions were away from the more popular areas tourists visit. One trip to a local flea market, where bargaining was encouraged, was especially important in building capacity in preservice teachers because all bargaining had to be done in Spanish. This allowed the group to practice honing newfound language skills. The primary purpose of the trip was to work with emergent bilinguals and build capacity in preservice teachers, but the thread of a beautiful new culture wove through the entire experience.

### **Building Capacity in Preservice Teachers and Emergent Bilinguals**

Structured service-learning experiences that provide preservice teachers with opportunities to understand how to tap into the cultural capital (DiMaggio, 1982; Dumais, 2002) emergent bilingual students bring to a learning environment can serve as a powerful pedagogical

tool (Toronyi, 2020). Jacoby (2015) noted that service-learning can augment an undergraduate student's experience through enhanced "moral development, empathy, efficacy, sense of personal and social responsibility, and commitment to service during and after college" (p. 11). Likewise, providing preservice teachers with opportunities to apply culturally and linguistically responsive teaching (Gay, 2002; Hollie, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1997) in real world settings, through lived-experiences and meaningful interactions, may enhance preservice teachers' self-efficacy in meeting the needs of emergent bilingual students. The primary purpose in traveling to central Mexico was to enhance preservice teachers' awareness and use of pedagogical strategies needed to support students who are emergent bilingual. The overall experience went beyond expectations, and these preservice teachers bonded with each other to support the needs of the students they were there to instruct.

Prior to arriving in Mexico, lesson plans were developed for kinder, first, and second graders. Personnel at the research facility advised faculty to prepare for students in grades K-2. However, within a few minutes on day one at the school, it was apparent that students' ages ranged from early childhood to middle school grades. There was a quick change in plans, a great lesson for preservice teachers, and the older students were pulled outside to work with floor-robots with the first author. The third author took the lead in literacy and English instruction inside the one-room, multi-age schoolhouse, working with preservice teachers to ensure the literacy lessons were modified to be engaging and effective for all students.

**Differentiation.** Differentiation of instruction was immediate, with preservice teachers adapting lessons to support K-4 student learning, while fifth through eighth graders were instructed in the use of floor-robots outside the school. Although preservice teachers understood the idea of differentiation, they were not expecting it to be the first thing they needed to do to support student learning. This real-world pedagogical practice, put into place while instructing emergent bilingual students, was impactful and beneficial. After the first day of teaching, preservice teachers spent hours revising their lessons to ensure they could meet the needs of all students over the next four days. Their efforts were productive, and the embedded arts activities were a bonus (Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1. *Rainbow Fish Drawings by Students*



**Educational Activities.** To ensure that students could make a connection to literacy lessons, preservice teachers carefully selected books that contained text in Spanish and English. Likewise, they tried to select books at an appropriate age level. Initially, during the planning stage in the United States, lesson development and embedded strategies focused on grades K-2; so Spanish/English books like *A Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1994) and *The Rainbow Fish*

(Pfister, 1992) were selected. After the first day, preservice teachers scrambled to address the wider range of ages.

Figure 2. *Flags of Mexico accompanying a lesson on compare/contrast flags*



The first author had planned to introduce educational technology in a more limited fashion to the second graders during one day of instruction. However, after the realization that students' ages were wider in range, the first author pulled older students outside on day one and each day afterwards, working with them on coding and programming two different kinds of floor-robots (Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3 *Working with Roamer floor-robot on blue tarp*



Preservice teachers and faculty designed literacy lessons embedded with English language acquisition activities and enriching art activities. For example, when teaching *The Rainbow Fish*, preservice teachers chose to focus on vocabulary that included colors in the English language to assist with acquisition. The story was read in English and Spanish, with opportunities for questions and dialogue during readings. Translators assisted in supporting students and preservice teachers as they worked on elements of the story, theme, plot, and characters. An arts embedded activity that promoted colors was developed to enhance learning (Figure 1).

