
The Transformative Power of Diverse Realities: A Case Study of Accommodation and Teamwork

Lee Wilberschied, Cleveland State University

Abstract

This case study details the changes in a novice TA—his change in attitude, the expansion of his knowledge base and repertoire of teaching strategies; the development of his ability to make accommodations for learners; and his growth in insight and skill—prompted by his willingness to conduct teacher research. His growth over a period of six months marked a parallel rate of growth in proficiency in his many of his students.

Introduction

Rafael [Please note: His name and all others are pseudonyms.] having arrived from Mexico the day before, reported for a week-long orientation at the university where he would study and serve as a teaching assistant (TA). He was unaware that, in addition to the duties usually assigned to TAs, his future responsibilities would include individual tutoring for a student whose needs were substantially different than those of “typical” students at an American university. When this new foreign language (FL) educator encountered elements of diversity that prevented him from teaching in the ways that he himself had been taught, his understanding expanded and deepened with the challenge.

This case study details the changes in a novice TA—his change in attitude, the expansion of his knowledge base and repertoire of teaching strategies; the development of his ability to make accommodations for learners; and his growth in insight and skill—prompted by his willingness to conduct teacher research. His growth over a period of six months marked a parallel rate of growth in proficiency in his many of his students.

One particular student, Azhar, became a decisive influence upon him and his colleagues, despite the fact that his rate or degree of acquisition did not match that of his classmates. His own obvious motivation to learn and a wide range of extra help were insufficient in helping him gain the same level of proficiency as many of his peers,

Lee Wilberschied (Ph.D., The Ohio State University) is an Associate Professor at Cleveland State University where she coordinates the lower level Spanish program and teaches courses in Spanish, foreign language methods, and foreign language practice. She works extensively with pre-service and in-service teachers. Her research interests are recruitment and retention of minority foreign language students and teachers; action research; and teacher thinking. She is a member of the New Visions National Task Force for Recruitment and Retention of FL Teachers and of the ACTFL SIG for FL educators of African American students.

but his accomplishments were valid and pleasing to him and the support team that Rafael helped to establish for him.

Azhar, Rafael's tutee, seemed to be the embodiment of diversity itself—an aging, blind, African-American Muslim who neither read Braille nor used computers but who wanted to “learn to speak Spanish.” Rafael had few illusions about his ill-preparedness to accommodate diversity, but he welcomed the challenge of tutoring Azhar. As Rafael conducted action research, shifts in his thinking and practice helped him to recognize the need for an accommodation team for Azhar, and he was instrumental in its coalescence.

Through the empowerment of action research, Rafael transformed himself from a trainee into a leader and helped to create a learning community that extended beyond the classroom.

Rafael and other team members examined the implications of Haley's (2004) statement that “planning is a pivotal point of accommodation.” Planning, they determined, is diminished in worth unless it is integrated with several types of assessment of student learning, including those associated with action research. In addition, they learned that the collaboration of the support team that ensued from each person's efforts greatly reduced the demands on any given individual. The main purpose of this study is to document the transformations in the learner, Azhar, and in the tutor, Rafael, as the latter implemented reflective practice, engendered by his own action research and connected to theory. But, these changes did not occur in isolation, and the effects on other individuals in the collaborative team are integrated.

Theoretical Background

Three conceptual frameworks guided this study, as well as Rafael's own investigation, and the instructional strategies of many members of the team. These are action research, alternative assessment (often used in implementing accommodative instruction) developed most particularly through backward design, and Gardner's Multiple Intelligences theory (see Haley, 2001).

