

Abstract: My ethnography paper will attempt to report on the cultural barriers of language learning in an ELL context. My study investigated the learning aspects that could be affected by certain cultural dimensions such as social factors, etc. My data and samples were collected from Jarrett Middle School through classroom observations, conversational interviews and online articles from the Kapiolani Community College. After analyzing the data, reviewing the interviews, reading the articles, participating in helping with in-class homework and learning, and finally processing the results, I found that the learning process of Jarrett Middle School ELL learners studying English, Math, Science could be hindered by certain cultural dimensions. My study also hopes to present that some results have implications for further English language learners, classroom practices and future KCC students who would like to participate in the process of helping ELL students at Jarrett Middle School.

Introduction: The topic of cultural barriers in an English Language Learners environment relates to the different cultural problems encountered when a student, young or old, decides to or must learn English. The cultural barriers to language learning range from behaviors in classrooms to religious practices, as well as from social economic backgrounds to educational ways of learning in the country of origin. In my ethnography, I will be focusing on barriers for ELL students in the classroom due to difficult social economic backgrounds, lack of interest in the subjects studied, as well as the classroom settings. In order to understand the many difficulties encountered, I spend around 40 hours helping students with their homework, talking to them about their background and interests, and participating in classroom life. This topic is important in order to understand and solve the educational problems of the future. The future of the United States of America is one made of many colors, beliefs, understandings, traditions where everyone must be able to communicate with each other. It starts in the classrooms by

understanding where the students are from to know which direction we must take them. My ethnography is about trying to understand the issues the ELL students face everyday and their effects in the classroom.

Background: The location of my ethnography was Jarrett Middle School, which is situated in the Palolo Valley between St Louis Heights and Wilhelmina Rise. According to Jarrett Middle School's home page:"The school was established in 1955. It was named in honor of William Paul Jarrett (1877-1929), who was a delegate to the U.S. Congress when Hawaii was still a Territory. Mr. Jarrett gained national and international recognition for his efforts as a humanitarian. The school serves a community that includes the Kaimuki, Palolo Valley and St. Louis Heights areas. Most of the student population comes from Ali'iolani, Hokulani and Palolo Elementary schools. The campus sits on 7.5 acres that was once the site of a city golf course. Jarrett Middle school is located adjacent to Palolo Valley District Park." Jarrett Middle School's location relates to the students socio-economic background. I have spent close to 40 hours in Miss C.'s classroom, helping 6th, 7 and 8th graders, all ELL students. The socio-economic background of the students relates to the ethnography I conducted, as I believe culture can represent a barrier in language learning. According to the "School Status and Improvement Report", as recently as 2007 there were about 280 students enrolled, of which 45 were in Special Education Programs. The ethnicities, according to that same report, for the year 2006/2007 for the different students was composed of Chinese (5.5%), Filipino (5.5%), Part Hawaiian (14.3%), Japanese (15.8%), Samoan (7.4%), Indo Chinese (12.9%), other (30.5%) and White (2.9%). The reason I express these numbers relates to the composition of the classes I helped to tutor with their homework. The students I tutored originated mostly from Micronesia: Marshall Islands, Island of Chuuk, even Pohnpei. I also helped one chinese student, one Vietnamese student and

one special education student. Another important part of the background relates to the economic status of the students enrolled at Jarrett Middle School. A quick overview of the community of Kaimuki, in which Jarrett Middle School is located, reveals that 15.4 % of families living with children in Kaimuki are living in poverty, 5 % of households live with public assistance income, and that 24.6 % of families in that community are headed by a single mother. This short background analysis explains a little the answers I was given by a few of the students I tutored. When asked which language they spoke outside of school, they answered that they spoke their native language or a mixture of both English and their native language. Furthermore, at home they almost never spoke English because their parents did not know how to speak it. For some their native language is Marshallese, for others Chuuk, or even Chinese. Another important point relates to the amount of time spent here in Hawaii. Some of them had just landed here within the last 6 months, others had been here a little longer, 5 years. Finally, when first came to Jarrett Middle School, I was also given and explained a list of rules that participated in helping with the discipline in classrooms, and as a direct result encouraged to put the focus on the education. The name of the rules were the Jarrett Middle School Tutor/volunteer guidelines such as no exchange of personal information with students, tutoring conducted under teacher supervision during designated times and places; Jarrett Middle School student expectations such as descriptions of bathroom breaks, water breaks, snacks/food regulation, gum chewing and swearing; and finally Jarrett Middle School Staff expectations such as faculty dress codes, breaks, the reporting of incidents, civil rights with a discrimination complaint form and even cell phones. But the last list of regulation I would like to mention regards the dress policy which I quickly realized became important in direct relation with the school, educational and classroom atmospheres. The main rule read as follows: "Students are expected to wear appropriate clothing to school and any school

