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Developing Multicultural Leaders through Online Language Immersion

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Abstract

Purpose: This study documents the impact of an eighty-hour virtual Spanish language immersion program on four elementary school leaders in Kentucky.

Design/Methodology/Approach: This study utilized a mixed methods approach. Each subject participated in three semi-structured interviews with the researcher and a standardized oral language assessment.

Findings: Participants expressed greater confidence when interacting with students and families who do not speak English, greater empathy for students learning English, new cross-cultural understandings, and deeper knowledge about the language acquisition process and language instruction.

Originality: This paper contributes to the literature by documenting a previously un-researched virtual language immersion program.

Practical Implications: Training in a foreign language may prove to be a valuable professional learning activity for leaders seeking to develop a stronger skillset and mindset for multicultural education.

Keywords: Multicultural, Empathy, Inclusivity, Emotional intelligence, Leadership competency, Spanish

Paper Type: Case Study

Introduction

Kentucky is experiencing a dramatic, multi-year increase in the number of students identified as English learners (EL), or the number of students whose native language is one other than English. Nearly sixty percent of these students are native Spanish speakers (Kentucky Department of Education, 2021). With this rapidly shifting population, new interventions to nurture and develop multicultural capacities as they relate to the teaching of ELs are essential. This study documents the experience of four leaders as they seek to strengthen their multicultural competencies by replicating the experience of their language learning students.

A multicultural education is rooted in five dimensions: content integration, knowledge construction, the eradication of prejudices, an equitable pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social structure (Banks, 1995). Together, these five dimensions seek to provide a holistic approach that views multicultural education not as a curricular reform but as a thoughtful and intentional method for nurturing well rounded global citizens. Multicultural education has been shown to improve student outcomes, increase student engagement, and improve intergroup relations (Zaldana, 2010, Özturgut, 2011).

While all students benefit from a multicultural education, EL students may benefit most of all (Dias, 2019). Studies have shown that educators often view linguistically diverse students,

especially those from Spanish speaking backgrounds, from a deficit framework that leads to lower expectations and subsequent lower outcomes (Byfield, 2019; Olvera, 2015; Callahan, 2005). Incorporation into a multicultural educational environment is beneficial for EL students as they seek to grow as cultural beings. Newcomer or dual-language programs, which are inherently multicultural environments, have been shown to boost both language acquisition and content knowledge in EL students (Silva & Kucer, 2016; Boyson & Short, 2003; Friedlander, 1991; Steele, et. al., 2003; Collier & Thomas, 2004). Similarly, when EL students are exposed to culturally responsive materials – materials that reflect their cultural experience and norms – as well as bilingual educators, they experience greater engagement, achievement, and social outcomes (Orosco & O’Connor, 2013; Orosco, & Abdulrahim, 2017; Wright & Tropp, 2005).

Given the importance of a multicultural education to EL students, multicultural competencies must be developed. Several researchers have sought to define and measure multicultural competencies, beginning with the work of Sue, et. al. (1982) whose original multicultural competency scale sought to measure the cultural competency of counselors. This early scale, along with subsequent scales in the counseling field (Sodowsky, et. al., 1994; Ponterotto, et. al., 2002), would be adapted into scales designed to measure the multicultural competencies of educators (Spanierman, et al, 2011; Hsiao, Y., 2015; Acar-Ciftci, 2016; Leung, 2020; Eredem, D., 2020). These scales universally include three sub-scales: awareness, knowledge, and skills. The awareness subscale is used to examine the subject’s own awareness of themselves as a cultural being, the awareness of their own attitudes and biases, and the awareness of the impact of culturally responsive instruction and environments. The knowledge subscale seeks to measure the subject’s knowledge of multicultural teaching skills and of the social and political environment within which they are working. Finally, the skills subscale seeks to determine the subject’s ability to select, implement, evaluate, and improve upon culturally responsive engagement activities, behavior management strategies, and other classroom procedures (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004; Spanierman, et. al., 2010; Leung & Hue, 2020).