Action Research and Reflective Practice. Many teacher educators have recommended practitioner action research as a way to reduce the perceived gulf between research and practice and to promote teachers' reasoning and reflection on their work in the classroom (Freeman & Johnson, 1998, McDonough, 2006). Lacorte and Krstel (2002) emphasized that action research casts the teacher into the new role of researcher. Teachers conducting action research must systematize what they do naturally in classroom teaching situations, when faced with a dilemma: Ask relevant questions; devise a plan to answer them; collect data and analyze it; draw conclusions from the analysis; determine appropriate courses of action and take them; and then evaluate the results (Donato, in Annenberg, 2004). This critical, reflective process helps to inform and to enhance awareness of L2 learning and teaching processes (Annenberg, 2004; Burns, 1999; Wallace 1998; Zainuddin & Moore, 2004). Several recent case studies have documented increased awareness and reflective practice. Zainuddin and Moore (2004) concluded that conducting action research facilitated construction of teachers' personal understanding of second language (SL) acquisition.

McDonough (2006) found evidence of broader insight into research, appreciation for peer teamwork, and adoption of new FL teaching practices. Rankin and Becker (2006), in addition to finding similar evidence, concluded that teacher reflection, when influenced by research, produces change. That is to say, a crucial element of reflective analysis is for the teacher to interpret his or her instructional behaviors in light of a theoretical framework and the evidence of data. The format of action research continues to prove itself adaptable to varied contexts and dimensions. Grant and Sleeter (2006) incorporated action research activities into the analysis and revision of lesson plans in order to promote pre-service teachers' understanding of theory and practice that meet the needs of diverse learners, Goker (2006) developed a model that aims to create a collaborative learning community characterized by reflective learning and growth for all stakeholders: students, teachers, and principals.

Alternative Assessment. Recent thinking advocates a view of assessment that involves both the learner and the teacher interactively in the ongoing practice of observing and appraising the learner's performance (Pierce, 2003; Hancock, 1994). Alternative assessment involves techniques or procedures that can be carried out within the context of the daily activities of instruction. Its purpose is to determine what the student knows or is able to do, but it also informs instruction (Maden & Taylor, 2001). Pierce (2003) explains that alternative assessment not only provides an accurate measure of what the student is able to do but also is integrated into the learning process so that assessment activities potentially promote learning. Other benefits of alternative assessments include the provision of descriptive feedback and the involvement of the student in self-assessment. In fact, according to Ross (2005) certain types of alternative assessment procedures that give more control to the student (through, for example, cooperative work or portfolios) result in higher student engagement and have significant effects on growth in language proficiency.

The term alternative assessment includes informal, authentic, portfolio, direct, descriptive, or performance assessment (Pierce, 2003). Limitations of space prevent a detailed description of each type; however, most instruments of this type share several characteristics: the student must perform, produce or create a response; the elicited responses are as close to real-life, authentic discourse as possible; the responses are assessed based on performance, not solely on knowledge; multiple language skills are integrated; both process and product are usually considered; the student's skill or mastery is observable at in-depth levels; and responses often demand higher-order thinking skills (Maden & Taylor, 2001, p. 3).

Backward Design. The backward design process identifies outcomes and assessments before learning experiences are planned. This is an essential element of the Learning by Design approach developed by Wiggins and McTighe (1998) and integrated into best practices for FL instruction (ACTFL, 2006; Annenburg, 2004). This type of instructional preparation calls for thinking first about what the learner will ultimately know and/or be able to do in the FL; second, how the learner will demonstrate such knowledge or skill; and finally, what activities, lessons and instruction will be needed to bring the student to that point. A teacher implementing backward design (also called backward planning) to plan a unit first identifies the culminating

product, performance, or task. Then, the teacher works in reverse to identify the successive benchmark assessments and learning activities that will be needed. Such planning encourages consistent focus on the desired results and is “an approach to curriculum and instruction designed to engage students in inquiry, promote transfer of learning, provide a conceptual framework for helping students make sense of discrete facts and skills, and uncover the big ideas of content” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 4). Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) explain that differentiation of assessment and/or differentiation of instruction can be incorporated with backward design in order to meet the needs of each learner more effectively and to ensure that each student acquires the desired skills, knowledge, or understanding.

