Collaborative Learning Among Spanish Language Learners
and Native Speakers in a Community College

by

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Collaborative Learning Among Spanish Language Learners

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by

Kathleen M. Sheahan
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my mother, my first and greatest teacher.

If the mother is educated, then her children will be well taught.

When the mother is wise, then will the children be led into the path of wisdom. If the mother be religious she will show her children how they should love God. If the mother is moral, she guides her little ones into the ways of uprightness.

—‘Abdu’l-Bahá
The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perceptions and behaviors of language learners and native speakers as they participated in collaborative learning activities to learn Spanish in a large suburban community college. In order to gain language skills, particularly speaking skills, students must be given opportunities to use the language and to exchange ideas. Collaborative learning strategies are a particularly effective way to create opportunities for students to accomplish this. For this reason, the use of collaborative learning techniques is common in foreign language education. However, there is a paucity of research done to examine the collaborative learning experiences of students studying a foreign language in a community college. Furthermore, little has been done to create opportunities for expert students and novice students to collaborate in the learning of language within the classroom.

This study utilized the methods of collaborative learning to develop and implement a curricular innovation in which novice students (i.e., Spanish language learners) and expert students (i.e., native speakers of Spanish) collaborated to learn the language and cultures of the Spanish-speaking world. Over the period of one semester, data were gathered via participant observation and semi-structured personal interviews conducted of two groups of students: (a) Spanish language learners enrolled in an introductory Spanish course, and (b) native speakers of Spanish who served as language facilitators. The present study was unique in that it examined qualitatively the interactions and perceptions of students who participated in a peer learning experience based on the principles of collaborative learning as applied to second language acquisition.
Using a grounded theory methodology, the findings from this study were examined to reveal four overarching themes: (a) the importance of psychological comfort, (b) students’ desire for interaction, (c) scaffolding, and (d) validating experiences. Students expressed a preference for learning environments that foster a sense of psychological comfort, where they feel comfortable speaking, making mistakes, and asking questions of one another. Also, students expressed a strong desire to interact and make personal connections with their peers in the classroom. The findings from this study supported the notion that learning is a social process in which students learn via interaction and exchange with one another. Finally, the native speakers interviewed in this study described feelings of satisfaction when they were able to help their peers learn Spanish, and from the understanding that their peers valued their language. The findings from this study support Rendón’s theory of validation (1994) and they highlight the importance of acknowledging the contributions students can make within the context of their learning environment. When students find that they have something to offer others, they feel a stronger connection to the college, and it reinforces their belief that they are members of the campus community.
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CHAPTER 1—THE PROBLEM

American students are studying languages more than ever before. In 2006, nearly 1.5 million postsecondary students in the United States enrolled in language courses other than English. Between 2002 and 2006, enrollment in these courses rose by 12.9%, with more languages being taught and more students enrolled (Furman, Goldberg, & Lusin, 2007). In the United States, Spanish is by far the most taught language other than English in both 2-year and 4-year institutions. Excluding English, more students study Spanish than all other languages combined. Spanish is also the most common language spoken in the United States other than English. In examining the population in the United States of speakers of languages other than English, 62% speak Spanish (Furman et al., 2007).

The number of students enrolled in language courses is clearly growing, and as the U.S. population continues to become more diverse, demand for language instruction only will become greater. Yet, little has been done to make use of the increasing linguistic diversity that exists on college campuses. In educational settings such as the community college where the student body is diverse, opportunities exist for students to collaborate with a native speaker of the language they are studying. This type of collaboration is not only possible, but also may be highly beneficial to both traditional and historically underserved student populations.

Language teaching methodologies increasingly place emphasis on interaction, conversation, and communicative practice using the target language (i.e., the language being studied). “Situations where students can use the target language in a meaningful way and where there is an authentic need for exchange of information are . . . essential” (Kung, 2002, para. 2). However, learning environments that promote interaction and
create opportunities for students to use the target language have predominantly occurred among nonnative speakers. Learning a new language can be a complex and difficult task, particularly for adult students. Students studying a second language must master grammatical forms, acquire new vocabulary, and navigate social and cultural differences. Moreover, the process of learning a language in the classroom can itself become a barrier to language acquisition because there are few opportunities for students to engage in authentic communication with native speakers in the language.

