



# Communication Skills, Cultural Sensitivity, and Collaboration in an Experiential Language Village Simulation

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**Abstract:** *This article discusses five college students' experiences in a simulated full-immersion, Arabic-speaking language village and the impact of that experience on learners' beliefs about the power of collaborative learning, the critical importance of cultural awareness, the efficacy of learning languages within a functioning community of practice, and the utility of role play and experiential learning. The article also shares students' insights into the value of both classroom and unstructured language learning opportunities and the contribution that such immersion scenarios can make as a stepping-stone into a full-immersion, long-term study abroad experience.*

**Key words:** *collaborative learning, community of practice, immersion, language for specific purposes, role play*

## Introduction

According to the 2006 *Education for Global Leadership* report (Committee for Economic Development [CED]), multinational corporations, large and small companies, and military and intelligence agencies are in need of articulate speakers of critical languages who are also endowed with a sensitivity to, and keen awareness of, world cultures, in particular those of the Middle East. Those who enjoy this distinctive skill set could answer the need that international companies have for globally literate employees (CED, 2006). In addition, they could bolster U.S. diplomatic efforts in that region and better represent America and its foreign policy to the

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*Foreign Language Annals, Vol. 48, Iss. 2, pp. 184–202. © 2015 by American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.*

DOI: 10.1111/flan.12134

rest of the world. To that end, the CED report recommended that “international content be taught across the curriculum at all levels of learning” (2006, p. 2) and that legislative incentives be granted to foster innovative approaches to incorporate international perspectives into classes. The report further recommended that global awareness and knowledge “be integrated into each state’s K–12 curriculum standards and assessments” (CED, 2006, p. 2) with the goal of developing curriculum and instructional methods that can be replicated at other schools and universities. In 2007, the report of the Modern Language Association (MLA) also recommended that learning institutions develop a unified curriculum that holistically teaches language, culture, and literature.

In collaboration with the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, in 2011, the ACTFL developed the 21st Century Skills Map that illustrated how language skills and cultural awareness can be translated into core subjects and also echoed the MLA report in calling for an interdisciplinary approach to language learning based on global awareness and business, civic, and health literacy (Magner, Saltrick, & Wesolowski, 2011). Aligned with these repeated calls for innovative programs and learning expectations that integrate language, culture, literature, and content from other core disciplines, the Intensive Arabic Program at the University of Mississippi has developed an interdisciplinary curriculum that puts into practice these core pedagogical values in the form of a full-day, immersion language experience.

Inspired by the U.S. Army’s combat readiness training, the program prepares students who are learning Arabic to participate in an immersion simulation that involves approximately 180 students from three different disciplines across the university: the Intensive Arabic Program ( $n = 18$ ), the Army ROTC program ( $n = 150$ ), and the School of Journalism ( $n = 8$ ). The experience places students from these three disciplines together in a simulated real-world scenario, allowing each participant to

become actively engaged and to depend on the knowledge and skills of students from the other disciplines. This article addresses the language acquisition activities and eventual roles that were played by the intensive Arabic students during this one-day, intense learning scenario in which their language skills were required to carry out a complex but ill-defined agenda, the results of which, according to participants in this study, were wholly positive and lasting.

## Literature Review

### *Experiential Learning*

In 1938, Dewey published his seminal work on education, *Experience and Education*, arguing for a progressive education and against traditional schooling. Learning, in the traditional school, concerned itself with “acquisition of what already is incorporated in books and in the heads of elders” (p. 6) with little regard to the foundation and subsequent building upon of those ideas or even how they were inevitably bound to change over the course of time; even though, as he put it, “change is the rule, not the exception” (Dewey, 1938 p. 6). Echoing Abraham Lincoln’s philosophy on democracy, Dewey stated that education is “of, by, and for experience” (1938; p. 6). He never contended, however, that every experience was enriching, rewarding, or enlightening; in fact, he said that, within the traditional school

*experiences, the experiences which were had by pupils and teachers alike, were largely of a wrong kind. How many students, for example, were rendered callous to ideas, and how many lost the impetus to learn because of the Way [sic] in which learning was experienced by them? How many acquired special skills by means of automatic drill so that their power of judgment and capacity to act intelligently in new situations was limited? How many came to associate the learning process with ennui and boredom? How many found what they did learn so foreign to*

*the situations of life outside the school as to give them no power of control over the latter? How many came to associate books with dull drudgery, so that they were "conditioned" to all but flashy reading matter? (p. 9)*

These questions, posed in 1938, remain pertinent for many educators today. They suggest a need for those who design programs, develop courses and learning experiences, and provide direct instruction to create situations where, as Kolb (1984) stated, "Learning is a continuous process grounded in experience" and that "all learning is relearning" (p. 28). This statement has far-reaching curricular implications: From this perspective, learning is viewed as a process where ideas are formed and reformed through experience, where learning habits are shaped and behaviors persist even when they are no longer rewarded with grades, and where outcomes are no longer the definition of learning. Kolb (1984) elaborated on this thought: "How easy and tempting it is in designing a course to think of the learner's mind as being as blank as the paper on which we scratch our outline. Yet this is not the case. Everyone enters every learning situation with more or less articulate ideas about the topic at hand" (p. 28). "In the process of learning," Kolb (1984) suggested, "one moves in varying degrees from actor to observer, and from specific involvement to general analytic detachment" (p. 31); Kolb then proffered a theory that Lafford echoed in her 2013 article: Learners need to have four different abilities that generate a cycle of understanding: the concrete experience, which leads to a reflection of that experience that is then conceptualized in abstract form in the mind, and is thereby actively tested by having more like experiences.