Figure 4 *Working with Thymio floor-robot*



Differentiation is an important aspect of pedagogical practice, but this is usually done in a single grade level. Preservice teachers quickly discovered that teaching multiple ages in a one-room schoolhouse held a host of difficulties. Conversely, they learned that multi-age instruction has many proven benefits for students. The process of grouping and regrouping students for instruction afforded greater opportunities for learning to occur in a supportive classroom environment (Ritland & Eighmy, 2013). Like the United States, Mexican students experienced some level of educational loss during shut down periods of the pandemic. Due to Covid-19, the regular public school was closed, and one family had erected a small school on their property. In previous years, summer-school was held at the local public school, with rooms available for the different grade levels. This was not possible in summer of 2021; but modifications and accommodations were quickly made to support instructional time. Of note, attendance at summer school was voluntary; but every morning, approximately 22 students showed up for instruction. All the K-4 children squeezed inside the one-room schoolhouse for the three hours of literacy and English language instruction. The older students were left working outside in the school yard. For the first two days of instruction, a blue tarp was available to use on the ground. On the third day, the tarp was taken to a construction site, and the first author and older children made do with a wooden door. Although narrow, it was a perfect tool to facilitate instruction with the floor-robots (Figure 5).

Figure 5 Working with Roamer floor-robot on an old door



**Cognates.** Preservice teachers learned the value of cognates for teaching, as well as for their own benefit while in Mexico. They searched for useful cognates during their instructional planning time. Cognates are words that are very similar between the English and Spanish languages, and they can facilitate comprehension of content more quickly. For example, the following words are spelled identically in Spanish and English: chocolate, animal, and regular. Pronunciation is different between the languages. Other near perfect cognates include: celebration/*celebración*, formation/*formación*, and numerous/*numeroso*. Nagy et al. (1993) suggested that “instruction in the use of cognates might help Hispanic bilingual students overcome some of the difficulties that they face with English reading vocabulary” (p. 253).

Similarly, the use of cognates to support English-only preservice teachers’ instructional strategies was beneficial during the week. For example, cognates were useful during a compare/contrast lesson that included *The Rainbow Fish*. The Spanish word for fish is *pescado*. One preservice teacher knew that pescatarian was a diet related to fish, and she was able to make a connection between *pescado* and fish. In contrast, the Spanish word for rainbow is *arcoíris*. There is no resemblance to the word in English, but a definition was not needed. Preservice teachers merely needed a translation; likewise, K-4 students listening to the story read in both languages only needed a translation. Everyone was familiar with the concept of a rainbow. Thus, preservice teachers’ pedagogical practices were enhanced during the week; and now, all three are familiar with a few more research-based, instructional strategies necessary to support emergent bilingual students in learning language and content.

Like cognates, it is important for preservice teachers to understand the difference between basic intercommunication skills and cognitive academic language proficiency (Cummins, 1979). It takes less time to master basic communication, and much more time to master academic language. Supporting emergent bilingual students as they enter K-12 schools is vital to ensuring their success along the way. During their time in Mexico, preservice teachers experienced what it was like to try and speak a second language to obtain basic information such as directions, the cost of an item at the market, and/or information related to menu items. Through this experience, preservice teachers may have a better understanding of what future emergent bilingual students in their classrooms may face during instruction. Preservice teachers were anxious and nervous when they had to speak Spanish. They rehearsed phrases but were

often unprepared for the quick pace of the Spanish speaker responding to their request for a price, directions, etc. Speaking another language can be a frightening, overwhelming, and intimidating experience. This information may provide preservice teachers with a connection to bilingual students' initial use of the English language.

**Non-instructional learning.** The American status of the group was hard to hide; but it was especially prevalent during a break from lessons and assessments to interact with children in a game of football, or as we call it, soccer. Within minutes of playing, the children's smiles and excitement faded. When asked, the interpreter relayed that football is played without hands. The second author did not realize that the rules of soccer are mandatory, and no playing around would be tolerated. As soon as the value and integrity of this sport was understood, along with a run-down of the rules for soccer, the smiles and fun returned. It was a part of the cultural immersion that was completely unexpected. Football is a revered sport in Mexico, and pride and integrity in the rules of the game run deep from an early age. Importantly, mutual respect of this sport and their cultural norms was expected.

### **Community Engagement, Cultural Aspects, and Advocacy**

Another strong lesson learned from the host couple who own and operate the research facility was the art of teaching advocacy. It is critical to teach others to advocate for their children, their family, and themselves. Donors come and go, providing necessities such as books to schools and communities; but teaching advocacy can last generations. Education in the public school system in this small rural community lasted approximately three to four hours per day, which included recess, lunch, and breaks. This is quite different than the American educational system. Preservice teachers had difficulty in comprehending how all the standards could be taught with so few teaching hours in a day. However, children had other responsibilities at home, including taking care of siblings, working in a family business, or assisting with more demanding household chores. For the preservice teachers, this was a cultural difference that was vastly different than what they had expected. Children as young as eight and nine were expected to be participating members of the family and community. In spite of this, the parents in the community want the best for their children; and understanding, acknowledging, and respecting this cultural norm was important for preservice teachers and faculty.

