

Introduction: Crossing Borders

“Where *you* from, Professor?”

Felix, a dreadlocked Dominican in a New York Yankees t-shirt, is sitting in the last row of my classroom of 30 advanced English as a Second Language (ESL) students. The students stop their conversations, suddenly curious. I had asked them to introduce themselves when they first sat down in the room, but I had forgotten to introduce myself.

“I’m *from* here, but *not* from here.”

“What do you mean?” Aliza wants to know.

“Well, I was born in the United States, but not here in New York. I came here a long time ago from Mississippi, from the Southern part of the United States. In some ways, being from there is like being from a different country.”

Some of the students look skeptical. “But you speak Spanish,” Felix says. They had heard me answering a student’s question in Spanish on an elevator going to class. Because I speak Spanish, students often assume I am Latina. I’m not; however, one of the several subcultures of which I am a member is that of native Anglos who can speak other languages fluently.

I continue, “I grew up in an English-speaking family. In addition to English, I speak Spanish as a second language. I studied Spanish in school and majored in it in college.”

“But how is it that you speak Spanish so well?”

“Practice,” I tell them, hoping they will get the point that this is what they must do in order to become fluent in English, spending time on the task of using the language. I say, “In order to help you perfect your spoken English, I will *not* be using Spanish in class.” Some students smile and nod. Others groan. I know that I will, at appropriate times, use Spanish to explain a grammar point contrastively or to give a definition. Similarly, I will also use French if I have French speakers in my class. (This

conversation is an example of a typical classroom scene. The student names are fictional and are based on composites, rather than actual individuals.)

Though I am not Latina, I have more in common with the students than they perceive at first. As a Southerner, born and raised in Mississippi, I have always felt like an outsider. I do not fit in totally with “Yankees,” and yet I am not a typical Southerner. I have lost my accent, though I can code-switch to my southern dialect when I visit relatives. For me, switching dialects and language identity in English is similar to switching between English and Spanish for a bilingual person. I understand how difficult it can be, even in the best of circumstances. And, even though I have not moved from another country, I know how it feels to start over in a place different from where you were born.

Today is the first day of class in the community college where I have worked for more than 30 years. I have just finished teaching the advanced ESL class, and I am preparing to teach ESL Composition, a class designed to teach advanced ESL writing to international community college students to prepare them to pass the exit essay exam. Once they pass the challenging essay test of the City University of New York, the College Academic Test for Writing (or CAT-W), they can register for their career programs. The essay is very difficult for international students, people who have come from all over the world to study in the United States, and they often take the test several times because of lack of experience with this kind of expository writing in their native countries. Some never pass it and end up dropping out of college altogether.

On the board is the assignment that we will read, discuss, and write about in class. The assignment is from *Many Voices: A Multicultural Reader* (Watkins-Goffman and Goffman, 2001), an anthology consisting of international authors writing in first person. It is the poem “Child of the Americas” by Aurora Levin Morales. This assignment focuses on identity and, at the same time, helps students get to know one another. After a discussion of this poem and Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken,” they will write an informal response in class.

One of the reasons I have chosen the poetry at the start of the semester is to help students identify their own writers’ voices. It is essential that they become comfortable with their own identities so that they can write from an authentic perspective.

As I prepare to teach, I look out over the diverse class; students invariably group themselves along national, religious, language, or ethnic differences. The majority of the students are Spanish speakers and tend to sit with those from their native countries. However, there are some who

don't seem fit in any group, like Zamza, who has told us she is from Mali. She sits in the front row and is dressed in a mixture of African and Western dress, blue jeans with a head scarf. I smile at her and she smiles back. An older student from Albania mentioned that he had been a medical doctor in his native country. He is sitting next to a fellow Muslim, a young man from Morocco with a well-trimmed beard. In the front row sits Myra, from Colombia. She seems shy and somewhat ill at ease. She is the only Colombian in class, and she is sitting with a group of Dominican students. Most of the students are getting their books out of their backpacks; those who can't yet afford the book yet will share with a neighboring classmate.

I inspect the large classroom with white walls and no windows and hope the students will find their own windows into the world of English composition. At the beginning of the next class, I will give everyone a number and ask students to sit with people who have the same number. In this way, they will have an opportunity to get to know their classmates as they work together, usually answering questions related to the text. Even though I usually let students form their own groups, I have learned to occasionally organize groups myself as icebreakers. Eventually students will make friends with people of other nationalities. Often, in the past, when I walked into class, I noticed the Spanish speakers teaching the French speakers Spanish, and the French speakers reciprocating by teaching their language. When this happens, borders are crossed, and language boundaries become flexible.