As colleges and universities in the United States increasingly shift toward a more student-centered mode of instruction, much attention has been given to the range of possible techniques by which this can best be achieved (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Among the approaches to student-centered learning is one particularly effective group learning method: collaborative learning. Collaborative and group learning are not new to education, there has been more research done on these topics than on any other instructional method (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991). Researchers and educators began applying collaborative learning techniques as early as the 1920s and 1930s, with increasing popularity since the 1960s. Collaborative learning, understood to be a form of peer learning, is based upon classroom interactions that involve consensus building among small groups or pairs of students. However, collaborative learning is not just a classroom technique, but also a philosophy that suggests a way of dealing with people that respects and highlights individual group members’ abilities and contributions (Panitz, 1996). Although the process of implementing collaborative learning techniques in the classroom is still somewhat misunderstood, it has increasingly become more widespread in educational theory and practice (Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2005).
Collaborative learning, also described as cooperative learning, is a technique used to engage students in the learning process and to promote student success. “By working collaboratively, learners are in a position to create knowledge and insights distinct from the knowledge each person brings to the learning situation” (Saltiel, Sgroi, & Brockett, 1998, p. 1). With widespread support for creating more student-centered approaches to learning, researchers and educators are tasked with creating active learning environments that increase student involvement. Some of the most powerful tools educators have in achieving a student-centered learning environment are the students themselves. Collaborative learning, in which learners engage in a common task, requires that students be accountable to each other. Groups of students must work together in searching for understanding, meaning, and knowledge.

As the interest in collaborative learning has increased, so has its practice. In recent years, there has been an increased focus on the use of collaborative techniques specific to the needs of college students, particularly in their first year of study (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2007). Considerable attention has been given to the creation of learning environments where faculty-student interaction and student-student interaction is heightened (Kuh & Hu, 2001). Although much research exists on the use of collaborative learning in higher education, research specific to the community college is more rare but is developing in this area. One area where more research is needed is in the creation of collaborative learning environments among learners and native speakers of a foreign language.
The Local Setting

The research site used for this study was Suburban Community College. In order to understand the setting in which the present study was conducted, a detailed description of the students enrolled and the area surrounding Suburban Community College is included here. Suburban Community College is a public community college located in Southern California in a suburban neighborhood that sits approximately 30 miles from the closest urban area. The college’s service area is made up of several neighboring suburban cities, a military training facility for the U.S. Marines, and the tribal lands of 11 Native American reservations (San Diego Geographic Information Source [SanGIS], 2010). The total geographic service area covers approximately 2,500 square miles and borders seven other community college districts (Palomar College, 2009).

The community that Suburban College serves is comprised of approximately 750,000 residents and 250,000 occupied housing units. In 2008, the ethnicity of the community population was described as 56% White, 29% Hispanic, 8% Asian/Pacific Islander, 2.6% Black/African-American, and less than 1% Native American. The ethnicity of 3.1% of the population was described as “other” (San Diego Association of Governments [SANDAG], 2008). The median age of residents living in the service area was 35 years old. However, the median age of the Hispanic population was the youngest, at approximately 26 years old. In 2008, projections showed that the overall population in this service area was estimated to increase by 36% between the years 2008 and 2050, with the Hispanic population projected to grow by 106% during the same time period (SANDAG, 2008).
In terms of employment, the U.S. Marine Corps base has been the largest employer in the region for more than 60 years (U.S. Marine Corps, 2010). Other major sources of employment in the area include school districts and manufacturing jobs. In 2008, the median household income for the service area was approximately $76,000 (SANDAG, 2008).

The U.S. Census Bureau reported that in the year 2000 within the county where Suburban College is located, 33% of residents described themselves as speaking a language other than English at home, and 22% of all county residents described speaking Spanish (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). There are many languages spoken in the areas surrounding Suburban College. However, following English and Spanish, the subsequent language spoken was Tagalog at just 3% (Modern Language Association, 2000; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Suburban College constitutes a single-college district, and it is the largest community college in the county. The college is comprised of a 200-acre campus, one education center in a neighboring city, and five satellite centers serving the communities close to the district’s boundaries (Palomar College, 2009). Suburban College is a comprehensive community college that offers students coursework in preparation for transfer to 4-year institutions, career-technical education programs, noncredit courses, as well as courses for personal enrichment and community development. The college offers more than 300 Associate degrees and certificate programs in a wide-range of disciplines (Palomar College, 2009).