Generally, the education workforce in the U.S. lacks many of these competencies due to its own lack of cultural awareness (Gay, 2000). This lack of awareness combined with previously held beliefs and perceptions of multicultural education present a barrier to the development of multicultural competences (Le Roux, 2001). While many educators demonstrate an awareness of the importance and value of multicultural education (Tonbuloglu, 2016; Taylor, et. al., 2016; Alismail, 2016), their internally held biases negatively shape the way they implement multicultural education in their classrooms (Alismail, 2016). Concerns about factors such as globalization (Bagceli Kahraman & Onur Sezer, 2016), implementation challenges (Jimenez, et. al., 2014), and the intangible and often fluid definition of multicultural education (Tonbuloglu, 2016) also contribute to a lack of effective multicultural teaching.

Professional learning experiences have been shown to shift core beliefs about multicultural education and lead to positive changes in an educator’s cultural awareness and empathy (Spies, et. al., 2017; Ankeny, Marichal, & Coady, 2019, Whitenack, 2015). This is especially true for experiences that are heavily immersive and involve regular contact with people from other cultures over an extended period (Smolcic & Arends, 2017, Arshavskaya, 2020). Distance experiences, such as pen-pal type exchanges, and simulations have been shown to promote greater understanding, empathy, and critical thought about the instruction of culturally and linguistically diverse students while boosting educator self-efficacy (Patton, Hirano, & Garrett, 2017; Choi & Lee, 2020; de Oliveira, 2011). With the need for new

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professional learning apparent, this study seeks to examine the impact of the BaseLang Grammarless program as a multicultural professional learning activity.

Methodology

This study deployed a mixed-methods design. The specific methods for participant selection, interview and coding protocols, and the language assessment are outlined below.

About the Intervention

Participants in this study completed an intensive, eighty-hour virtual Spanish immersion course provided by the BaseLang language school. The course, entitled Grammarless, is designed to immerse participants in the Spanish language through intentional, daily conversation with a dedicated private tutor. Each participant receives two hours of private instruction, five days per week, for eight weeks. The course is designed to teach general, conversational Spanish and covers only the most necessary grammatical rules (BaseLang, 2021).

Designed to serve professionals and travelers seeking to expand their language skills, BaseLang's Grammarless program has not been empirically studied nor has it undergone an external evaluation. Despite the lack of prior validation, the conceptual underpinnings of BaseLang's Grammarless program, and its alignment to the professional learning literature, suggest that participation in the program is likely to provide a boost in the multicultural competencies of education leaders. The program provides a highly immersive and intensive experience. Participants in the program are assigned a dedicated tutor who works with them in a one-on-one environment, allowing them to build relationships with their instructors. Each lesson is guided by a curriculum but allows time for conversations about cultural differences, discussions of how language shapes our understanding of our environment, and opportunities for the participant to ask specific questions, role play requested scenarios, or focus on industry specific vocabulary. Participants can apply their new learning immediately as the experience does not remove them from their home or job duties. Additionally, the daily commitment over an eight week period is aligned to the literature's assertion that professional learning experiences are more impactful when they exist over a longer period.

Participant Selection

As this study documents an initial pilot of BaseLang's Grammarless program, only four leaders were selected to participate. Participants were selected through an open application process. The application collected school demographic information designed to identify leaders who would benefit from both the anticipated language acquisition and growth in multicultural awareness. Applications were scored using a rubric that prioritized leaders with a high percentage of Spanish speaking students, limited prior language instruction, and serving low performing schools. The researcher received 56 applications, eleven of which shared the highest score. Two narrative questions, designed to better understand the applicant's motivation for participating in the program, were scored by three independent reviewers with backgrounds in EL programming and used to select the final participants.

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The final participants represent leaders from three urban and one rural elementary school. Specific profiles for each school are included in Table 1 below. All four schools received two out of five stars in the 2018-2019 school year based on Kentucky’s school accountability system, indicating that they fall on the low end of the accountability spectrum. All four schools are Title I eligible schools with a total EL population of at least 24 percent, of which the Spanish speaking subgroup represents the majority of learners. The four leaders have an average of nine years of leadership experience. The participant group included three women and one man; three white participants and one African American participant; and three head principals and one assistant principal.