As we prepare to read "Child of the Americas," I think about the crossroads I have faced and the roads I have taken. How is it that I, whose family has been in this country since the 1600s, seem to connect so easily with this group of students who just recently arrived? Feeling like an outsider in the South was just one of the reasons I took a different path.

Marisol, from the Dominican Republic, begins to read the poem; she fluently pronounces every word with expression in Spanish-accented English.

"I am a child of the Americas,
a light-skinned mestiza of the Caribbean,
a child of many diaspora, born into this
continent at a crossroads."

(Morales & Morales, 1986, p. 50)

As she reads this poem that I know by heart—a poem about identity and making choices—I reflect on why I love teaching ESL students.

After we finish this poem, I ask Miriama from Ivory Coast to read “The Road Not Taken,” and she pronounces the words with a slight French accent. The accent does not matter; the meaning is easy to understand. We all make choices as to which road we will take and which borders to cross. The students enthusiastically respond to these poems, using their own experiences of making choices and changing their personal boundaries. I believe each of us is or has been an outsider at some time in life, and becoming aware of this insider/outsider perspective is an important resource in second language teaching. Teaching language is very much about identity, and as we acquire languages and new ways of communicating, our identities change.

This book will chronicle my own acquisition of dialects and languages and connect this experience with new research on bilingualism (Uchikoshi & Maniates, 2010; García, 2009). Each new way of communicating has opened a new pathway for me. It is the same for students learning other languages. For teachers, our choices in life and experiences shape the kind of teachers we become. One insight I have learned from experience is that teaching is about forming strong connections with students, and the ability to connect with an individual is more important than any other competency, even in our technological age. To teach effectively, we must communicate authentically. We must connect our own experiences in some way with those of the students we teach. This reflective approach, which grew out of my own life narrative, will be shared throughout my story.

We do not have to come from another country to do this; rather, we must remember our own experience of being at a crossroads. Most people, even those who have lived in the United States all their lives, have crossed some kind of border and experienced alienation of some kind (Zerubavel, 1991; Bateson, 2000; Akhtar, 1999). Boundaries are not necessarily geographic; the cultural, social, and psychological borderlines we cross are often fraught with as much weight and change as those that require a passport.

This book is a memoir of an educator, a teacher of languages. Within some chapters are stories and scenes that represent my life’s journey. I have recreated these to the best of my memory. The choices I made guided my evolution, and I write about how an individual from Mississippi finds an identity as a teacher of ESL and linguistics. Other themes that are mentioned throughout my story are the challenges of juggling the roles of mother and educator at key times, struggling for success in higher education, and, finally, becoming a writer. All of my experiences

have influenced who I have become as a teacher. It has been a long journey and one that is still in progress.

I am writing with the hope that the lessons I have learned will be useful to readers who plan to become ESL educators, or those who simply seek inspiration about teaching. Because I began teaching in the field of ESL at its beginning in the United States in the 1970s, my own experiences in part chronicle some of the developments in the field. Furthermore, the stories I share in this book are offered as a point of departure from which teachers can share their own experiences with other professionals, or in some cases, their students. I am hoping that this book will be an invitation to reflect and learn about identity. I believe the more comfortable one is with the person one has become, the better the connection with another person, in this case, a student.

Writing this book affirms my own transformation because of the opportunity of education. As I describe in Chapter 1, my own linguistic development evolved along with my identity. I grew up on a large farm in rural Mississippi. Besides Southern-accented English, we were familiar with the local African-American dialect. My existence was very insular and provincial; I mostly travelled only within a 30-mile radius of the farm until I received my Bachelor of Arts from Mississippi State College for Women in 1966. I was always interested in foreign languages and studied Spanish and Latin in high school and then added French in college.

Within my isolated rural experience, I developed a hunger to travel, to know other people and other cultures. A brief job as an international stewardess with Pan American Airlines from 1966–1969 helped me realize that dream and made my perspective more multicultural. I had to qualify as a speaker of other languages. I found my knowledge of Spanish and French useful. For example, at times I would be assigned a trip to a French-speaking country like Tahiti because of my ability to speak that language. I was glad to have the opportunity to travel and use the languages I had studied in college. The job with the airlines helped make my language identity stronger, and I believe I am a better ESL teacher because of it.

As Mary Catherine Bateson says, we are each a work in progress, composing our own lives (Bateson, 1991). My own individuation with language, becoming bilingual and acquiring the Northern U.S. dialect of English, helped me understand my students' experiences when I became a teacher. Similarly, watching students negotiate identity across languages and cultures has taught me about my own evolving sense of self. Each time I teach, I learn and change along with my students.