Suburban College is a public 2-year community college that enrolls approximately 31,000 full and part-time students. In 2008, the student population of Suburban
Community College was described as follows: approximately 25% of the college’s students were enrolled full-time in credit classes, and 60% of students were enrolled part-time in credit classes, with 15% of students enrolled in noncredit classes on a part-time basis. Approximately 50% of students were between the ages of 18-24, while the other half of the student body was older than 24. In terms of ethnicity, the student population was described as 49% White, 29% Hispanic, 9% Asian/Pacific Islander, 3.4% Black, and 1.1% Native American. Additionally, 8.1% of students declined to indicate their ethnicity (California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, 2008). Furthermore, in the 2008-2009 academic year, Suburban College served approximately 300 international students from 49 countries (Palomar College, 2009).

Because Suburban College serves a large population of Hispanic students, more than 25%, it was designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), and at the time of this study received federal grant funding via the Title V Hispanic-Serving Institutions Program offered through the U.S. Department of Education. The HSI program is designed to support institutions of higher education “to expand educational opportunities for, and improve the attainment of, Hispanic students” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, para. 1). The federal funding provided through this program benefits all students enrolled at the institution, not just Hispanic students, by expanding and enhancing academic offerings, program quality, and institutional stability. As can be seen from the description given above, Suburban Community College serves a diverse population of students, particularly in terms of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.
Problem Statement

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), many studies have focused on the use of collaboration among expert and novice students to learn a second language (O’Rourke, 2005; Pica, 1998; Qi, 2001; Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002; Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Watanabe, 2008; Watanabe & Swain, 2007, 2008). However, the majority of these studies have been quantitative in nature and there have been no studies to examine collaborative learning techniques specific to students learning language in the community college setting. The present study, which is qualitative in design, examined the perceptions of community college students who collaborated with native speakers of Spanish attending the same institution. This study made use of both student interviews and participant observations in order to understand the nature of expert-novice collaboration in SLA from a student perspective.

Social interaction is a key component to the process of learning. Research studies investigating various aspects of collaborative learning have expanded and developed since its rise in popular practice occurred in the 1960s. Interest in applying collaborative learning techniques with college and university students has increased further with the recognition of student-centered learning as an important goal of instruction. The interaction among students and the pedagogical benefits of collaborative learning are the focus of an increasing number of investigative studies in a variety of disciplines (Cabrera et al., 2002; Cockrell, Hughes Caplow, & Donaldson, 2000; Dinsmore, Alexander, & Loughlin, 2008; Felder & Brent, 2007; Hoek & Seegers, 2005; Webb et al., 2008). The present study focused on the perceptions and interactions of community college students who participated in a curricular innovation that made use of collaborative learning.
activities in an elementary Spanish course. During these activities, native speakers of Spanish collaborated with language learners in the completion of cooperative tasks during class meetings. Language learners worked in pairs and small groups that were facilitated by another student who was a native speaker of Spanish.

**Research Questions**

This study sought to answer the following six research questions:

1. How do Spanish language learners who worked with peers from the native language group (i.e., native speakers of Spanish) perceive what they have learned in the second language as a result of this collaborative learning experience?

2. How do Spanish language learners who worked with peers from the native language group (i.e., native speakers of Spanish) perceive what they have learned about the culture associated with the second language they are studying?

3. What are the perceptions of Spanish language learners and native speakers of Spanish regarding collaborative learning and the peer-learning method used in this Spanish language class?

4. How do Spanish language learners and native speakers of Spanish who participate in collaborative and peer learning describe their sense of belongingness and connection to the college?

5. How do native speakers of Spanish who participate in collaborative and peer learning experiences perceive themselves as language learners and language facilitators?
6. What are the observable learning behaviors and interactions that occur among the Spanish language learners and native speakers of Spanish in class?

**Purpose of the Study**

Thus far, quantitative studies have dominated the research conducted in the field of SLA. Although quantitative research has “enjoyed a more elevated status” (Duff, 2002, p. 15) in SLA and in applied linguistics research, qualitative research has become increasingly prevalent in order to explore the “social, cultural, situational, embodied, and performative nature of language, knowledge and learning” (Duff, 2002, p. 18). The nature of qualitative research in SLA is not meant to substitute for quantitative investigation, but rather to serve as a complement to the abundance of quantitative studies in order to provide for a more enhanced understanding of how students learn. The current research was a grounded theory study conducted among students who were native speakers of Spanish, and language learners who were studying elementary-level Spanish in a large suburban community college.