Table 1: School Profiles

Descriptors	School A	School B	School C	School D
Urbanicity	Rural	Urban	Urban	Urban
Accountability Rating	2 Star	2 Star	2 Star	2 Star
Title I Eligibility	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Percent Economically Disadvantaged	65.2	51.7	94.9	89.7
Student Count	419	391	631	388
English Learner Count	103	96	423	176
Spanish Speaking Subgroup Count	102	83	395	62
Percent English Learner	24.6	24.6	67.0	45.4
Percent Spanish Speaking Subgroup	99.0	86.5	93.4	35.2

Interview and Coding Protocol

Participants in this study completed three semi-structured interviews with the researcher. Participants were interviewed before beginning the intervention, one month into the program, and upon completing the program. All interviews were conducted one-on-one with the researcher using the Microsoft Teams platform and were recorded and transcribed for analysis and archive. Interview questions were open-ended to encourage study participants to give lengthy and detailed responses that would allow the researcher to fully understand their experience with the program at that time. Descriptive coding was used to analyze the interview transcripts (Saldaña, 2016). Illustrative quotes listed in this report have been edited for clarity.

Language Testing Protocol

While the primary goal of this professional learning opportunity was to boost multicultural competencies, language acquisition is a natural byproduct of the intervention. Upon completion of the program, participants took the *Oral Proficiency Interview – Computer (OPIc)* examination to measure the amount of language acquired. The OPIc, developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), is a valid and reliable assessment designed to capture unrehearsed speech in order to measure the ability of the test-taker (Alpine Testing

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Solutions, 2020). Participants begin the assessment by completing a background questionnaire to determine appropriate interview topics and a self-assessment designed to determine which of five test forms they will take. This is followed by a 20-40 minute oral interview where a computer avatar poses questions and makes audio recordings of the responses provided by the test-taker (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language, 2020).

The exam was virtually proctored by Language Testing International (LTI) and scored using the ACTFL's proficiency guidelines. ACTFL examinations report four levels of language ability; novice, intermediate, advanced, and superior, with low, medium, and high distinctions. Each level corresponds with a set of related functions, ranging from the ability to communicate minimal, formulaic, and rote lists and phrases at the novice level, to the ability to discuss familiar and unfamiliar topics, support opinions, hypothesize, and speak about topics abstractly at the superior level. An individual is considered fluent in the target language at the superior level.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

This study occurred from January to June 2021, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. All four participants experienced COVID-19 related disruptions and were unable to maintain strict adherence to the recommended delivery schedule. One participant was unable to complete the program within the designated time frame due to COVID-19 infection and received only 67 hours of instruction. While the pandemic created scheduling challenges it also created opportunities. Participants indicated that remote learning flexibilities and the lack of after-school requirements allowed them to have more time to study and complete homework assignments between classes.

Findings

The descriptive coding process revealed eight themes which are reported below. Each of the four leaders demonstrated increased empathy for the students served by their EL programs, a greater awareness of the language acquisition process, and enhanced confidence when working with both students and families.

Impact on School Procedures and Curriculum

All four leaders facilitated systemic changes to procedures and curriculums in response to their participation. The primary area of change centered around parent and family engagement activities. Participants expressed a desire to engage more deeply with the families of their EL students through rehearsed and recorded welcome videos, making announcements in Spanish, translating components of newsletters into Spanish, and asking parents to support cultural immersion and enrichment activities. Participants also stated that they had a better understanding of specific teaching strategies having experienced them from the student perspective.

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Table 2: Impact on School Procedures, Illustrative Quotes

Participant A	<i>I know what it's like now for these kids, and what needs to be my next steps as an instructional leader for my teachers. There's been times that the pillars for EL, like gestures and visuals and whatnot, and I'm going to tell you that sometimes I look at [my teacher] and I say, "I just need you to tell me what that word is and how to say it." Then I can break it down. He could gesture all day long and I would still not know what he's trying to tell me so. It's been very eye opening in that sense.</i>
Participant B	<i>We've made some pivotal changes by making sure that our teachers collaborate more authentically. Even down to ensuring that our teachers use the same vocabulary, you know, so it's perfectly fine for my immersion teacher to train their English counterpart. For example, using "pare" in the hallway instead of saying "stop". So, the kids see that conversion of language; they see it being layered and they don't see it as something separate.</i>
Participant C	<i>We're going to really try to refocus on the bridging part of the lessons. In the bridge, you really highlight the similarities and differences in the language, especially the content specific language. That really helps clarify what the words are and what they mean.</i>
Participant D	<i>I definitely will be able to make a connection with our families better, or at least attempt to. I think I'll definitely be able to connect with the students in a different way. The students will speak in their primary language a lot. It will help us as well with other newcomer students.</i>