**Advocating.** Parents recognized the opportunities that the summer school provided for their children to: (a) learn English, (b) be exposed to other cultures, (c) engage in literacy learning, and (d) engage in educational activities. The 2021 summer session also provided an opportunity to regain some of the lost education from the school shutdown during the pandemic. Of the approximately 200 students who attend the public school, a mere fraction attended the summer sessions; and many of the parents advocated for their children to attend because they recognized the value of the experience. Although the school day was much shorter, the children engaged in valuable, instructional material.

In addition to shortened educational time, there are other activities and community resources these students do not have access to, and that Americans may take for granted. For example, almost every town in America has a public library that is free for the community to use. In the small, remote village, a library would be a luxury. Currently, one sponsor of the town is looking to start a small library to allow children access to books outside of school. However, the



community must value the idea of a commodity such as a library and view it as an essential part of their children’s education. Likewise, someone must teach the community that the books are to be checked-out and returned by a deadline. Teaching parents to advocate for a community library to enhance their children’s access to books is an area that is under consideration.

**Attendance.** Education is considered extremely important. Still, many young children were unable to attend due to home and work obligations. One young girl missed a few days because she was “grounded”. Several students were only allowed to attend if they brought their younger, pre-school-aged siblings. This practice continued even though it was discouraged because no one is available to babysit small ones; young siblings would sit beside their older sibling as they participated in literacy or educational technology activities. However, the more important aspect was that a child with a younger sibling was present, engaged, and learning.

**Community resources.** The preservice teachers did their best to keep everyone engaged in the lessons, and all students in attendance were like sponges, absorbing every learning experience available. They relished in learning a new language, often showing off their newly acquired vocabulary. Still, it was extremely difficult to differentiate instruction. Even with the change in instructional strategies, the outside area was not ideal due to the natural terrain. Nevertheless, it was critical to work with the strengths found within the community, rather than focus on aspects that might appear to be potential barriers. Each community shared their resources to support education and the academic opportunities provided to their children. Throughout the week, the older students delighted in learning how to program the floor-robots to make geometric patterns. This was expected, though, as American fourth and fifth graders had also enjoyed working with the educational technology (Casey et al., 2018)..

**Health Screenings.** The best lesson plans are useless if the student cannot see the board or hear the teacher. Students looked forward to the instruction, but they were also excited for the vision and hearing screenings (Figure 6); and importantly, all students returned the parental permission forms.

Figure 6 *The second author performing a hearing screening*



Vision and hearing screenings are critical to improve students' educational experience and success (Wang et. al., 2011). As a School Nurse, a primary goal for the second author was to identify children who may need diagnostic examinations, refer children for professional examinations, follow up on referrals to encourage that recommendations are followed, and collaborate with educators to provide students' support in the educational environment (<https://www.dshs.texas.gov/vhs/manual.shtm>).

The second author experienced some consternation in comparing the health screening process in the United States with the one encountered in Mexico. Typically, a school nurse will have direct contact with resources for referrals, know who to call when there is a financial need, know classroom set-ups for required accommodations, and, most importantly, maintain contact with students for years. The process encountered in Mexico was startlingly different. There were seven days to: (a) get permission slips returned, (b) build relationships to ensure students followed screening instructions, (c) get a translator for screening instructions, (d) provide referral letters, (e) find funding resources, and (f) hope everyone participated. However, the plea for the return of permission slips, along with an explanation provided of the importance of screenings, was a success. Unfortunately, follow-up plans were not successful.

Every student provided a permission slip and participated in the vision and hearing screenings. Out of 22 students, only a few needed a referral for minor impairments in vision. For a few students in particular, vision/hearing screenings showed that glasses were necessary to support eyesight that ranged from moderate vision difficulties to severe deficits. One student significantly failed both vision and hearing screenings. Normal procedures in the United States are to retest in two weeks to make sure there was not a temporary cause in the failure (fluid in the ears, infections, etc). The second author did not have that luxury. There remains one student who needs support for deficits in hearing and vision. However, medical follow-up was refused for a variety of reasons, some cultural, including: (a) personal beliefs of the parents; (b) stigma associated with medical supports such as glasses; and, (c) potential risk of bullying. This experience left all authors with mixed emotions as they grappled with the cultural differences in approaches to medical screenings and what they believed to be medically necessary supports.