This study drew primarily on student voices to provide a better understanding of the factors that contribute to language learning, to the learning of culture, and to further explore how peer interaction influences students’ perceptions of belongingness within an educational environment (i.e., a community college). The present study made use of semi-structured student interviews conducted by the researcher in order to examine the nature of collaborative learning among peers of mixed ability from a student perspective. Additionally, as a means of triangulation, participant observation data were used to further illustrate the findings. Through collaborative learning activities completed during class time, Spanish language learners were given the opportunity to practice speaking and
using written Spanish with a peer who was a native speaker. Conversely, native speakers of Spanish were given the opportunity to serve as language and culture experts to their peers.

The present study sought to contribute to an understanding of language learning and collaborative learning in a number of ways. First, the study employed a qualitative design in order to gather data on students’ perceptions of the proposed intervention. Second, the study focused on the perceptions and views of community college students, a population of students rarely considered in SLA research. Third, this study utilized participant observations to examine the collaborative interactions among language learners and native speakers who were peers attending the same college. Finally, the study used a combination of student development theory (Astin, 1999; Rendón, 1994, 2002; Tinto, 1975, 1997) and sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1986) as the framework for the research. The unique design of this investigation provides insights into students’ language learning experiences, the way students learn about culture, and the factors that influence their sense of belongingness to the college where they study.

Definition of Terms

**Belongingness:** This term refers to a students’ self-described sense that he or she is a full and active member of the college community. A student who reports a sense of belongingness may describe that he or she feels accepted as a member of a group, has established relationships with other people, and that those relationships go beyond simple acquaintance or familiarity.

**Bilingual:** This term describes a person who is fluent in two languages and is able to communicate in written and spoken forms of both languages.
**Collaborative dialogue:** This term refers to the language that students use aloud (either in their first language or second language) to reflect on what they are learning as they complete collaborative learning tasks. Proponents of collaborative dialogue assert that this process facilitates student learning and that through this type of collaboration, students are more successful at completing difficult learning tasks (McDonough & Sunitham, 2009). Through a process of collaborative dialogue, students use language to exchange thoughts and ideas that then create the basis for solving problems and building knowledge.

**Collaborative learning:** This term describes a process of peer learning that occurs via student interaction in small groups or pairs. For some researchers, the terms collaborative learning and cooperative learning are synonymous. For others, collaborative learning emphasizes the process of learning, whereas cooperative learning stresses the accomplishment of tasks. For the purpose of this study, the term collaborative learning will be used to describe both collaborative and cooperative learning.

**Cooperative learning:** This term describes a process of learning that occurs via student interaction. Some researchers describe cooperative learning as a highly structured approach to student interaction as compared to collaborative learning. For others, the terms collaborative and cooperative are synonymous. For the purpose of this study, the term collaborative learning will be used to describe both collaborative and cooperative learning.

**L1:** This is an abbreviation used to describe an individual’s native or first language.
**L2:** This is an abbreviation used to describe a foreign or second language. Often, L2 refers to the target language that an individual is working to learn or has acquired since mastering his or her first language.

*Language facilitator:* For the purposes of this study, the term language facilitator describes a native speaker of Spanish who assists language learners by modeling native-like pronunciation, grammatical forms, and vocabulary. Also, language facilitators in this study assist students by participating in peer and collaborative learning activities focused on the cultures of the Spanish-speaking world.

*Native speakers of Spanish:* For the purpose of this study, this term refers to students who have native or near-native language ability in Spanish, particularly speaking ability. Additionally, these students come from family backgrounds where Spanish is spoken as a primary language.

*Nontraditional students:* This term refers to unique student populations attending an institution of higher education. Rendón (2002) identified these student populations as “returning adults, low-income students, first-generation students, and many women and minority students from working-class backgrounds” (p. 644).

*Peer interaction:* This term describes the interaction among students during class meetings. This student-student interaction may occur in pairs, small groups, or as a class.