Empathy for English Learners

One of the most profound takeaways expressed by the program participants was a renewed and deeper sense of empathy for the unique experiences of their students. All four participants expressed a better understanding of the challenges of language learning and hypothesized about the expanded challenges of learning new content and a new language simultaneously. Participants frequently mentioned that they were exhibiting common behaviors they have witnessed in the classroom, such as exaggerated smiling and nodding. Participants expressed feelings of discomfort and vulnerability and frequently made connections to the emotional state of their students. Participants expressed renowned awe for the strength and resiliency of their students and occasionally voiced feelings of shame or remorse that they had been previously unaware of the challenges faced by their ELs.

Table 3: Empathy for English Learners, Illustrative Quotes

Participant A	<i>Just being a learner myself, being able to empathize with them. To say “oh, that's how you feel in this moment” or “that's why you look at me and you're smiling.” They just nod their heads because there are times where I have no idea what [my teacher] was saying. What I've learned is empathy and my perception of how they're learning and what they're doing.</i>
Participant B	<i>I have learned that [our EL students] are really resilient. I guess I just didn't realize during a school day that many of my kids are operating at their highest level of frustration. I'm thinking about how I walked away from a two hour lesson completely defeated. At least I knew as an adult I had a way out, you know. I knew I could say “stop, I'm done.” [The lessons] have allowed me to feel vulnerable, like completely vulnerable and now I better understand my students.</i>
Participant C	<i>They say English is more difficult to learn if you're native Spanish speaker. It's hard to learn English, and we have a whole school for people trying to learn English. Yeah, so you know, I'm more empathetic with the difficulties that they have.</i>
Participant D	<i>I now have such a better understanding for our students and where they're at in the struggle. Especially our families. So many of our families are in the same boat as me. You know, there are older, and it just takes longer. Yeah. I definitely have a completely new respect for what the students have to do.</i>

Cross-Cultural Connections

While the program was conducted completely in Spanish, participants made many cross-cultural connections and frequently expressed a new understanding of the challenges of EL students from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Similarly, participants discussed many of the cultural differences between the United States and countries in Latin America and how those cultural idiosyncrasies often presented in the classroom. Participants demonstrated an increased awareness of the way various cultures were depicted in the media and discussed the importance of countering inaccurate depictions when crafting new lessons.

Table 4: Cross Cultural Connections, Illustrative Quotes

Participant A	<i>Even if I was to sit down with the kiddo that speaks German and he starts writing something, I now have the awareness to say, “Wait a minute... is this how they would write it in German?” I have to acknowledge that he knows what he’s doing.</i>
Participant B	<i>I thought I was being a good leader, but you know, now I understand. I probably wasn’t being the most culturally sensitive leader. I think it’s personal because you don’t want to disrespect the language and language is very connected to culture.</i>
Participant C	<i>We will be putting an emphasis on the culture and the different cultural aspects from the different countries that we service. I think it helps make the school more inviting for parents and more inviting for the kids. We celebrate the differences in the diversity and it’s - you know we play it up that they can speak and read and write in two languages. Most people cannot do that. You do things that most people will never do. They know we value their language.</i>
Participant D	<i>What we see of Colombia is completely different than what the reality is of Colombia. [My teacher and I] pull up Google map and just kind of look around at different areas and things like that. We talk about different ways of school. We talk about the difference in money and cost of living a lot. Cost of living was the big eye opener for me. [My teacher] still lives with his family and that’s pretty common.</i>

Interdisciplinary Connections

Although English language acquisition is clearly aligned with success in language based content areas, participants made strong connections to other areas of academic achievement. Multiple participants discussed the unique challenges ELs may face while learning mathematics, such as the use of a comma to denote decimal points in Spanish and the potential challenges related to directionality in some Middle-eastern languages that read from right to left. Additionally, one participant made a connection to importance of Latin root words in science and the way they carry over into both the Spanish and English languages.