**Cultural differences in students with exceptionalities.** In our discussions with students, parents, and others knowledgeable about cultural practices, it was noted that the majority of students: (a) either do not need glasses, or, (b) have never been evaluated to know if they need them. Of importance, bullying for students who wear glasses is abundant. Likewise, any difference that appears to be a weakness may be kept hidden from community members. Teachers must embrace today's culture of addressing social stigma and bias head-on. It is imperative that teachers acknowledge the differences of the students in their classrooms, although their differences may be hidden (Herndon, 2020).

During the time at the school, a preservice teacher with a similar prescription brought glasses to allow the student in need of glasses to try them on. When the student put on the glasses, she looked in the mirror, and smiled one of the biggest smiles; and it is believed that was the first time she saw herself clearly. The preservice teacher encouraged the student, remarking how beautiful she was while wearing the glasses and how glasses can assist in reading and everything else needed to meet educational dreams of success. The second author found it to be one of the most beautiful moments of her professional career. The translator was so moved by the situation, she agreed to pay for the professional assessment and glasses. However, six months later, it was

discovered that the family refused, not wanting their child to be bullied over glasses. The faculty and preservice teachers found this information difficult to believe. However, respecting traditions and customs of one culture is part of the process, even if it goes against ingrained beliefs of someone from another culture. Facing their own biases while respecting decisions made by parents with differing views was a learning experience; for the second author, it was especially difficult.

## **Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusions**

Preservice teachers and faculty took notes and wrote reflections throughout the experience to make improvements for the next International Field-Experience opportunity. A nation's culture includes diverse components like language, food, religion, politics, economy, art, archeology, values, education system, heroes, and dangers. All are important in the preparation for cultural immersion. Valuable lessons were learned during this trip. Prior to travel, we met a few times to go over simple Spanish phrases, needed apparel, climate, and other items to prepare for travel to a foreign country. Even though there were a small number of travelers, we realized after the fact that we should have made larger, more expansive plans prior to travel that included: (a) cultural awareness training for all participants; (b) additional preparation and training in teaching multiple grade levels; (c) Spanish language instruction for common phrases, directions, and niceties; and, (d) foreign food awareness. It should be noted that culture competency is a process, not an end product. For the full cultural immersion experience in such a short time, participants needed to start studying the culture in abundance prior to landing in the country. Notably, this trip was exploratory in nature; and there was the understanding that it was unlikely to occur due to the pandemic. Thus, a more robust preparation was not undertaken. Going forward, preparation and training will be a larger part of the preparation process prior to travel.

Another area that the second author wants to focus on is collaboration with optometrists or ophthalmologists. For the vision and hearing screening, it would be optimal to take a digital vision screener that decreases errors due to misunderstandings and communication deficits that can provide further assessment on more precise prescriptions. These instruments will provide further assessment on exact prescriptions needed by students. Screenings could be followed up with a visit from an optometrist in the neighboring community for a more thorough, onsite assessment. Many families cannot take off work or have transportation to leave this rural community for healthcare specialties. Finding ways to bring the healthcare professionals to community members in need is vital ([nasn.org](http://nasn.org)). Mass screenings can still be done by volunteers, but immediate referrals can be followed up by a specialist.

A great deal was learned by all stakeholders during this ten-day trip; faculty and college students shared experiences in weeks following travel, and all agreed that the trip was extremely beneficial. It is believed that the elementary and middle schools benefitted based on their actions during our work with them. Summer school is not required, but approximately 20-22 students eagerly gathered and awaited our arrival at the building each morning. Through translators, students stated that they enjoyed all the activities, but they especially enjoyed the embedded art and educational technology activities. The consensus was that students of this small, rural community and the faculty and preservice teachers from a public university mutually benefitted.

There were many wonderful learning experiences during the time spent in Mexico, including: (a) a newfound appreciation for the rules of soccer; (b) an understanding of a parent's right to make medical decisions that they believed were best for a child; (c) an appreciation of

differences in education between cultures and countries; and (d) a newfound respect for beliefs and cultural norms of diverse communities. It was intimidating to speak a language to ask directions; but at the same time, it was heartwarming to listen to a young Mexican child trying to speak English. This common connection, the desire to communicate with someone who speaks a different language, provided a bonding experience for everyone. The primary recommendation is to go and experience new cultures, when possible, and provide supports needed by communities wherever they reside.

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