sponsored activities.” A few interesting examples were no baseball caps, no sunglasses or headbands, no red shorts or tops allowed, no offensive messages on any clothing, or no revealing or low-cut tops. The reason for those clothing rules was to prevent any gang related problems that existed in the past, as well as the fact of dealing with young boys with “raging hormones”. This is a brief description of my tutoring environment. A poor socio-economic background, diverse origins for the students, strict rules and regulations for everyone to prevent problems and encourage education, and a little bit of a negative reputation of the area of Palolo Valley due to past incidents and events. Before I describe my different experiences and observations during my service learning period of 3 months, I would like to frame the issue of cultural barriers in language learning through different articles. I will attempt to connect those articles with my own experiences, and data at Jarrett Middle School.

Conceptual Framework: The first concept I would like to explore is the difference between the social language and the academic language. Social language is defined as “the language used in everyday, casual interactions” in chapter one of “Academic Success: learning the language of School.” In the same chapter, the academic language is defined as being the language used in scholarly environments. In class, we agreed that both languages played a separate but equally important parts. However, we also acknowledged that “the academic language builds on the social language skills and knowledge”, which is an important of cultural barrier in language learning. My belief is that if ELL students do not practice their language skills outside of a classroom setting, progress will be slower in mastering that same language. We further explored the idea that “social language in the classroom is about children/students not feeling excluded. Everyone wants to fit in, be a part of a group. As the type of language clearly states, social language allows and helps children *socialize*.”The second concept deals with the close relation

between culture and language. In class, we first observed it through the movie “My fair lady.” That story took place in England however it is present everywhere when learning any new language. Mr Khuwaileh from the Jordan University of Technology and Science writes that “it is very difficult to separate culture from language. In most cases, the cultural elements are not itemized in English language curricula though inevitably they emerge later. Not surprisingly, they can make the classroom’s channels of communication smooth or hard.” In Hawaii, the cultural factor everyone must deal with when teaching/learning the english language is Pidgin English which is used as a social language among lower social classes. Mr Khuwaileh further states that “whether we accept it or not, the cultural element seems to be an important side that needs to be associated with english language teaching in particular.” The ELL students bring with them their cultural package when learning english. The third concept deals with the challenges facing the FAS (Freely Associated States) students in Hawaii. According to Hilda C. Heine, in her study “Culturally responsive schools for Micronesian Immigrant Students”, students from FAS (Chuuk, Kosrae, Pohnpei, Yap, Republic of Marshall Islands, Republic of Palau) represent “13% of the state’s total English as a Second Language student population.” Due to mostly economic reasons, the population of FAS migrated to the United States to seek better employment, educational and health care opportunities. However, their children face a daunting task: adjusting to a brand new environment, with new rules, new way of life and a new language to learn. According to the same study, “the numbers show a 43 % increase of FAS students in Hawaii public schools between 1997 and 2002.” That increase brings new challenges such as “poor English abilities, lack of familiarity with school system expectations, and a mismatch between their culture and the school’s culture” still according to Hilda C. Heine. Finally, Miss Heine explains that “while English is taught (and learned) in all FAS schools, students come