Table 5: Interdisciplinary Connections, Illustrative Quotes

Participant A	<i>[My teacher] showed me this number [wrote 25,86 on a sheet of paper] and he said, “so that's 25.86, that's how we write it.” If I'm working with a kid in math and they write [it like that], the teacher says “So you just put the wrong symbol. Let me show you.” Now when I see a kid out doing this, I can sit down, and I can say “you know what? I understand why you're using this symbol. That's how you represent a decimal in Spanish. Here we use the decimal point.”</i>
Participant C	<i>I was a high school science teacher. A lot of the Spanish words have a base in Latin. So, we use a lot of Latin in biology; nomenclature and stuff. I studied chemistry so having some knowledge about the Latin words are has helped me.</i>
Participant D	<i>It never dawned on me that in Arabic math they don't go left to right. I think they go right to left... Now I feel like I'm more aware of things like that.</i>

Leadership Confidence

Participants in the program expressed new levels of confidence in many of their day-to-day leadership tasks. During initial interviews, multiple participants expressed trepidation when a non-English speaking parent showed up at school unannounced as well as reluctance to answer the main office telephone when their bilingual receptionist was not available. Following the program, all four leaders expressed higher levels of confidence when participating in bilingual interactions, supervising bilingual staff, and engaging with bilingual students. Multiple participants expressed that the project led to higher levels of respect from their staff and helped their staff to view them as engaged, life-long learners. Participants with bilingual staff mentioned that their staff would often engage with them in Spanish and would regularly ask about their progress and offer aid; creating a reciprocal culture that helped to form stronger relationships.

Table 6: Leadership Confidence, Illustrative Quotes

Participant A	<i>I want to be able to verbally communicate more, and it's not because I'm not trying, it's just I know confidence wise that's not where I am yet. We had a couple of parents [of English learners] that have brought things in that are written in Spanish. I can't understand all of it, but I understand enough of it that I knew what the parent was trying to say to us... The kids know I've been learning it too, and so I think they see it and it's humanized me.</i>
Participant B	<i>I've made myself vulnerable to the teachers and they all know that I was engaged in this language learning course. One of [my bilingual] teachers came up to me yesterday, because I had my notebook out on the table, and said "I am so impressed like you're not just taking [the course], like you're really trying to learn [the language]." He was like, "Okay, so every morning when I see you I'm gonna say this and you've gotta say something different." So now the kids see the teachers engaging with me and so our native Spanish speakers now will come up to me. And they'll say something, and they'll look at me and I'm like, "Okay, I think you just asked me..." you know, so it's kind of started that.</i>
Participant C	<i>I will listen to the conversations between my [bilingual] office workers and parents, and for the most part now I can tell what they want. So that's big – I can basically understand what they're asking. I don't know that I could formulate a response for them... I can pick out enough keywords – and there are only certain things people ask for when they come into a school – so I can recognize some of those keywords and I'm like, "okay, they're asking about this..."</i>
Participant D	<i>We have a certified teacher from Puerto Rico, and we have two [bilingual instructional assistants]. They will email me in Spanish. We have had some drive through events and when I see the kids, I try to greet them in Spanish. We have another one coming up, so that should be interesting.</i>

Challenges of Language Learning

All four participants expressed shock at the difficulty of learning a foreign language. As educators, participants expressed high levels of self-efficacy for learning. This program challenged them in a way that they had not experienced since childhood. Participants frequently used words like frustrated, vulnerable, and emotional to describe how they felt during their lessons. This was regarded as a positive experience because it helped the leaders to remember what it feels like to learn something new without the benefit of prior knowledge or experience. Participants expressed that this helped them better understand not just the experiences of their ELs but of all students in their building.