Moving from individual experiences in the works of Dewey (1938) and Kolb (1984), Lave and Wenger (1991) introduced the theory of legitimate peripheral participation, in which "a person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning

of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice" (p. 29). Wenger (2000) explained that *participation* does not only refer to "local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities" (p. 4). Through interactions, newcomers to a community of practice grow through apprenticeship with old-timers, becoming "increasingly experienced in the practices that characterize that community" (Norton & McKinney, 2011 p. 79).

The concept *communities of practice* finds its roots in Scribner and Cole's Vai Project, a five-year study of the Mandespeaking people of northwestern Liberia, who are among the few cultures in world history to have independently produced their own phonetic writing system (Scribner & Cole, 1981). According to Barton and Tusting (2005), the ethnographic study that Scribner and Cole (1981) undertook marked a departure from the cognitive framework by applying "anthropological field work with experimental psychological methods" (p. 71) to study the nature of the Vai writing system. Building on that work, Lave and Wenger (1991) refined their theories, progressing from "a psychological model with the social as a context developing into a model which is essentially social" (Barton & Tusting, 2005, p. 4). Participation in the community of practice, therefore, serves not only as the context for learning but also as the source of knowledge, and it is from analysis of, and reflection on, real-life experiences that ideas are formed and reformed, and deeper, more complex understanding is achieved. The immersion village project that is described in this article was designed to provide students with meaningful opportunities to use Arabic as well as to develop cultural awareness through active experiential learning as a member of one of two communities, each of which had different goals and needs.

### *Language Learning, Role Play, and Identity*

The MLA report (2007) defined the outcome goal of a language major as deep translingual and transcultural competence attained by training “to reflect on the world and themselves through the lens of another language and culture.” Similarly, the overall goal of language learning as defined by the World-Readiness Standards is to “prepare learners to apply the skills and understandings measured by the Standards, to bring a global competence to their future careers and experiences” (National Standards, 2015, p. 2). Specifically, the standards stated that learners should be able to “communicate and interact with cultural competence in order to participate in multilingual communities” as well as use language “beyond the classroom to ... collaborate in their community and the globalized world” (2015, p. 1, Standard 5). The 2007 MLA report and the World-Readiness Standards,<sup>1</sup> as well as the 21st Century Skills Map (Magner et al., 2011), called for the institution of an interdisciplinary curriculum to solidify the connections between students’ linguistic and cultural skill sets and knowledge and skills in content areas outside of their own field of study so as to better prepare learners for a range of life experiences.

Interestingly, all three documents affirmed that learners must develop a multilingual and multicultural core identity and actively use their language skills and cultural knowledge to better understand their own actions, beliefs, and roles as well as the identities and actions of others across the range of personal and professional interactions. When considering the concept of roles and identities, Vygotsky (1978) stated that in life the child behaves without thinking that she is her sister’s sister. In the game of sisters playing at “sisters,” however, they are both concerned with displaying their sisterhood; the fact that two sisters decided to play sisters induces them both to acquire rules of behavior. Only actions that fit these

rules are acceptable to the play situation: they dress alike, talk alike, in short, they enact whatever emphasizes their relationship as sisters vis-à-vis adults and strangers (p. 95).

In a similar vein to Vygotsky’s idea of “enacting” a role, a more recent sociolinguistic study focused on speakers’ enactment of particular stances. *Stance*, according to Du Bois (2007), is “a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (the self and others), and aligning with other subjects with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field” (p. 163). Societal context and the stance(s) a person takes within interactions with others leads to the creation of an “identity.”

Language learning, according to Norton and McKinney (2011), “engages the identities of learners because language itself is not only a linguistic system of signs and symbols, but also a complex social practice through which relationships are defined, negotiated, and resisted” (p. 77). Social interaction gives rise, to a certain extent, to the roles that people play in a given community. DiPietro (1987) claimed that “roles are not easy to define in absolute terms. They are neither static nor invariable. Rather, they are patterns of behavior. They are not always played uniformly” (p. 44). In other words, due to the infinite variety of individual differences, no two people “mother” in exactly the same way, nor do they “bartend” in the same manner (DiPietro, 1987). Like learning, role-playing is ill-defined, messy, and quite complicated. Also like learning, role-playing has a metacognitive dimension in that a person can play a social role, like a nurse, as well as a psychological role, such as a mother or sister, at the same time (DiPietro, 1987).

Sfard and Prusak (2005) viewed identity in Bakhtinian terms. Bakhtin (1986) theorized that utterances, in general, are connected links of speech (written or oral) with the earlier links reflecting on,

and influencing, the latter links. This chain of links is contained within a speech genre, which Bakhtin (1986) conceptualized as a sphere. The sphere itself is in a constant state of flux and evolution and is constantly growing and changing due to the introduction or development of ideas in spheres that share related information. That is to say, according to Bakhtin (1986), the more highly developed and organized spheres absorb the simple nondeveloped spheres during their evolutionary process. In their 2005 article, Sfard and Prusak drew a connection between these spheres and narratives: It is through diffused narration that identities are born. Identities, they claimed, “are products of discursive diffusion—of our proclivity to recycle strips of things said by others even if we are unaware of these texts’ origins” (p. 18).

Based on Dewey’s theories concerning experiential learning, Sfard and Prusak’s (2005) view of identity, Vygotsky’s and DiPietro’s (1987) notions of role-playing, and the goals and expectations that are stated in the MLA report (2007), World-Readiness Standards (2015), and 21st Century Skills Map (Magner et al., 2011) documents, the experiential learning experience described in this article is framed by a philosophical framework of transmission (to know), transaction (to do), and transformation (to create) (Leaver & Shekhtman, 2002). Specifically, this article describes the way in which experiential learning and role play were experienced by learners of Arabic within the context of a simulated community of practice—the immersion village—and examines the extent to which pragmatic interactions had an impact on language learning and the acquisition of cultural awareness and sensitivity. Interviews with five key participants in the simulation addressed what participants learned from choosing and living the role of their character, the ways in which experiential learning differed from classroom learning, the value participants found in collaborating with students from other programs and disciplines, the impact of the experience on their

acquisition of Arabic as a foreign language, the extent to which the simulation prepared them for future careers, and the extent to which this and similar scenarios can serve as a tool for socially constructed, mediated learning.