*Peer learning:* This term describes a pedagogical strategy whereby students learn from one another in a reciprocal learning environment. “Peer learning should be mutually beneficial and involve the sharing of knowledge, ideas and experience between the participants” (Boud, 2001, p. 3). Topping (2005) defined peer learning as:
The acquisition of knowledge and skill through active helping and supporting among status equals or matched companions. It involves people from similar social groupings who are not professional teachers helping each other to learn and learning themselves by so doing. (p. 631)

Scaffolding: This term describes the instructional support that a student may receive from the instructor, a tutor, or a more knowledgeable peer. The term “scaffolding” was first used by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) to describe the “process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts” (p. 90). Although Vygotsky (1986) never used the term, it is widely understood that scaffolding describes Vygotsky’s notion of the support a more knowledgeable peer provides to a less knowledgeable peer in the learning process.

Second language acquisition (SLA): This term describes the process of learning or acquiring a second or foreign language.

Sociocultural theory: This term refers to learning theory based largely on the work of psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1986), who argued that learning occurs via social interaction. Sociocultural theory views language learning as a developmental process that occurs through peer interaction and social relationships.

Spanish language learners: For the purpose of this study, this term will describe the students who are enrolled in one of two participating sections of Spanish 101.

Student development theory: This term refers to the theories that describe factors affecting students’ development and learning in higher education. For the purpose of this
study, this term refers specifically to the theories of Astin (1999), Rendón (1994, 2002), and Tinto (1975, 1997).

*Target language:* This term describes the language that learners are trying to learn in addition to their native language. As mentioned previously, the term “L2” is also used to identify the target language or second language being studied.

*Validation:* This term describes a process of support and encouragement that students receive from institutional agents (e.g., faculty and counselors). Rendón (2009) described validation as “actively reaching out to support students and to communicate that students can learn and become a part of the college learning community” (p. 34).

*Zone of proximal development (ZPD):* This term describes the difference between what a student can achieve with assistance from a more knowledgeable peer as compared to what the student can achieve on his or her own. This concept, first introduced by the Russian psychologist Lev S. Vygotsky (1978), is defined as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86).

**Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

The theoretical and conceptual framework for this study was based on both learning theory and student development theory. This research drew primarily on Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory as it relates to second language acquisition (SLA), as well as three theories of student development: involvement theory, integration theory, and validation theory. This section is divided into two parts: learning theory and student development theory.
Learning Theory—Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural theory emphasizes the fundamental role of social interaction in human development:

Despite the label 'sociocultural' the theory is not a theory of the social or the cultural aspects of human existence . . . it is rather, . . . a theory of mind . . . that recognizes the central role that social relationships and culturally constructed artifacts play in organizing uniquely human forms of thinking. (Lantolf, 2004, pp. 30-31)

Sociocultural theory is based on the work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978, 1986). Vygotsky argued that speech and language are psychological tools used to help individuals organize and control their social interaction and cognition. Vygotsky contended that a child’s development cannot be understood by a study of the individual, because learning does not occur independently. Vygotsky (1989) described learning as being a social process, “social interaction actually produces new, elaborate, advanced psychological processes that are unavailable to the organism working in isolation” (p. 61).

Norton and Toohey (2002) supported the social nature of learning, particularly language learning:

Language learning engages the identities of learners because language itself is not only a linguistic system of signs and symbols; it is also a complex social practice in which the value and meaning ascribed to an utterance are determined in part by the value and meaning ascribed to the person who speaks. (p. 115)
Vygotsky further illustrated the function of social interaction in the process of learning by introducing the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978) contended:

An essential feature of learning is that it creates the zone of proximal development; that is, learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. Once these processes are internalized, they become a part of the child’s independent developmental achievement. (p. 90)

According to Vygotsky (1978), the ZPD is the distance between what an individual can accomplish independently and “the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). The term “scaffolding” describes what Vygotsky introduced as the assistance that an individual receives from a “more knowledgeable other.” The assistance provided through the use of scaffolding within the ZPD enables the learner to do activities that he or she would not have been able to do otherwise (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Although Vygotsky himself never used the term “scaffolding,” SLA researchers frequently have associated the concept of scaffolding with the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (Donato, 1994; Lee, 2008; Ohta, 2005).

The principles of the sociocultural approach assert that when students work in an environment that includes social interaction, learning is heightened. Sociocultural theory advances the idea that students’ learning is best achieved in a collaborative setting that allows for interaction among peers and faculty. Vygotsky (1978, 1986) argued that
humans learn by participating in situations that necessitate cognitive and communicative functions to occur in social settings. Vygotsky did not draw distinctions between social and cognitive processes, as done by other psychologists, but rather he argued that social and cognitive processes are interdependent (Hogan & Tudge, 1999). It is through collaboration that these developmental processes are stimulated and the zone of proximal development is created.