Table 7: Challenges of Language Learning, Illustrative Quotes

Participant A	<i>There were lots of positive emotions. I mean, I will be honest, there were times where I've been completely frustrated... [where] I don't understand or ask him to repeat something like fifty seven times.</i>
Participant B	<i>I think sometimes as a principal, even if we don't know it, there are articles, research journals, or even peers that you can turn to very quickly. At 9:00 I may not have known something. I know it by 10:00. I've mastered it... But with language learning, you may be introduced to [a concept] but you definitely don't master it in one day.</i>
Participant C	<i>I'm a relatively smart person. I've always felt like I was, and I don't really have the growth mindset that I preach to the kids. I feel like I should be right, and in Spanish, a lot of times I am not. So, it's frustrating of me to not be able to find the word that I want to use or not be able to have the vocabulary or sentence structure down enough so that I can say [what I want to say].</i>
Participant D	<i>When I listen to [my teacher] talk in Spanish, I have to sometimes ask him to repeat it or I have to sit here and really think about what he just said. It could be something super basic, but it's because it's processing still, kind of like you're buffering. It's like being right handed your whole life and then learning how to write with your left hand at the age of almost fifty.</i>

Language Acquisition

Following the program, two participants received a score of Novice Medium and two participants received a score of Novice High on the ACTFL rating scale. This indicates that all four participants can participate in routine, formulaic conversations and use rote lists and phrases to complete common daily tasks in the target language (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2020). The two participants with lower scores both experienced prolonged disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, while the higher scoring participants were able to complete the program with greater fidelity.

Discussion

All four leaders found the experience with the *Grammarless* program beneficial. The experience was deeply challenging, on both a cognitive and emotional level, yet they universally expressed gratitude for the experience and a desire to promote this type of professional learning among their colleagues and staffs.

While this study did not deploy a multicultural competency scale due to its small sample size and limited statistical power, each of the four participants reported professional growth in the three multicultural competency categories. They expressed deeper understanding of their own cultural experience and the role that experience played in shaping their view of the world. They demonstrated greater awareness not only for the challenges of language learning but also for the

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challenges of cultural assimilation. Participants exhibited new knowledge and sensitivity to the social and political atmosphere and a desire to create more culturally responsive school communities. By experiencing many of the educational techniques being deployed in their school from the student perspective, participants expanded their understanding of such strategies and commented on ways they may change the instructional experience for their students. Similarly, participant interviews showed growth in three of the five areas of multicultural education, including the eradication of prejudice, the creation and deployment of equitable pedagogy, and the desire to build empowering school cultures and climates.

The success of the intervention is likely due to its alignment with the professional learning literature. The experience is deeply immersive, allowing the participants to truly experience the day-to-day challenges of their students. Participants worked closely with a single teacher from a different cultural background allowing them to build deep personal connections and a better understanding of how life is different in another country. The duration of the program also likely contributed to its success as it required participants to dedicate daily attention and focus to the experience.

While the intervention was generally successful it was not without its challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the learning experience, likely resulting in lower language acquisition for two participants. Due to the intense schedule, more rigorous systematic supports will be necessary as the intervention is brought to scale. During this pilot, participants were kept segregated from one another and worked solely with their instructor. Each of the four participants expressed a desire to work within a cohort of learning partners and recommended that future cohorts spend time together on a regular basis to allow them to practice their language skills and establish a system of accountability.

Participants also discussed the importance of protected time to participate in the program. Future deployments of this intervention should consider the full roles and responsibilities of participants and how the intervention will fit into an already busy administrative schedule. As this intervention is deployed over an eight week period, facilitators of the intervention should consider the ebbs and flows of a traditional school year and select a period that will provide for a reasonable amount of predictability. Scheduling challenges will be magnified if the intervention is deployed during the start or end of the school year or over a period that traditionally includes the use of leave time.

As this is the first study to examine BaseLang's Grammarless program directly, future work must be considered. Future researchers may wish to implement a more rigorous implementation of this current report with a larger sample size and more standardized data collection methods. While the experience of these four leaders is promising, the small sample size lacks the rigor of a larger experimental study. It would be beneficial to deploy a multicultural competency scale in a pre-test/post-test format to better document the impact. This study also cannot be used to generalize as it was limited to leaders at the elementary school level. Future researchers should consider expanding the sample to include leaders at the middle, high, and system levels. It would also be beneficial to replicate this experience with classroom teachers to better understand how the language acquisition process shapes communication with students and thinking about the implementation of teaching strategies for ELs.

In conclusion, the rapidly changing demographics and increase in linguistically diverse learners in the U.S. has created a need for educators to develop new multicultural competencies.

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While further research is necessary, this initial report suggests that BaseLang's Grammarless program can be a valuable professional learning experience for educators as it simulates the EL student experience and promote growth in cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills.

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