Multiple Intelligences and Learning Strategies. Some of the best approaches to bringing the student to the desired end(s) involve the implementation of Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences theory and overt instruction in learning strategies. Haley (2004) explains that the use of multiple modalities facilitates the best demonstrations of student comprehension and proficiency. Further, Oxford (1990) and others have developed learning strategy inventories that can be used as a point of departure for strategy instruction to complement multimodal learning activities. Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences Theory (1993) is based on his research findings that each learner has at least eight intelligences. Al-Balushi (2006) has summarized these as follows:

1. interpersonal: ability to interact, lead, inspire, and motivate other people
2. intrapersonal: ability for introspection and self-understanding, for personal problem-solving, and for ethics and/or self-discipline.
3. linguistic: ability to use language effectively, to manipulate language, to be sensitive to words and meaning
4. logical/mathematical: ability to analyze problems logically, to use numbers, and to recognize or to create sequences and patterns
5. visual/spatial: ability to manipulate objects mentally in order to solve problems
6. musical/rhythmic: ability to recognize and reproduce tunes, sounds, pitches, melodies, and/or to compose
7. bodily/kinesthetic: ability to use the body and movement to express ideas and feelings, to handle objects nimbly in sports, crafts, art, etc.
8. naturalist: ability to understand various aspects of nature with appreciation, enjoyment, insight, and/or skill

Gardner (1993) provides examples of historical figures who best embodied each of the intelligences and explains that intelligences vary in dominance and strength in each individual. The intelligences determine how an individual processes, makes meaning of, stores, and expresses information. Each person, then, has an intelligence profile that incorporates each of the eight intelligences to a greater or lesser degree. The theory has impacted curricular design and provided an impetus for alternative assessment. Using teaching methods to enhance the various intelligences (cooperative learning, guided imagery, brainstorming, questioning, scientific inquiry, project-based learning), Al-Balushi (2006) implemented activities drawing on imagination, creativity, cooperation, social skills, self reflection, linguistic abilities, critical thinking, scientific thinking and attitudes towards nature, with the goal of improving different talents in blind children.

The application of MI theory has been found to lead to gains in standardized test scores and to reduce the achievement gap between white and minority students in MI-based K-12 programs (Shore, 2004). Students in these programs have been found to outperform their peers on basic skills tests at the district, county, and national levels. Other beneficial outcomes have been described: reducing behavior problems, facilitating inclusion, encouraging parent involvement, and creating an environment that encourages critical thinking (Shore, 2004). In adult instruction, specifically in teacher preparation courses, both Haley (2004) and Shore (2004) found that the study of MI theory and implementation of MI-based tasks in course work resulted in deepened understanding of diversity and greater ability to plan meaningful instruction after reflection. Reflection upon the strategies that one employs to learn a new language has encouraged language learners to be more autonomous (Oxford, 1990). One possible classification of language strategies is into two broad categories, language learning or language use (Hsiao & Oxford, 2002). Learners employ language learning strategies to improve their knowledge and understanding of the FL. These are conscious thoughts and behaviors that include cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. These help the learner to memorize and manipulate FL structures, manage and supervise strategy use, gauge emotional reactions to lower learning anxieties, and enhance learning (for instance, by cooperating with other learners and seeking to interact with native speakers). Learners employ language use strategies when the language material has become accessible, even in some introductory form. These strategies may help learners use elements of the FL they have already learned. This category includes strategies for retrieval of information about language already stored in memory, rehearsal of language structures, and communication in the FL, even if there is incomplete knowledge (Cohen, 2003). Training language learners in strategy use may help language learners to self-assess their learning strengths and weaknesses, to develop awareness of what helps them to learn the FL most efficiently, to acquire a variety of problem-solving skills, to determine approaches to language tasks, to self-monitor and self-assess performance, and to transfer strategy use to other learning situations (Oxford, 1990). Peacock and Ho (2003) found a positive association between strategy use and proficiency, which corroborates findings of several previous studies. These three areas—action research, alternative assessment (guided by backwards design), and MI theory (augmented by strategies use instruction)—frame the case study described in these pages.