## Methods

### *Context*

The Intensive Arabic Program at the University of Mississippi is based on the Flagship model and is designed to prepare students for occupations requiring cross-cultural understanding, linguistic and meta-linguistic sophistication, and holistic knowledge of Arabic. It has produced, according to official Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) and computerized OPI (OPIC) assessments, two Superior and 18 Advanced speakers of Arabic since its inception in September 2008. In an effort to help students achieve these high proficiency goals, the program has established a standards- and literacy-based curriculum (Kern, 2004). The Intensive Arabic Program provides the equivalent of 7 years of language instruction in just 4 years of study. Students are required to spend the summer before their freshman year in an intensive Arabic language program on the University of Mississippi campus and also spend the next two summers in intensive study abroad programs. These three summer experiences provide the equivalent of 3 extra years of academic study, in addition to students’ regular 4-year university programs. The first 2 years of study are dedicated to language-based courses; 34% of the Intensive Arabic Program’s students reach the Advanced level after their second year, according to official OPI scores (Language Testing International, 2015, n.p.). The final two years of study are dedicated to content courses, which include the study of media, literature, culture, poetry, comparative dialects, and advanced conversation, and a series of four courses in one of three dialects of Arabic. The goal of the program is two-fold: (1) to reach automaticity in all four

language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), and (2) to achieve a level of speech in which *what* is being said takes precedence over *how* to say things (Shekhtman, 2003).

Like all 27 programs at the 22 universities that constitute the Language Flagship (The Language Flagship, 2015), the Intensive Arabic Program was designed to support students' learning through a range of activities that enhance social interaction and ensure maximum exposure to Arabic in a domestic setting: At the University of Mississippi, students live in language houses, participate in language tables and language clubs, and also engage in weekly interactions with native speakers of Arabic as well as weekly 30-minute one-on-one language sessions with instructors. However, the Intensive Arabic Program at the University of Mississippi is wholly unique from other Language Flagship programs in offering its learners the opportunity to participate in functioning language villages and play roles within a large-scale interdisciplinary experience.

### The Language Village Simulation

The immersion language village served as a pragmatic experience for students in the Intensive Arabic Program. The village experience is based on village models at the National Training Center in California, a training facility at which “all U.S. troops, from all the services, spend a twenty-one day rotation before they deploy overseas” (VENUE, 2012). “Termed ‘theatre immersions,’ these sites feature entire villages—living, breathing environments complete with residential, government, retail, and worship districts” (Magelssen, 2009 p. 48). The villages set up by the Intensive Arabic Program offered a unique domestic simulation set in the deep woods of Mississippi wherein, during this roughly 9-hour intensive experience in 2013, students became full participants in a complex scenario: Using only Arabic as the language of communication, students solved the differences between two rival communities. Each

small village consisted of tents that symbolized different buildings and houses. People living in both tent villages had similar problems: They lacked support from the provincial government and needed access to health care and medicine. However, there were also fundamental differences: The two villages were separated not only in terms of distance (1 kilometer apart), but also in terms of race, ethnicity, and religious denomination—one was a Shiite village and the other was a Sunni village.

- The Shiite village, *al-manūra*, consisted of 7 to 10 occupants, whose roles were played by students in the Arabic program. Their principal vocation was herding sheep and goats, and their main source of power stemmed from their control of the region's water sources. The inhabitants of *al-manūra* were largely ambivalent toward insurgent forces but strongly disliked the people who lived in the other village. As part of the negotiation process, the inhabitants of this village wanted a new mosque and school to be built.
- The second village, *al-manūfiyya*, was a small Sunni village also consisting of 7 to 10 occupants whose roles were also played by students in the Arabic language program. Their livelihood was based on agriculture, which meant that they needed access to the water supply as well as to pumps and electricity. The inhabitants of *al-manūfiyya* were pro-insurgent and strongly disliked the people who lived in *al-manūra*.
- Insurgents were added to the scenario for complexity and played by ROTC cadets who did not speak Arabic. The role of the insurgents was to undermine the efforts of the ROTC cadets (i.e., ROTC cadets played the role of the U.S. Army and of insurgents; five of the cadets were in the Intensive Arabic Program).
- Complexity was also added in the form of contractors and physicians who traveled with the ROTC cadets. Their goal was to accommodate the needs of people living in both villages and thus to create peace

and stability in the region, although the scenario required that the insurgents work to undermine these efforts.

### Use of Language

Students who played the roles of villagers spoke only Arabic when communicating with all the other members of their village and used this language rather than English to express their grievances as well as their opinions and points of view concerning the merits of the different approaches to resolving their grievances that were proposed by the insurgents and the ROTC cadets. Because they were required to speak only in Arabic, the “villagers” communicated with English-speaking ROTC cadets only by means of a designated Arabic-English translator, played by an upper-level student in the Intensive Arabic Program. At the conclusion of the experience, designated interpreters used their skills in Arabic and English to negotiate and resolve villagers’ grievances, convey villagers’ counterproposals, and broker an eventual mutually acceptable agreement.

### Collaboration

Activities throughout the simulation were filmed on location by students in the university’s journalism program, and three of their news broadcasts were aired on local television.<sup>2</sup> This scenario, which explicitly addressed questions of building positive relationships at the local level, was based on one of the authors’ life experiences in Iraq, and it reinforced the need for intense collaboration among students with different knowledge and skill sets across the three university programs (Arabic, ROTC, and journalism).

### *Participants and Their Enactment of Their Village Identities*

After listening to a presentation by co-author Minami describing the simulation experience, 18 students in the Intensive Arabic Program volunteered to participate.