My first job in education was as a high school Spanish teacher (see Chapter 2). But before long, I was teaching ESL. Even though English language learners (ELLs) and other labels are used now for students for whom English is not a native language, I use the term ESL in this book because that is what students were called when I was introduced to the field. However, I am fully aware that for many students today, English is not the second, but the third or even fourth language.

In Chapter 3, I discuss my experiences as a graduate teaching assistant working toward my Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics at NYU. There, I learned how to teach freshman composition and tutored ESL students in the writing center. Theories I had learned in my graduate classes about the teaching of writing influenced my teaching of NYU college freshmen, many of whom were Chinese-American. I also learned much about the writing process of English language learners in my job as a tutor in the writing center. At NYU I became a researcher learning about the insider/outsider perspective of ethnography when I conducted my first case study, a sixth-grade writing group, for my dissertation. Chapter 3 also chronicles my learning curve as I struggled to maintain the difficult balancing act of being a wife, mother, professor, and writer.

After I received my Ph.D. from NYU in 1985, I became an assistant professor and taught ESL in the poorest congressional district in the nation, the South Bronx in New York City. There, seeing individuals overcome poverty through education inspired me (see Chapter 4). I had seen so much poverty in rural Mississippi and had never been able to do much about it; here was a chance to be pro-active. Besides teaching at Hostos, a community college in the City University of New York system (in 1988), I was also an adjunct professor in bilingual and ESL teacher training courses at the graduate level at William Paterson University and Jersey City State University, both in New Jersey. As was the case when I was at NYU, I found keeping abreast of theory and research informed my teaching. Some of the insights from this experience are included in the teacher training textbooks that I wrote later on (see Chapter 7).

In Chapter 4, I narrate the challenges I faced in order to qualify for tenure and promotion at the same time Hostos was struggling to survive. I discuss the difficulties associated with the position of chairperson, including the ushering in of a new curriculum of content-infused ESL. I share with readers what I learned from these experiences with the hope that the insight will benefit those who are planning a career in higher education. Though every institution of higher education is unique, the

climb toward permanency with tenure and recognition with promotion exists in most universities.

The story of how I initiated a linguistics program at the college, one gratifying development of taking the chairperson's responsibility, is shared in Chapter 5. Our college's new linguistics program offered career opportunities while strengthening bilingualism. Chapter 6 summarizes interviews with former Hostos students who have climbed the economic ladder as a result of education after beginning at the community college level. In this chapter, I also recount the experience of listening to Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor speak at our 2010 graduation ceremony and talk about her mother's educational experience at Hostos. Her mother Celia's degree in nursing helped her family survive. After listening to the Justice speak, I had the feeling that all the hardships the college had endured since its difficult inception in 1970 had been worth it, not only for the Justice's mother, but countless others like her. Coming from Mississippi, I felt proud that my college offered opportunities for people to overcome poverty.

As part of the process of developing an identity as a professor and a linguist, I became a writer. The effort to own that aspect of my identity has been a process I describe in Chapter 7. From being a quiet child in a silent home, I became someone with a voice and a point of view largely inspired by the students I taught and experiences in the classroom, and to date, I have published five textbooks. This book is my sixth.

All the books and articles I have written have taught me much in my evolution as a teacher. For example, the last book I wrote for teacher trainees, *Understanding Cultural Narratives* (Watkins-Goffman, 2006), explores how narratives can provide a way to find similarities and differences in human experiences. It can offer a way of understanding behavior that can allow us to gain agency over our lives.

One of the reasons I have written this memoir is that I still believe that the power of the story, a way of knowing and perceiving, is one of the oldest epistemologies. In my career, I have learned how a narrative can provide a template in which an individual's choices can be examined in context (Polkinghorne, 1988), and I have learned much from choices in my own life. Writing this book helped me confirm pedagogical choices I have made, and my teaching has benefited from insights I gained as I wrote my story. The arc of my life as a teacher begins with the pedagogy of teaching language and continues through various trends over the years. I hope the perspectives I have developed will be meaningful to readers.

Finally, the ethnographic perspective I learned in my doctoral work at NYU led me to evaluate some of my pedagogical principles in the final chapter, Chapter 8. The common sense approaches for pedagogy that have evolved over the years are discussed, as well as teaching techniques for ELLs that I have found useful. Even though each teacher is unique and must develop his or her own techniques, I think the best practice for self-development is self-reflection as well as learning from other teachers and colleagues.

In this relatively young and eclectic field of language teaching, difficult issues and questions remain, and I do not claim to have all the answers. This book closes with Questions for Reflection or Discussion and Writing that can be useful for journal writing about pedagogy and other relevant issues. These questions can be used in discussion in classes or reading groups. Although the book as a whole is a narrative about my life as a language educator, my hope is that the ideas in these pages will stimulate discussion and writing and will offer insight into the teaching/learning experience.