Norton and Toohey (2002) argued that if language learning is to be considered a social practice, language learners must be given opportunities to join the “wider target language community” (p. 120). Nevertheless, “in many language classrooms, all of the members of the classroom community apart from the teacher are newcomers” (Norton & Toohey, 2002, p. 120). This suggests the need to implement curriculum reforms in SLA methodologies in order to offer students the opportunity to engage in learning with members of the target language community (i.e., native speakers).

Studies on collaborative learning in SLA research have increasingly been based on the principles of sociocultural theory (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; DiCamilla & Antón, 1997; Donato & McCormick, 1994; Gánem Gutiérrez, 2008; Huong, 2007; Lantolf, 2008; Ohta, 2005; Watanabe & Swain, 2007). Second language acquisition researchers have used the principles of sociocultural theory to examine the collaborative interactions of language learners with tutors (Huong, 2007), with their teacher (Antón, 1999), with native speakers (Brouwer, 2003), and among peers in learner-learner interactions (DiNitto, 2000; Forman & Cazden, 2004; Gánem Gutiérrez, 2008). Additionally, extensive research has been done using sociocultural theory to examine collaborative language learning in computer-mediated environments (Chung, Graves,
In view of the fact that the present study intended to examine the use of collaborative techniques to support a student-centered, socially structured learning environment, sociocultural theory is appropriately related. Sociocultural theory was of particular importance to this study because of its emphasis on the need for learners to engage in social interaction and language exchange in order to activate learning. Additionally, sociocultural theory supports the notion that learners are able to accomplish more when working with the assistance of a peer, than when working alone. Because all participants in this study were students attending the same college, they were likely to share common educational experiences, which can shape and influence the level of social interaction between peers. However, by asking Spanish language learners to collaborate with peers who are native speakers of Spanish, “language learners are not only learning a linguistic system; they are learning a diverse set of sociocultural practices” (Norton & Toohey, 2002, p. 113).

**Student Development Theory**

Student development theories seek to identify the factors that promote student learning and success in higher education. Among these theories are the work of Alexander Astin (1999), Vincent Tinto (1975, 1997), and Laura Rendón (1994, 2002).

**The theory of student involvement.** The research of Alexander Astin (1999) introduced the role of involvement and its relationship to student development. “The theory of involvement . . . emphasizes active participation of the student in the learning process” (p. 522). Astin described involvement as the time and energy students spend on
their studies, on the college campus, and in interaction with faculty and other students. Astin (1999) contended, “The greater the student’s involvement in college, the greater will be the amount of student learning and personal development” (pp. 528-529). Although much of Astin’s research was done in examination of the learning experience among students attending 4-year universities, he accurately recognized that “community colleges are places where the involvement of both faculty and students seems to be minimal” (p. 524).

Astin recognized that a student’s time and energy, although finite, are an important institutional resource and therefore should be considered when evaluating institutional policies and practices. Within the academic experience, one technique supported by Astin to maximize the use of students’ time and energy is the use of collaborative learning. Based on the findings from his study What Matters in College? (1993a), Astin concluded that students could do with more opportunities to participate in collaborative learning activities (Astin used the term “cooperative learning”) that encourage students to become more engaged in the college experience.

In his study, Astin (1993a) found that student-faculty interaction has a great deal of influence on the quality of a student’s educational experience. However, Astin (1993a) asserted, “the student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (p. 398). For Astin, one way to take advantage of the benefits of peer groups is to ask students to participate in collaborative learning. Astin (1993b) contended that collaborative learning is potentially effective for two reasons: (a) students are held accountable by their peers for achieving certain learning outcomes, and (b) students assume a certain degree of responsibility for assisting their
peers in achieving the same learning goals. In these two ways, “the peer group phenomena may well serve to motivate students to invest additional time and energy in the learning process” (Astin, 1993b, p. 6). The present study made use of collaborative learning techniques to engage students in peer interactions guided by a native speaker and thereby increase their involvement in the educational experience.