from homes where at least one indigenous language is used predominantly. English is often a second, or third language. Consequently, FAS student's English language abilities are frequently below grade level, necessitating a placement in the state ESLL programs." Before I detail my next concept, I would like to share a few revealing numbers when it comes to ELL and FAS students in Hawaii, again according to the study conducted by Miss Heine:"In the school year 2000/2001, the Honolulu school district/complex enrolled the largest number of students from FAS: about 926, of which 30 % were considered non English proficient, 65 % limited English proficient, and 5 % fully English proficient." Finally, one last number which reveals another level of problem: 28 % of those students were not in age-appropriate grade levels. My next concept in relation with cultural barriers deals with in classroom teaching/learning following misunderstandings. What do I mean? Patricia D. Barber explains in her article "Teaching non-English speakers" that "the class can be easily side tracked due to a lack of cultural understanding. There will be times when the entire class must stop to discuss a cultural difference or misunderstanding before the actual lecture can continue." Those are just a few concepts dealing with cultural barriers in ELL environment. Those concepts also describe well the different situations I encountered while tutoring/helping at Jarrett Middle School with the 6th, 7 and 8th graders. I cannot unfortunately go into more details as it is a very complex and detailed issue to cover. I will however try to give some examples of my experiences in connection with the different concepts I just briefly covered in the next part.

Issue: I would like to describe one day of tutoring, and how it relates to the different concepts mentioned previously. This is my observation on October 21st 2010: "Today, the class started with a lesson called "Review the story elements for Sign of the Beaver". The story elements reviewed were the setting, plot, falling action, rising action, mood, etc... There were 4 students.

They were all sitting by Miss C.'s desk. One of the students is Chinese, and needs to use a translator with a mac in order to understand what is going on. He has only been in Hawaii for a few months. Another teacher, a Japanese woman who works part time, was also present today. She was helping the Chinese student by sitting next to him, and explaining to him what was going on with the help of the translator on the computer. These were the questions that Miss C. asked the students during the lesson: 1- If you could change 1 thing in the story, what would it be? 2- Do you like this book? Would you tell your friends to stay away from this book? 3- Would you recommend this book? Why? She explained the word "to recommend" to make sure they understood what she was asking. She then read the chapter 12, stopped, asked questions about the passage she had just read, and the students tried to answer. Different subjects/themes were tackled such as death, hunting, Native Americans, to survive. As she was talking about the passage, one student was almost laying down on the desk. Miss C. stopped, asked her to sit up, pull her chair up, to put her backpack on the ground. The student complied after Miss Chan insisted nicely. The room is big, full of colors and word definitions everywhere on the walls. There were 2 fans going on. It was hot. But today, the students seemed to focus a little better than usual. When she asked them to summarize the passage, one of the students read the definition of the word "summary" out loud to explain what it meant, from a blue card on the wall. At 11:13 am, the bell rang. There was a few minutes break, and then we went into study hall. 1 student left, 2 worked on math and the last one worked on the book questions. One of the students working on math got up to drink water, was falling on her desk, did want to do her homework despite Miss C. working one on one with her. But she kept being interrupted by the other student working on math. That same student got up twice, once to go to the bathroom, once to drink water and walked around class, before sitting down again. At 12:04 the bell rang again.

Time for lunch. The students are very dependent on Miss C. for everything, and take advantage of her not sitting down with them one on one. They are around 12 years old but cannot seem to focus more than 3-5 minutes at a time. The room is very bright. There are many windows on the left side of the room. They are all open. Another interesting thing is that Miss C. exchanges her stuff for something of theirs if they need it. For example: if a student needs a black pen marker, she takes it out of her bag but asks for something in return, and when the student gives her back her black marker pen, she gives them back their belonging. It is a good way not to lose anything anymore. They would walk away with her stuff before. The most common point, since I started, is the difficulty in concentration from the students. They always seem to be unfocused, use any excuse to waste time, laugh with each other, are always relying on Miss C. for help and if she does not focus on one, he does not do his homework. Today, one of the student that is usually present was absent. I was told he was suspended for 2 days as a result of bad behavior. I wonder how hard it must be for any of them to focus on something that would seem so irrelevant to them. In other words, I wonder if they ask themselves what is the point of all this? Social language knowledge is part of the problem, but it is not the main one. They speak a kind of “pidgin” with each other and even with Miss C. sometimes. I do wonder how much they actually remember from what they are learning. They do know how to read, they did in class today but do they understand what they are reading? Or are they just not interested in school? “ That day reflects different issues related to the concepts above. The social language used, even in the classroom, is Pidgin English. The students I tutored seemed to encounter difficulties understanding the vocabulary and concepts of language taught in class. The academic language skills seemed to be lacking as the questions Miss C. asked seemed difficult to understand for the students. One student, of Chinese origin, couldn’t follow the class lecture properly, his English