All participants were college undergraduates. None of the participants was a heritage or native speaker, and none of them knew any Arabic prior to beginning their studies at the University of Mississippi. Some of the participants who were rated at the Novice High/Advanced Mid level chose secondary roles, while participants who had Advanced- and Superior-level language skills were offered more sophisticated roles, which included, but were not limited to: the *muxtār* [head of a village] and family, the *ṣayx* [village elder] and family, the imam [religious leader] and family, a doctor, a minister of health and public works, a trader, a double agent, and a general contractor. Participants’ pseudonyms, OPI/OPIc ratings, and assigned roles in the village simulation are listed in Table 1.

Because of their key roles in the immersion simulation described here, the data reported in this article were collected only from the five primary players shown in Table 1. Although two of the ROTC cadets from the Intensive Arabic Program had also completed their coursework and had achieved proficiency ratings of Advanced Low after 13 months of instruction, they were not included in this study because they were no longer students in the program. None of the journalism students who participated in this experience studied Arabic and thus were not interviewed as part of this study.

### *Procedures*

#### **Preparation for Roles**

Prior to participating in the simulation, students in the Intensive Arabic Program studied the kinds of problems that the villagers were likely to have and became deeply invested in their village and its survival. Because they had never experienced life in a functioning Arabic community, the students first watched an episode of *bāb al-āra* [“The Village Gate”], a popular Syrian television drama that exposed them to the general social hierarchical structure of an Arabic community. Participants then

TABLE 1

## Roles Played in the Experience

| Name            | OPI/OPIc Rating   | Role   |
|-----------------|-------------------|--|
| Primary Roles   |                   |  |
| Caroline        | Advanced Mid      | The <i>muxtāra</i> [leader (f.)] of <i>al-manūra</i>         |
| Peter           | Superior          | The <i>muxtār</i> [leader] of <i>al-manūfiyya</i>            |
| Layla           | Advanced Low      | The government worker embedded in the ROTC ranks             |
| Rachael         | Advanced Low      | The interpreter  |
| Clair           | Advanced Mid      | Both the interpreter embedded in the ROTC ranks, and the spy |
| Secondary Roles |                   |  |
| Jamila          | Intermediate Mid  | Daughter of the <i>muxtār</i>                                |
| Asad            | Advanced Low      | Son of the <i>muxtār</i>                                     |
| Samiya          | Intermediate High | International worker   |
| Bashar          | Advanced Low      | Sheikh   |
| Izdihar         | Novice High       | Daughter of the <i>muxtāra</i>                               |
| Zayd            | Advanced Mid      | Sheikh   |
| Khalid          | Intermediate High | Son of the sheikh  |
| Ruqaya          | Intermediate High | Daughter of the sheikh                                       |
| Hasan           | Intermediate Mid  | Double agent   |
| Ali             | Intermediate High | Translator   |
| Samir           | Intermediate High | Contract worker  |
| Amira           | Intermediate High | Trader   |
| Yasamin         | Advanced Low      | Doctor   |

individually and collaboratively developed their characters by fleshing out possible traits and nuances in their character's personality and problematizing their relations with the other village and the insurgent forces.

Students prepared for their role in the immersion simulation by identifying and practicing, alone or in collaboration with other characters, the expressions and types of complete interactions that they anticipated their character would need. Specific in-class activities included talking about character development, engaging in simulated dialogues, and participating with other characters to relate the villagers' requests and demands to the students playing the

roles of the English-speaking participants. These interpretation exercises gradually grew in length, from approximately 5 minutes per attempt to 15 minutes per attempt, as well as in complexity. During out-of-class practice, some students recorded and then reflected on simulated monologues and conversations. In addition, during their weekly 30-minute individual meetings with their Arabic instructors, the students explored linguistic possibilities of their individual characters: for example, the student who played the religious figure prepared short statements that supported or forbade collaboration with the military forces, the student who played the doctor prepared to discuss and offer advice on the

health-related problems in each village, and the student who played the contractor specifically prepared the language he would need to address the design and construction of the new facilities that each of the villages needed.

### The Role-Play Simulation

Wearing clothing that was appropriate to their roles and occupations, all 18 students from the Intensive Arabic Program immersed themselves in their respective stances and new identities, then dedicated themselves to carrying out their collective and individual agendas within their villages and in negotiations between villages. Villagers were instructed to listen to the promises being made by the ROTC cadets and by the insurgents and to base their decision to support the cadets or the insurgents on whichever group gave their village the more favorable opportunities during the negotiation phases of the simulation, as well as the *ṣūrā* that took place at the end of the experience.<sup>3</sup>

### Data Collection and Analysis: A Phenomenological Approach

Following the completion of the simulation, five participants (both heads of the villages, two interpreters, and the government worker) were interviewed using the following semi-structured questions:

1. Describe, in as much detail as you can, your experience.
2. What did you learn from choosing, developing, and living the role of your character?
3. How did this type of experiential learning differ from the traditional classroom setting, in your opinion?
4. When does it feel natural for you to speak in Arabic?
5. What value, if any, do you see in collaborating (in this or similar immersion simulations)?

Patton (1990) described the reasoning behind purposeful sampling as follows: “The logic and power of purposeful

sampling lies in selecting *information-rich* cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (p. 169; emphasis in original). Gathering data from “small, purposively-selected and carefully-situated samples” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 29) is thus in keeping with phenomenological research. Moustakas (1994) noted that phenomenological research “is derived from first-person reports of life experiences” (p. 84). That is, the research design involved gathering qualitative data from the actors of a shared phenomenon so as to make apparent key, salient perceptual points resulting in a pool of “deep” information (Lester, 1999). Interviews with the five core participants were recorded and lasted from 40 to 60 minutes. Interviews were then transcribed and the data were reduced, per Husserl’s (1927) advice, to the participants’ “prime intentions”—a process known as eidetic reduction—so as to reveal the experienced “reality” and ultimately gain a deeper understanding of the simulation through the lens of each participant. Meaningful statements were marked, then regrouped and coded into reoccurring clusters, which were categorized into themes (Creswell, 2014, p. 197). This process provided insight into the complex, changing, and ill-defined space such as the village immersion simulation by systematically “navigating” (Brown, 2002) through the experience by means of five accounts of, and perspectives on, the same event. The training scenario provided a setting not guided by lesson themes, giving the students an opportunity to think, speak, and act extemporaneously in Arabic. Data were coded by only one of the researchers so as to avoid the possibility of two researchers using different coding schemes (Creswell, 2014).