Method

Context

Our setting was a Midwestern urban university of 15,000 students, where the student population is, by nature, diverse. Those ordinarily considered nontraditional students are the majority here—not living on campus, working full time, older, returning, part-time, transfer, and co-op. Many are the first in their family to attend college. The demographics of this student body are as follows: 62% Caucasian, 18% African American, 2% Hispanic, 3% Asian, .2% Native American, 5% nonresident alien, and 9.8% unknown.

General language study requirements are based on whether the student has successfully completed two years of study of a foreign language in high school. Those students who have not done so must successfully complete one year of foreign language study at the university level. If a student has completed one year in high school but not two full years, the student must complete one semester of the same language at the university level. Students graduating from programs in the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences must complete an additional two semesters beyond the general requirement. The Chair of the Modern Language Department serves as the basic language coordinator, and there is a Coordinator for beginning level (Spanish 101, 102, 201, and 202—years one and two) as well as a Coordinator for Graduate Studies in Spanish. Graduate students in the Spanish program may earn a Masters degree with a concentration in either literature or linguistics and have course requirements totaling 36 to 40 semester credit hours, depending on whether they complete a thesis, an exam, or extra course work. TAs in this program generally teach one section of Spanish 101 during the first semester of their first year and one of Spanish 102 of the second semester. They also attend and complete requirements for the TA teaching seminar, which is taught by the Coordinator of the beginning level program. Rafael, as a beginning TA, followed this sequence.

A number of circumstances and events conspired to bring Azhar and Rafael together. First, through a series of communication misfortunes, we were nearly one month into the semester before Azhar could join his Spanish class. The lateness meant that we had to configure a team and devise strategies quickly. Second, Disability Services lacked personnel who could read Spanish rendering it impossible to have the textbook recorded onto cassettes. Further, the aide who could accompany Azhar to class to provide a running description of the visual cues could be funded for only a limited number of hours.

Participants

The learner (Azhar) was returning to the university in order to complete his undergraduate degree in social work. Azhar had several challenges in addition to the loss of his sight 25 years earlier. Other physical problems such as high blood pressure and diabetes occasionally caused him to miss classes or tutoring sessions. Because he did not read Braille, and his computer skills were not extensive, the use of either of these resources (for input or output, for memory aids) were proportionally limited. For Spanish class, he relied on his memory, aided by re-playing class lectures and tutoring sessions on audiocassette. Most of the input as well as the information (grammar rules, especially) put a strain on his memory. In addition, Azhar tended to be very hard on himself. He consistently reported feeling impatient that he was not learning more or not learning faster.

The tutor-researcher (Rafael) was a 25-year-old male, a native of Mexico, newly arrived at the university in order to complete a Masters in Spanish. He taught one section of Spanish (in which Azhar was not able to enroll, for scheduling reasons) and supplemented his income by working in the Tutoring Center. Two instructors (Don and Elizabeth) were members of the team. Elizabeth, the language coordinator with more than 25 years of teaching experience, had been Azhar's first-semester Spanish

instructor. Don, Azhar's second-semester instructor, was 23 and in his first year of a Spanish Masters program. Although a native of the city in which the university was located, he had studied in Puerto Rico for a year and had returned with extensive knowledge of Caribbean music.

Others—who did not take part in the research but who formed part of the team—included Disabilities Services personnel, who remained in contact with Azhar because of the support that they provided for him in his other classes. In addition, they devised a way to make the most of the strongest resource that we had on the team: they rerouted some of their sparse funding so that Rafael's five hours weekly could be set aside solely for Azhar. Three additional TAs formed the Masters cohort for that year and happened to have office hours during time periods when Azhar came for tutoring or supplemental sessions. Because of the nature of the interaction, they became interlocutors, cheerleaders, sources of enrichment, and sounding boards for Azhar and Rafael. Thus, the physical environment provided closeness for the team, greatly enhancing the likelihood and the quality of any interaction with Azhar or support for Rafael's research.

Research questions

Preparations for Accommodation and Research.