level was very insufficient. He kept referring to his translator which led him to being a step behind everyone else at all times. On the same day, I also expressed the following feeling:” As mentioned above, keeping the students focused is the main goal at times. Each of Miss C’s class has about 4 to maybe around 10 students (The 8th graders, who are the most “rowdy” ones, and hardest to manage). It seems that it is all about defying and breaking the rules of learning for the students. There is always somekind of scheme going on to escape from homework, or waste time doing it.” The rules are part of the classroom environment, and the attitudes in them also but as Miss Heine explains :”Many families come to the US with inadequate understanding of community and classroom expectations and other procedural requirements of the American school system.” One examples she refers to is attendance which is taken seriously here in the US. But I would argue that in class attitudes, distractions are also part of it. For example, some students in Miss C’s 8th grade class had to attend “Boot Camp” every Friday lunch time. Boot Camp is when the students miss lunch every Friday in order to be counseled, to learn how to behave, and during that time they lose their privileges. One of the other students I was helping got suspended for 3 days following an altercation with another student during recess. That same student, when he came back, kept on acting up, wanting to be noticed, not focusing on his homework or in class projects, and even speaking loud to distract others. Deborah Perkins Gough explains in the article “Focus on Adolescent English Language Learners” that “Adolescent ELL’s differ from native English speaking students in the dual challenge they face:they must learn to read, speak and write in English and master complex academic content at the same time.” In the 8th grade classroom, this observation confirms that last point:” On November 5th, the class was about summarizing the last chapter of the book “Fever 1793”. That day they read the climax of the story. Miss C. started by reading a quote, had to explain the word “peculiar” which

she defined as meaning “different, particular, strange.” Then she asked how the quote related to the chapter? One student started answering , the others followed up. However, there were some distractions throughout the class. Another student was wearing a jacket of color, which is against the rules, was not prepared for class (did not have his book, or planner) and kept being distracted and continuously distracted 2 others. The triangle shape of 3 students were distracting each other constantly. The class went on to the subject of “constructive responses.” Miss C. read part of the chapter, then asked the class for constructive responses to check if they understood what she read.” But none of them seemed to care, nor truly understand what she meant despite having covered that subject before. As we studied during our semester, the cognitive pedagogy includes the theory of “I +1” where the level taught should not be too high for fear of losing the attention of the students. In conclusion for the issue chapter, Miss Heine describes it best:”School staff who may not have the cultural understanding and sensitivity often view these differences as deficiencies. Consequently, the children appear to them to be uninterested, unprepared, unmotivated.” Furthermore, it is also crucial to realize that “stepping into cultural context where individual interests (as opposed to family/group sharing)is sometimes the primary concern can create conflict and frustrations on both sides.” But how did all these experiences, observations help me? How can I apply these experiences to my future?

Connections: I learned that patience is not just a virtue but also an art in some cases. Miss C. seems very artful in that area. I also discovered that it is important to know and understand your audience. A teacher is a performer, the students are his audience, the lesson is the performance. In order for the audience to be happy, they must understand the performance and like the performer, at least to some degree. However, if the performance is in a foreign language with no subtitles, the audience will either leave the movie theater or fall asleep, unconcerned by the story.

Only very few will make the effort to try to understand the storyline. The center piece can be summed up in two concepts: BICS and CALP. However, the true lesson is the complexity and depth of teaching revealed itself to me this past semester. Cultural barriers are an issue to be dealt with in order to perfect the education system, and give everyone a chance to succeed. There are many many other cultural barriers such as religion, taboo subjects, etc...that still could be addressed. Another interesting I learned while researching for this paper is the crucial importance of getting the parents involved in their children's education. In the article "Building Partnerships with Immigrant Parents", Miss Sobel and Miss Kugler defend the idea that schools must invite and explain immigrant parents to get involved in their children's education. They inform us that "most parents care intensely (about their children's education) but many misunderstand what is expected of parents in US schools or do not know how to become involved." Finally, I learned that there are many roads that lead to education. None of them are easy. None of them seem encouraging. But all of them seem rewarding. These past few months rewarded me more than I expected.

Conclusion:I will conclude with one line. One line from Mr Khuwaileh's article, where he quotes Levine and Adelman:" To know another's language and not his culture is a very good way to make a fluent fool of one's self." I agree. As I started by stating, culture and language are closely linked.