### Results

Across the five interview questions, a number of themes emerged.

### *Theme 1: Opportunities to Learn and Use Arabic*

All five of the participants mentioned that the ill-defined nature of the simulation put new and more broad-reaching demands on their knowledge and skills in Arabic because of the lack of scaffolding and support that are customarily offered in the classroom setting. Caroline pointed out that classroom learning is mediated with numerous tools that aid in language learning but warned that some of those tools are not practical for use in the real-world: “You can’t have flashcards in front of you.” In this ill-defined space where conversations can change very quickly, Caroline noticed that it would behoove students to reach automaticity in certain aspects of grammar: “It reinforces a lot of things that you don’t think are important, like verb conjugation.”

In addition, participants mentioned differences in the range of topics, contexts, and tasks between classroom learning and real-life language use. Caroline observed that classroom conversations were driven by topics imposed on the interlocutors, by lesson theme, or by the instructor: “When you’re in a regular class setting, the topics that you’re talking about are different than the topic you talk about when you are just trying to communicate with people.” The lesson-based, thematic approach used in the Intensive Arabic Program, and for that matter in most language programs, shaped conversations and focused students’ learning on certain expressions, structures, and categories of vocabulary, which differed considerably from the range of conversations that occurred during the simulation. Caroline stated, “I think that having experiences where you are simply communicating with someone—you’re not telling them what you did yesterday; you’re not giving them a presentation on the Muslim Brotherhood; you’re not doing any of those stereotypical things that you do in Arabic class—that really opens your world to a whole different type of vocabulary.” Similarly, Rachael compared the classroom setting to the

immersion experience: “Everything in class is more hypothetical. You can talk about it and have neat conversations, but when you’re trying to negotiate with someone in real life, you have to think really quickly. I think that gives you a lot more experience speaking and conjugating, ‘Whoops, I made a mistake, keep going.’” Layla echoed these thoughts, noting that the simulation offered an opportunity to think, speak, and act extemporaneously in Arabic and particularly pointed out that there was no safe and defined lesson theme: “We had to think on our feet. There was no script ... only that we had to remain in character. This allowed for the opportunity for many different scenarios to unfold, which we all had to be prepared to participate in and respond to.”

In addition, participants cited assessment as having a different level of impact on their willingness to produce language in the classroom and in the simulation. Layla and Rachael perceived tension when speaking to instructors of Arabic in the Intensive Arabic Program because they felt that the instructors were constantly assessing language level. Layla commented, “Before the field training exercise, I was definitely hesitant about speaking Arabic. During the exercise, there was no pressure to speak Arabic. I did not feel like I was being graded [as can sometimes be the case in a classroom environment], and therefore speaking Arabic was much easier.” In order to avoid making mistakes in front of her instructors, Rachael limited her vocabulary to those words and phrases that she was certain to be using correctly: “I’m a little more apprehensive when I talk to teachers, because I feel like I’m being graded, but it goes down with classmates, or people who aren’t grading me. I don’t want to make a mistake, so you end up actually limiting the words you use, because you’re second-guessing the meaning.” In her mind, Rachael believed that this exercise finally offered her a setting in which she could apply the language skills that she had practiced for years in the classroom: “It’s really interesting, it almost gives you a giddy feeling, excitement like: I’m

finally putting the skills I've learned to the test." Interestingly, two participants commented on the complementary nature of classroom and simulated learning. Peter viewed the classroom setting as advantageous in terms of the structure it lends to language learning: "In the classroom, you have the advantage of the teacher, the professor, in the front of the classroom and the students are in rows. You're talking to them, and you have a set of structured things that you're going to do." Echoing Caroline's comments about the inaccessibility of scaffolding and support when having a conversation outside of the classroom, Peter said, "You have to be able to make decisions without somebody leaning over your shoulder telling you what to do. I think it definitely simulates the real world more than the classroom." Similarly, Clair felt like classroom conversations were beneficial in that they were governed by the instructors: "I feel like, your conversations can be very guided or directed by the professor," and that the immersion setting also provided critical learning opportunities: "It's also very beneficial, because, it's more like a real-life conversation—it's going to keep you on your toes. That's what learning the language is all about: it's where you want to be." Overall, students noted that both classroom learning and the immersion simulations played important roles in providing a well-rounded learning experience. While Peter believed that the immersion village experience was more successful than the classroom setting in terms of functional usage of Arabic in a simulated setting, he warned that it must be matched with classroom instruction, in particular at the beginning and intermediate levels:

In the sense of language skill, I think it's more successful, if matched with the classroom. Of course, you have to have that foundation. I don't think that it would work if you just throw someone out there the first time and tell 'em to learn Arabic in this field. But with people with experience, I think that all of us were at the intermediate or advanced level, so I think it's very beneficial.