As Azhar was in the process of joining Elizabeth's class, she, in her capacity as coordinator, was presenting the concepts of accommodation and alternative assessment, as well as action research and backward design, in her seminar for TAs. In addition, she was reviewing the principles of second language acquisition research and theory. Seminar questions encouraged the TAs to connect the issues with their experiences in the classroom. The topics included the limitations of several theories that contribute to an explanation of second language learning, factors that affect second language learning, interlanguage, and effective error correction. Elizabeth also supplied Rafael with some books and articles regarding FL teaching and blind students. After two meetings with Elizabeth, Rafael formulated the questions upon which he would focus his action research:

1. What can the student do, assisted and unassisted, to learn Spanish?
2. Using backward design what [alternative] assessment will show that the student has developed proficiency to a level that would satisfy state requirements for university students of foreign language?
3. What teaching strategies, beyond class, will help this student most?

Rafael agreed to be the focus of this case study, and he helped to construct a plan for collection of data that could be used in either his own action research project, in the case study, or in both.

Data Collection

For this study, a mixed design was used, as explained by Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 24). The sampling strategies in such a design allow for triangulation (here, with Rafael's research and with student outcomes) and meet more than one need (investigating more than one type of growth). The sampling process of mixed design is "theoretically driven," in that it is guided by conceptual questions regarding the effi-

cacy of teacher research, the relevance of accommodation in instruction, and Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences (see Haley 2001). At the same time, the data for this case study proved to be useful to Rafael during his action research. We made a chart of the documents that would be analyzed as data, which are listed below, along with the abbreviations that would be used to identify them.

Figure 1. Documents analyzed as data

Source (coding for source)	Generated by	Number of documents	How often written or recorded	How long for each session
Weekly post-teaching reflections (Raf)	Rafael, Semester I and II tutor	17	weekly	75 minutes
Weekly post-teaching reflections (Elz)	Elizabeth, Semester I instructor; Spanish coordinator	15	weekly	75 minutes
Interviews (notes, transcriptions) of Azhar, Rafael, instructors (Don and Elizabeth)	2 outside interviewers	8	Beginning and conclusion of project	20 minutes each
Minutes of team meetings (Min)	Elizabeth	10	weekly	10-20 minutes each
Class observations, office hours, and tutoring observations (Obs)	Member of Spanish faculty; Member of Liberal Arts faculty; Elizabeth; Disability Services Coordinator	6	Beginning, middle, and end of Semester I and Semester II	Class: 75 minutes; tutoring and office hours: varied
Coordinator notes on Student work (AzTar)	Elizabeth	9	Bi-weekly	

Data analysis

For this study, data analysis was done using an effects matrix. Miles and Huberman (1994) define a matrix as two lists of qualitative data, one in rows and one in columns, set up to intersect with one another. An effects matrix helps to clarify which outcomes have occurred (p.137-141). The matrix provided a progressive view of the changes in Azhar, in Rafael, in other members of the team, and in the team as a whole. A random sampling of approximately 33% of the documents was shared with two members of the College of Education, who read them in raw (untranscribed) or transcribed form in order to corroborate the effects analysis. The majority of the analysis here will focus on the changes in Rafael.

Findings and Discussion

The most important transformation, for members of the team, was Azhar's. Rafael continuously focused on the questions for his action research and allowed these to guide the accommodations he made.

Transformation One: Results of Accommodation Action Research for Azhar

1. What can the student do, assisted and unassisted, to learn Spanish?

Rafael, in collaborating with the instructors, concluded that, although Azhar had daunting limitations, his personal strengths were impressive. These included integrity, maturity, intelligence, persistence, earnestness, insight, humor, extroversion, altruism, rhythmic and musical talent, prior L2 learning experience (a brief FLES experience with Arabic). The major liabilities had nothing to do with personal traits, but they were sufficiently serious: These included the lack of training and skills that would have reduced the load on his memory, and a lack of resources at the university and social agency to provide such training.

2. What alternative/ accommodating assessment would show that the student has developed proficiency to a level that would satisfy state requirements for university students of foreign language?