The theory of student integration. The early work of Vincent Tinto (1975) recognized a paucity of conceptual frameworks to adequately explain the processes that caused student dropout in higher education. Tinto (1975) examined the conditions in which student dropout occurred in order “to formulate a theoretical model that explains the processes of interaction between the individual and the institution” (p. 96). As a result, Tinto proposed the theory of student integration in which he asserted that dropout occurs because the individual is insufficiently integrated into the two systems of college or university life: the academic domain and the social domain. According to Tinto (1975):

It is the individual’s integration into the academic and social systems of the college that most directly relates to his continuance in that college. . . . the higher the degree of integration of the individual into the college systems, the greater will be his commitment to the specific institution and to the goal of college completion. (p. 96)

Of particular interest to the present study was Tinto’s (1975) research on the use of peer interaction and collaborative learning strategies. Findings from his research pointed out that “of the various forms of social interaction that occur within the social system of the college, peer-group associations appear to be most directly related to
individual social integration” (p. 110). Findings from Tinto’s study pointed out the
educational value of creating learning environments that create opportunities for students
to interact and develop relationships with their peers. Tinto’s early research (1975)
served as the foundation for his subsequent research on the function of collaborative
learning strategies within the college classroom to create a community of learners.

Tinto (1997) examined the efforts of one community college to enhance student
learning through the creation of learning communities based on collaborative techniques.
He found that as a result of participating in a collaborative learning group, students were
able to “develop a network of support—a small supportive community of peers—that
helps bond students to the broader social communities of the college while engaging them
more fully in the academic life of the institution” (p. 613). Tinto, supporting the work of
Astin, reiterated the importance of student involvement. He argued that by creating a
personal and involving experience for community college students through the use of
learning communities, “involvement can be generated in settings where involvement is
not easily obtained” (Tinto, 1997, p. 614). Tinto argued that opportunities for academic
and social integration among community college students have generally been
unavailable outside of the classroom. He asserted, “If academic and social involvement
or integration is to occur, it must be in the classroom” (Tinto, 1997, p. 599).

The theory of student integration was fundamental to the present study because
it supports the notion of enhancing the learning environment for community college
students via interaction among peers in the classroom. Furthermore, the use of
collaborative learning strategies creates an environment that allows peers to learn from
and with one another and increases opportunities for students to practice speaking the
target language. These collaborative learning strategies also help to create places where students feel supported and validated. The present study sought to enhance classroom interaction by bringing together students who were native speakers of Spanish with Spanish learners so that they may collaborate, thereby creating opportunities for linguistic, cultural and social interaction.

**The theory of validation.** Rendón (1994) proposed that a key element in unleashing students’ capacity to succeed in their educational endeavors is the sense of validation that students experience. Rendón defined validation as “an enabling, confirming, and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development” (p. 44). In her theory of validation, Rendón specifically identified the presence or absence of validation as the key to understanding the experiences of diverse students in higher education. Through a process of support and encouragement from institutional agents (e.g., faculty and counselors), students receive messages that validate their experiences, knowledge, cultures, values, and their ability to learn. This sense of validation serves to encourage students to participate in the college community and identifies that there is a place for them in college. When students feel validated, they develop a sense of belongingness to the educational institution and feel integrated into the college community.

Rendón (2002) asserted that contributing to a student’s sense of validation is particularly important for nontraditional student populations, such as exist in community colleges. For Rendón, student populations such as first-generation students, low-income students, and women and minority students from working-class backgrounds confront educational challenges that traditional student populations typically do not encounter.
Traditional students often come from families where they are supported and encouraged to attend college. These students often have already experienced “a significant amount of academic and personal validation in their lives” (Rendón, 2002, p. 646) and arrive at college feeling supported and encouraged in the pursuit of their education. However, nontraditional students who have not experienced this type of personal and academic validation typically have doubts about their ability to succeed in college. Many find that the college experience does little to validate their backgrounds and experiences: few faculty look like them, and the curriculum does not reflect the way they have experienced the world. As a result, many nontraditional students lack a sense of belongingness and connection to the educational institution.

Validation theory identifies six elements that contribute to a student’s sense of validation: (a) faculty and counselors are responsible for initiating contact with students, (b) through validation, students feel a sense of self-worth and feel capable of learning, (c) as a result of experiencing academic or interpersonal validation, students become involved and develop confidence, (d) validation occurs in and out of class and with multiple agents, (e) validation is a developmental process and over time will result in a richer experience, and (f) validation is especially important early in the student’s college experience. In contrast to Astin’s theory of involvement, the theory of validation puts the onus of initiating and promoting interaction on the institutional agents. It is important that faculty and counselors reach out and provide early encouragement and support to nontraditional students because “students from low-income backgrounds and who are the first in their family to go to college usually find it difficult to get involved on their own” (Rendón, 2002, p. 645). Rendón (2002) asserted that nontraditional student populations
must be distinguished from traditional students because the transition to college is a much
different experience for these two groups of students.