Peter went on to explain language learning using a basketball metaphor:

*Because, languages, in my own opinion, it's more of a training, than a learning type of thing. I can always make the parallel to basketball: You can go out there and tell a guy how to shoot a free-throw, and you can show him how to do it, and he can watch you do it a million times, but unless he goes out and does it a thousand times, he is never going to be a very good free-throw shooter. In fact, you can tell someone all of the grammatical rules of Arabic and you can have them watch videos and stuff like that or whatever, but you're never going to speak the language if you don't actually speak it.*

## *Theme 2: Opportunities to Develop a Cultural Identity and Deepen Cultural Understanding*

Peter prepared for his role by modeling his character on the cultural practices and overall appearance of the main character in a popular Syrian television drama, although this characterization may have reflected a number of cultural stereotypes. Peter noted, "I didn't really do any research, but I did draw on my own experiences from being overseas. Watching *bāb al-āra* played a role in that. We watched a little bit to see like how the guy there—he's got the big moustache [and is] speaking to everybody—he was very confident, he had a big booming voice, that I don't have." Peter, who tested at Superior after studying Arabic for just three years, emphasized the freedom to develop a new language and cultural identity that was offered by the simulation: "I choose to be the *Mokhtar*.... I tried to play it up as much as I can, that's the same strategy I always use with language learning...always acting. So, just act it all the way up even if you feel ridiculous." Peter summed up his language acquisition philosophy in one sentence: "Speaking a foreign language and learning a foreign language is really acting and it's really developing a character." Interestingly, the

immersion village experience played to his personal philosophy of language learning, which focused on taking on a long-term role within the new culture. Peter noted, however, that adopting a new cultural identity was perhaps more easily accomplished in a simulation, where role-playing and identity development were essential, than in the classroom:

*I think a lot of students, that's a real problem, they don't want to take on a role 100%. Because, they don't want to speak with the accent because they feel like they're faking it. It's not really the way they speak, or they speak with an American accent and people will still understand them. If you really want to master a language, you gotta take on that character. I think that it's a really good experience in training or developing that, or just kind of breaking through that ... awkward boundary. OK, I'm just going to pretend to be somebody else for a while.*

Caroline, who played the head of *al-manūra* village, was one of three students who commented that the simulation truly resembled a real-life experience and that playing her role “definitely allowed me to see the difficulties that that guy in that situation would have.” She went on to describe how, even as an American in America, she was able to experience the reality of a village chief in Iraq:

*On one level, as an American, I understood, like you are trying to get this [assignment] done and I understand that it's probably for a good reason, but on the level of someone who is in the character of the Mokhtar, I was like, “I am not going to play your game because you have offended me ... you're acting as though your prerogative [sic] ... is more important than whatever I've got going on.”*

Caroline commented on the hierarchical structure of the village and noted that the community was already set up for the students so as to allow them to experience

the practices and perspectives of culture and truly feel and act like a real villager:

*It was really easy to like jump into the village as I think that a village would actually work, because it had already been set up for us. ... I did gain a lot of value in understanding better how ... that must feel like for someone who actually lives that way, because there was like a structure ... that had been described to us, that we had looked up and that we had thought about.*

Within that structure, Caroline found herself in charge of a whole village of people and quickly took on that unique perspective and learned how to negotiate context through language use.

*It was very interesting because you got to put yourself in the mind of one of those villagers. ... Once we found out that there was a “translator” in the Army ranks, the way that we started talking to one another completely changed. We started using code words and false language and all sorts of stuff that we weren't doing before.*

She found the most salient feature of this type of language learning to be “responsibility”: “The thing that I learned the most about living in that character was how difficult it would be to be that guy who is ‘on the hook’ for a whole village of people.... It did introduce you to the struggles that a villager would have.”

Layla addressed the variety of practices, perspectives, and resulting differences in goals and actions as follows:

*In my role, I had the benefit of observing what was happening from both the soldiers' and villagers' perspectives. The villagers were in conflict with a neighboring village over water resources and [needed to decide] if they should support insurgents. The soldiers were trying to provide security, get rid of the insurgents and develop projects [so] that the villagers could get clean water. These issues were compounded by the fact that the soldiers*

*did not speak Arabic and the villagers did not speak English. Furthermore, the ROTC students quickly learned that “government officials” did not carry as much weight or authority in the villages as they do in the United States. Again, I thought this was a great way to truly experience the problems faced overseas when attempting to gain support of a local population, as well as the difficulties faced in trying to create a new government that the population will actually support.*

Rachael was impressed at what it was like to be embedded with the cadets as they made their way through the woods and quickly realized that the cadets would benefit from direct cultural instruction by explaining to them how to approach and greet people in the village: “I had to be protected going through the woods while they are trying to navigate. I had to explain to them the cultural significance of certain actions before entering the town.”

### *Theme 3: Preparation for Careers*

All five accounts mentioned how the immersion experience prepared them for future experiences and careers in a number of different ways. When Layla traveled abroad to Jordan the following semester, she found that the village simulation had prepared her for a truly immersive environment:

*After watching my fellow Arabic students who were playing translators, I realized that sometimes you have to make do with what you have. You may not know every word that is being spoken, but if you are the expert, or the most experienced person speaking the language at the time, you have to translate to the best of your abilities. Even though you will make mistakes, you are in reality probably better at speaking Arabic than you realize. This became more of my mindset after the exercise. It was a good mindset to adopt, and made interacting with native Arabic speakers much easier when I studied abroad in Jordan the following semester.*

Four of the five interviewees commented on the significant role that interpretation played in the simulation and its impact on their understanding of possible careers. Caroline, for example, recognized that information was lost on both sides due to translation: “There were a lot of really good moments [that were] lost in translation, where stuff did not go back and forth even though we are all American kids and we all speak the same language, simply the fact that we were all acting and we put ourselves in such completely different roles it was really a great experience to see what it would be like in real life.” Similarly, Peter, a superior speaker of Arabic and the head of *al-manūfiyya*, ended up playing the role of interpreter at the end of the simulation and described the *ṣūrā* [negotiation] as “interpretation chaos”:

*We had to sit down and translate back-and-forth between the contractor, which was hilarious, and the leader of the army guy. ... And it was really funny there, because then I was translating for [the contractor], who didn't understand a lot of the stuff that he was saying and then the army guy, the translator for him didn't understand a lot of what I was saying, so it was very much like a lot of stuff lost in translation.*

Clair had taken a course at the University of Mississippi on translation and interpretation and drew upon that knowledge when reflecting on her role as lead interpreter:

*I learned that translation is a very, very key thing, when in situations like that. I learned this more after I had taken a translation class and in graduate school. The Army people were saying so much, so quickly, I ended up having to paraphrase things to translate them. In this situation the villagers know English so they knew exactly what was going on, but in a real-life situation that might not be the case.*

Clair suggested that the interpreter is, in fact, the only person who would be able

to bring two historically rival villages together: “The translator would be the person that makes everything fit together. That’s where knowing the colloquialisms or really knowing specific vocabulary for certain topics comes in handy.”

A number of participants’ comments addressed the way in which the interdisciplinary nature of the simulation prepared students for future careers. Peter, for example, pointed out the positive aspects of interacting with both the students from the College of Journalism and the Army cadets and the way such interactions simulated those that students will encounter across a range of careers:

*I guess the best type of collaboration is when you have a shared goal. I think that was pretty good having all those different departments and how it all worked out. It’s messy—that’s the thing about the experiential learning thing—it’s messy, but I think there are definitely good side effects from it. Like learning to interact with different people, who don’t have the same goal as you, the same training or experience as you, or the same skills as you, but that’s what you do, you know, when you go to the workplace, is, you have a certain set of skills, they have certain sets of skills, or have different backgrounds, you have to work together to get something done.*

Interestingly, Rachael pointed out that the depth of collaboration that was required in the immersion village not only was beneficial to the students of the Intensive Arabic Program, but also served as a wake-up call for the cadets: “Not only did it give us an experience in one of our possible job paths, but it gave them a ‘rude awakening,’ because some of those guys didn’t seem to be ready to deal with a translator.” After the end of the exercise, Rachael was asked if she had any recommendations to offer the cadets and gave some sage advice: “At the end, the captain asked me to explain what we could have done better, which made me a little nervous but I gave them some tips. ...

Make sure you listen to the translator because some of that stuff really does matter. They will have a lot more information to give you that you need to remember.”

Similarly, Layla played the role of a governmental worker embedded with the ROTC cadets. Her role, however, did not allow her to speak any English:

*My experience in [the simulation] was a bit different than that of my fellow classmates. When I was first introduced to the platoon, the ROTC students were pretty excited that I was with them. This excitement quickly faded when they realized I would only be speaking in Arabic. A few ROTC students had tried to learn a few Arabic words, and attempted to speak to me. Unfortunately, what they were saying was pretty incomprehensible so it was difficult for them to communicate.*

Layla noticed the frustration that the cadets felt but viewed it as a part of their learning experience and a powerful and positive result of the simulation: “Despite their frustration that I could only speak in Arabic, I thought that overall facing this challenge was worthwhile, since this is a common problem soldiers actually face in real life.”

Reflecting a more global perspective, Caroline commented on how real the simulation became: “They had us move in with the military; it was more of a real-life situation. There were some people who were the town and then there was a translator. I was one of the group’s translators.” She stated that the experience “pushes you outside of your one area of life. I think that it is something that definitely prepares you for the real world, because if it is your goal in ... a real-world setting, like for a career, then you need to have that experience in your life.” Similarly, Layla summarized the way in which the simulation prepared her for future careers: “Overall, I thought [it] was an excellent experience that helped the Arabic students understand the practical application of their language skills, as well as develop a deeper understanding of the

challenges faced [when] speaking Arabic in the real world, outside of a classroom environment.”

## Discussion

### *Reflection on the Language Acquisition Process*

Participants contrasted the thematically focused and carefully scaffolded nature of classroom learning with the unstructured and sometimes high-pressure situations in which participants found themselves during the simulation. Three of the five participants (Peter, Rachael, and Clair) recognized the advantages of structured classroom learning, in which conversations are guided by the professor and the textbook and curriculum largely control, manage, and organize the contexts and tasks, particularly at the beginning and intermediate levels. On the other hand, even in classroom settings like those that characterize Flagship programs, in which interpersonal, interpretive, and presentation communication are emphasized and in which classroom learning is supported by rich opportunities for language use in language houses, tables, and other interactions, participants found that the ill-defined nature of the experience required students to think, speak, and act extemporaneously in Arabic. Functional language use, according to Layla, Rachael, and Clair, was being able to keep up with the ever-evolving changes in subject matter, leading Clair to remark, “That’s what language learning is all about” and highlighting the importance of having specific vocabulary terms in active, working memory. The functional (usage) based approach to language learning (Tomasello, 2003), which focuses on the notion that “meaning is use” and “structure emerges from use” (p. 146), would seem to support these insightful claims.

Many students in the Intensive Arabic and other Flagship programs seek careers in national security or perhaps in international business, both of which involve serving as translators. Notably, Caroline and Peter

used the exact same phrase—“lost in translation”—to describe the impact of imperfect language skills on the tasks that together constituted the simulation and came to realize the pivotal role an interpreter plays in negotiations. The skills acquired in this intensive immersive scenario directly translate to the workplace for jobs at the United Nations, the U.S. State Department, and U.S. intelligence agencies where interpreters in the Arabic-English language pair are at a premium (CED, 2006; United Nations, 2015; U.S. Department of State, 2015) as well as across a range of other careers.