Rafael planned and implemented his tutoring sessions with a focus on facilitating Azhar's ability to perform in both formal and informal assessment situations. Formal assessment consisted of projects, mainly biweekly recitations and one project for each of two semesters. Both semester projects would be tape-recorded; the first was a narrative using regular and irregular verbs in the present and simple past (*pretérito*) tense; the second was a set of two originally composed *bomba* songs (along with a third, unassigned song, entitled "Gracias"). The informal assessment consisted of documenting the length and nature of Azhar's participation and interaction. At year's end, he had completed more than twice the contact hours of other students in the first year classes. This does not include the time that he spent going to extra class sessions (the same unit, taught by a different instructor); (re-) listening to class tapes at home; completing exercises on CD-ROM; seeking out, interacting with, and practicing with native speakers who were not affiliated with the university; attending Hispanic cultural events on and off campus; assessing and applying learning strategies; and immersing himself in intercultural interaction during and beyond tutoring sessions. At the end of two semesters, he had attained several of the benchmarks outlined in the K-12 Standards of his resident state. His contributions to his class by modeling aspects of Spanish, L2 learning, and living were invaluable to his support team and classmates. However, if the team had considered only his proficiency level, disappointment would have prevailed. Azhar's proficiency was below that of many of the other students who had completed the second-semester course, at Novice-Mid. The ACTFL *Standards* describe ACTFL's Guidelines for speaking at this level:

... communicate minimally and with difficulty by using a number of isolated words and memorized phrases limited by the particular context in which the language has been learned ... utter only two or three words at a time or an occasional

stock answer. They pause frequently as they search for simple vocabulary or attempt to recycle their own and their interlocutor's words. Because of hesitations, lack of vocabulary, inaccuracy, or failure to respond appropriately, Novice-Mid speakers may be understood with great difficulty even by sympathetic interlocutors ... to handle topics ... associated with the Intermediate level, they frequently resort to repetition, words from their native language, or silence. (p. 13)

Yet, his desire to communicate and his initiation of conversations were stronger than ever, and certainly much stronger than those of most of the students in all sections of second semester courses.

3. What teaching strategies will help this student most in the tutoring session and in class?

Rafael inventoried the variety of teaching strategies that each team member used when working with Azhar and tried to build on them, as well as implementing his own.

The following description of roles includes a variety of strategies used by each team member, along with other aspects of his or her role. However, it is important to repeat that these strategies were employed because they were appropriate for this particular learner in this particular context, which is an important consideration when planning for accommodation (Haley, 2004). Each team member, within the role s/he played in working with Azhar, employed various strategies and completed various instructional duties.

Tutor. Rafael's background reading provided him with strategies and gave him confidence that he could implement them (Haley, 2004; Kashdan, 2002). These included but were not limited to: bringing the language into context (for example, using Spanish entirely throughout a meal, from ordering to eating); using multiple modalities; rhythmic repetition, call and response, dance, song, authentic conversation; generating and working with vocabulary lists aligned to Azhar's interests; and enriching Azhar's understanding of Mexican culture.

Teacher 1. Assuring that Azhar had equipment (text CDs, CD-Rom player); ensuring that Azhar had help from and interaction with classmates; taking class time to ensure that Azhar understood the concepts; devising short recitation assignments due on cassette every two weeks; meeting weekly for oral practice, progress checks, and needs analysis.

Teacher 2. Having Azhar act as the speech model and the inspiration for the class; consistently interacting with Azhar (for input) during class; ensuring that Azhar had help from and interaction with classmates; devising the final project for semester two and providing background information and materials; accompanying Azhar and his tutor in rehearsals and on language-speaking excursions; enriching Azhar's understanding of Puerto Rican culture.

Coordinator. Acting as liaison among team members; conducting initial and ongoing needs analysis; guiding accommodation, assessment, and action research; inventorying

Azhar's strategy use and teaching new strategies; working on affective aspects of learning.

Disability Services. Intervening regarding initial placement; funding Rafael for tutoring Azhar exclusively; providing a classroom aide, when one was available; monitoring Azhar's progress in light of his entire schedule.

Department TAs. Engaging Azhar in authentic L2 conversation

Transformation Two: Results of Conducting Action Research for Rafael

Rafael revealed himself to be exceptionally bright, articulate, and refined, but very worried about his lack of teaching experience. Nonetheless, his action research project yielded a record of his growth as an educator. In addition to working with Azhar and the team, he extended his research, forming it into a final project for his graduate class in sociolinguistics, and made a presentation on accommodating diversity at a state FL conference.

In between that first day and year's end, Rafael documented his growth in many areas. The following quoted excerpts are from the weekly reflections that he submitted and from a transcribed end-of-the-year interview with him. Each of them has been triangulated with two other substantive sources—a combination of interviews with Azhar, minutes from team meetings, and/or notes from observations.

1. Theory and practice—not only integrating but also critically evaluating. “Management of the affective filter is not easy because it may change in one second. However, it is important that we learn how to manage it due to its importance in learning. While practicing the management of the affective filter, I found that it is more difficult to diminish the level of anxiety than to increase it.” (Rafael journal, 11/4/05)

2. Understanding and incorporating ACTFL standards (5 Cs). “I conclude that the comparison among cultures and even a comparison made in the same culture can be a determinant for a better understanding of the target culture and of its variety and, therefore, richness.” (Rafael journal, 11/23/05)

3. Understanding more about the extent and the limits of his repertoire of teaching Strategies. “My guess is that my apathy came from my lack of imagination for more activities.” (Rafael journal, 9/21/05) “I realized that there are many ways to teach Spanish and that I'm able to adapt myself to whatever situation, and, above all, to adapt my teaching style to the varied learning styles of students.” (Interview with Rafael, 6/1/06)

4. Helping to create and animate the learning team, and perceiving himself as part of a learning community. “I realize that I can use many more resources, and I am part of an educational community. I can make use of help from my supervisors and colleagues ... I have never seen a team join together to create a form of teaching and evaluation with a student. It was a big effort on the part of the teachers so that this student could have the necessary tools to learn the language.” (Interview with Rafael, 6/1/06)

5. Incorporating reflection into daily practice. “After each session I analyzed what I did with him, the work we did, and above all, what we accomplished. I was always left thinking about what I could do in the future for him, so he could acquire the language.” (Interview with Rafael, 6/1/06)

6. Including a research component in the teaching process. “Documentation in this case was of extreme importance, just as much as the work done with him. The information that his teachers and my supervisor provided me gave me a perspective about teaching and Azhar’s interaction and progress impossible to obtain from any other source. Also, in the future it will be remembered that the student is the most important source of information about how to teach that student.” (Interview with Rafael, 6/1/06)

Weaknesses of the Case Study

Because this is a case study, the results and conclusions apply only to the context in which it occurred. It does, however, illustrate some possible strategies for accommodation for diverse students, including alternative assessment. It affirms the effectiveness of multimodal approaches to instruction, and it affirms the transformative influence of teacher action research.

Conclusions

It was interesting that Rafael and the instructors initially used expressions related to “groping in the dark” (Minutes from team discussions, several dates). Because of the limited background knowledge and experience in accommodating instruction for a student having the needs that Azhar had, several felt as though their lack of procedural knowledge was a handicap similar to blindness. In retrospect, Rafael said, “This probably helped us to understand what he needed so much more quickly and so much better” (Minutes from team discussion, 3/14/06). Many teachers could frequently feel the same, if they are expected to make adaptations for learners without having much background about the learners’ conditions or needs. Looking realistically at Rafael’s growth and what he was able to facilitate in Azhar’s proficiency may provide some comfort or at least some reminders of some resources that are available, even if nothing else seems apparent. These include theory, the ability to do research, the ability to reflect, a potential community of educators at some level, ACTFL Standards, and some repertoire of teaching strategies upon which to build or to adapt (no matter how limited we may perceive that repertoire to be). This is by no means to say that teachers should expect to rely solely on these resources, without support from school administrative personnel, community agencies, or families. However, as Haley discussed (2004), diversity is becoming more and more the norm and, supported or not, teachers who make effective use of any available resources are more likely to derive the benefits, as well as experiencing the satisfaction of their students’ growth and motivation. Minutes from team discussions (Minutes from team discussions, 2/8/06, 3/8/06) testify to the benefits of empowering the learner. “The more you do so, the easier it is for teaching, and the more you learn yourself,” said Rafael. The more that we can learn about our students—how they best learn and