### *Reflections on Cultural Practices, Products, and Perspectives*

Caroline and Peter specifically reported having deepened their understanding of cultures and cultural identity. Caroline noticed and came to understand the hierarchical relationships among the villagers and what it meant to be responsible for them and their welfare and noted that the most important feature of experiential learning that distinguishes it from other kinds of learning was the opportunity to see, and experience, as closely as possible, life through the eyes of the character and from the perspective of a villager. Participation in the simulation made real previous discussions about conflicting practices concerning the use of resources; the role of life-sustaining products and resources like water, crops, and medicine; and the impact of differing goals and perspectives of two rival villages and promoted comparisons not only between value systems and ways of life but also of students’ pre- and post-simulation cultural identities.

### *The Power of Experiential Learning*

As noted earlier in this article, learning can be viewed as a process where ideas are formed and re-formed through experience, where learning habits are shaped and behaviors persist even when they are no longer rewarded with grades, and where outcomes are no longer the definition of learning. The

simulation experience gained depth and power by allowing learners to reshape their identity by living the role of specific characters within a new culture and to work together and share knowledge, skills, and perspectives with others who brought different and sometimes opposing values so as to accomplish a specific set of tasks. Such collaboration speaks to Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning, which asks, according to Hanks (1991); "What kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place?" (p. 14). As stated by Lave and Wenger, "A person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice" (1991, p. 29). What is more, the simulation experience engaged students in a reflection on another culture and one's role in the larger world; as noted by Kolb, "In the process of learning one moves in varying degrees from actor to observer, and from specific involvement to general analytic detachment" (1984, p. 31).

### *Transforming the Language Learning Experience*

While the one-day language village experience described in this article was set in the context of two rival villages in Iraq, the opportunity for memorable and impactful learning is based on a number of characteristics that can be used to develop other comparably powerful simulations. First, all simulation experiences should revolve around compelling, complex, and sophisticated real-life problems. In so doing, simulations provide learners with opportunities "to use the language both within and beyond the classroom to interact and collaborate in their community and the globalized world" (Standard 5.1). Furthermore, simulations allow learners to "reflect on their progress in using languages for enjoyment, enrichment, and advancement" (Standard 5.2). Second, such scenarios require social interactions that demand the respectful and

cooperative sharing of different domains of knowledge, skill sets, and points of view, thus allowing learners to "build, reinforce and expand their knowledge of other disciplines" (Standard 3.1) and "to access and evaluate information and diverse perspectives" (Standard 3.2). In addition, immersion simulations must require that accomplishing the proposed set of tasks, or agenda, require a sustained, unplanned, and challenging use of language: Learners must "interact and negotiate meaning" (Standard 1.1); "understand, interpret, and analyze what is heard or read" (Standard 1.2); and "present information, concepts, and ideas to inform, explain, persuade and narrate on a variety of topics" (Standard 1.3). What is more, such simulations cause participants to deeply investigate various roles, to fully develop and embrace their character, and to respect the limits imposed on that character by the simulation itself and on that character's beliefs and actions due to his or her personal identity as an individual and as a member of one or more larger culturally defined groups. Such opportunities "to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship" between the practices, products, and perspectives of culture (Standards 2.1, 2.2) and to make "comparisons between the culture studied and their own" (Standard 4.2) are critical in helping students to develop deep cultural sensitivity and global competence. Finally, it is helpful if scenarios can in fact be resolved by proposing creative but realistic solutions. In sum, it should be noted that the key to a simulation's success lies both in the opportunity it provides for standards-based learning as well as the "shared keen interest" that it provides for all parties to become heavily invested and value the learning that results for students in their separate but hopefully complementary fields and programs of study.

Integrating one or more short-term, immersive simulations such as the one described here could possibly fill the learning gap that currently exists in the traditional progression of language courses and

learning experiences. Currently, most programs of study move students from structured classroom learning and sometimes semi-structured supplementary learning opportunities (i.e., language houses, language tables, language clubs, weekly meetings with native speakers, language sessions with instructors) directly to totally unstructured, and relatively longer, study abroad experiences without any intermediate steps. By providing what appears to have been a deeply meaningful experience through which students learned about language learning, language use, the importance of cultural sensitivity, and the demand on language skills and cultural awareness that will be placed on students in their future careers, this short-term simulated immersion experience might better prepare students for the sociocultural and linguistic dimensions of a long-term study abroad experience.

## Conclusion

The MLA report (2007), World-Readiness Standards (National Standards, 2015) and 21st Century Skills Map (Magner et al., 2011) all defined successful outcomes of the program of study in another language in terms of “deep translingual and transcultural competence” (MLA, 2007) attained by training “to reflect on the world and themselves through the lens of another language and culture” (MLA, 2007) so as “to bring a global competence to their future careers and experiences” (National Standards, 2015, p. 2). A combination of emerging linguistic and sociocultural emphases throughout the world and the growing demand for competent international business professionals necessitates a change in how language educators approach language learning. There is an increasing need for competent language practitioners who can go beyond the rudimentary linguistic competencies learned in the traditional classroom to actually apply their language skills to real-world situations in a demanding and competitive environment.

This language village simulation was guided by a philosophical framework of transmission (to know), transaction (to do), and transformation (to create) (Leaver & Shekhtman, 2002). It offered participants the opportunity to live a role that paralleled reality and in fact, over a period of 9 hours, became their reality; it also challenged them to think on their feet while using language experientially. Indeed, the simulation exemplified Dewey’s belief that “education is of, by, and for experience” (1938, p. 6).

## Notes

1. Standard 5 = Connections to other disciplines/content areas and points of view.
2. Please see the following link on YouTube for more information on this experience and videos of the televised broadcasts: <http://meek.olemiss.edu/2013/04/26/mission-ole-miss-journalists-and-rotc-team-up-for-learning/>
3. According to Lane’s Lexicon, *śūrā* means “consultation; or mutual debate in order that one may see another’s opinion; or counsel, or advice: or a command, an order, or an injunction: or the extracting, or drawing forth, opinion” (Lane, 1968, p. 204).

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the editor and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions.

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Submitted December 18, 2014

Accepted February 24, 2015