how they can help us teach them—the more we can devise appropriate teaching strategies. One overarching strategy, as Haley (2004) mentions, is to give students options. For example, Azhar helped to generate a list of options for his final projects and then selected the one that he would ultimately prepare. In addition to empowering the learner, teachers may become empowered and supported through collegial relationships within a learning community. Several team members on several occasions discussed the benefits of interacting with a learning team or community. Although the team could conceivably consist of a teacher and his/her students, there are possibilities for online collaboration through one's state or regional FL teachers' association, through websites such as *FLTeach*, or those initiated by TESOL International, to name a few. Such relationships can help to amplify strategies for accommodating diversity and exploring theory. The team mentioned during meetings that collaboration gave them additional energy through the sharing of ideas. The ACTFL Standards remind us that we are part of a much larger learning team or community, and they help to identify appropriate answers to what the student will be able to do in the target language—not only Rafael's initial question, but the question that initiates effective planning.

The reality of one of the primary findings of this study—the fact that all the extra work, student motivation, research, etc., did not bring Azhar to the same level as the other students in his class—warrants additional analysis. Because his assessment and instruction were individualized, it is reasonable to accept that Azhar's gains could be viewed by different means. The obvious modes would be student self-report and observations by members of the team members.

Azhar reported to Elizabeth, Don, and Rafael, as well as to personnel in Disabilities Services that he felt thoroughly supported throughout his learning experience; that he would continue to expand upon the outcome of his efforts (his songs) in his creative work and in his efforts to engage in conversation with native speakers of Spanish. He felt that his work served as an example for sighted and non-sighted students alike, in that he was able to serve as an example for what was needed and what could be accomplished. He gained insight into his learning strategies and how to adapt them to various tasks and content areas, including those not directly related to foreign language learning. He expanded his repertoire of communication strategies. His self-reflection throughout the year, he felt, would be helpful in his future work with clients. (Personal communication from Azhar, several dates; corroborating observations by team members, several dates).

One of Azhar's most significant gains, he felt, was his insight into the many ways in which African culture has influenced other cultures, not only through music but also through themes, values, and ways of living (i.e., the products, practices, and perspectives of the Cultures aspect of ACTFL's 5 Cs). He said that he was tremendously proud to learn of the contributions of his heritage and just as proud to be able to share his knowledge with other African-American friends. Their heightened awareness prompted further questions, and so Azhar's inquiry has become ongoing (personal communications from Azhar to Rafael). The depth and intensity of accomplishment in cultural proficiency served to compensate for more slowly devel-

oped linguistic proficiency. Ultimately, observations and self report do confirm that, for all of his efforts, Azhar's accomplishments were indeed commensurate with those of his peers.

A final insight may not be generalizable beyond the limits of the particular learning community in question. During one of the informal discussions of the team (Observation, 3/13/06), Rafael rehearsed portions of the conference presentation that he would soon deliver. At one point, some of the TAs recounted the case history of one or more diverse students for whom they, too, had made accommodations in instruction that year—the student in the wheelchair, the two with documented cognitive processing difficulties, the student with autism, the student with schizophrenia. Rafael observed, “It has been such a gift. Each one of these students, not just Azhar, has such incredible persistence. To teach them is a learning experience for us.” The little circle became quiet. Don replied, “There’s so much hope in that—persisting in the face of obstacles that seem so hard ... and the idea that they become our teachers. Wow—no diversity without community. The hope in persistence. I’m really proud to be here.” He was sincere, and the stillness of the little circle indicated that many were reflecting on Don’s insight.

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Appendix

Lyrics for Azhar's songs are available by visiting the writer's website at:
[http://www.csuohio.edu/mod_languages/wilberschied.htm].