The theory of validation is related to the present study because community
colleges are among the institutions that serve the highest numbers of nontraditional
students. This investigation examined the experiences of a diverse range of community
college students, many of whom fit Rendón’s description of nontraditional students.
Additionally, the present study implemented several of the suggestions that Rendón
(1994) made for creating a validating learning environment. For example, Rendón (1994)
asserted that in the validating classroom, students’ past experiences must serve “as a
source of strength and knowledge” and that “faculty recognize the importance of
experience as a base of knowledge and that out-of class learning is equally powerful”
(p. 48). The present study sought to capitalize on the strengths and linguistic abilities of
native speakers of Spanish to guide their peers who are Spanish language learners. In this
role, the nontraditional student (i.e., native speaker of Spanish) was regarded as an expert
who possessed valuable skills that others sought to learn, thereby validating the student’s
knowledge. Another of Rendón’s (1994) suggestions used in this study was that “faculty
employ active learning techniques such as collaborative learning” and that “students work
together in teams and are encouraged to share information” (p. 48). In this regard, the
intervention proposed for the present study aligned perfectly with principles of validation
theory. Class time was dedicated to collaborative learning activities that Spanish
language learners completed in pairs and small groups, with the assistance of the native
speakers of Spanish who supported and modeled the spoken language for students. The
work of Rendón was particularly relevant to the present study because it specified through
the lens of validation the measures that can be taken to promote a positive and
encouraging learning environment for a diverse population of students.

Significance of the Study

The present study sought to examine more closely the observable interactions
among students and the perceptions of Spanish language learners and native speakers
who participated in collaborative learning activities. This study sought to provide an
increased understanding of how collaborative exercises can be used to enhance learning,
promote student engagement, and increase students’ sense of belongingness to the
college. Furthermore, this study examined how students perceived peer and collaborative
learning strategies, and if, as a result of participating in such activities, students felt an
increased sense of validation as demonstrated via their reported sense of belongingness to
the college community. Additionally, this study examined how nontraditional students
(i.e., native speakers of Spanish) responded to an educational environment that intended
to foster validating experiences.

The results of this study have implications on how foreign language educators and
researchers in the field of applied linguistics and SLA choose to conduct research. This
responds to the paucity of qualitative studies in SLA and further explores language
learning from the perspective of language learners and the speakers of language who
assist them. Additionally, this study attempts to further define the language activities that
students are assigned to complete outside of class. Many language courses incorporate
the use of technology to enhance learning and give students additional practice with the
target language. However, the findings from this study may help to encourage instructors
to create opportunities for face-to-face collaboration with native speakers, in addition to
computerized or web-based practice. Given the diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds of community college students, this study may serve to expand the opportunities available to students for practicing the target language in authentic settings. Moreover, the results of this study may have implications on the hiring and scheduling of students as language tutors, or language facilitators.

While previous studies have focused on the use of native speakers to increase language practice outside of class, the present study examined how peer and collaborative learning can be used to bring together students of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds during class time. Furthermore, this study may have implications on the design of foreign language curriculum for native speakers. Many foreign language departments offer advanced-level courses for native speakers, particularly in the discipline of Spanish. The results of this study may shape the design of coursework for native speakers who look to either improve or advance their language skills. The results of this study may also serve to encourage greater collaboration among faculty teaching foreign language courses, and offer insight to expanding teacher training and professional development in the field of SLA.

**Limitations of the Study**

There are several potential limitations to be acknowledged regarding this study. Among the potential limitations is consideration for the fact that this study was limited to one large-suburban community college located in southern California that serves a diverse population of students. Although the student population of Suburban Community College is not unique to southern California, the experiences of the participants may not reflect those of students who live in other areas. Consideration should also be given to
the fact that this study was limited in time to just one academic semester, which is 16 weeks in length. Also, the present study was limited to the experiences of students studying Spanish, and these experiences may not be reflective of the students who study other languages. Moreover, this study was conducted among students enrolled in two sections of Spanish 101 that were offered in a hybrid format (i.e., instruction online and in the classroom). Students who choose to enroll in a hybrid course, in which some instruction is conducted online, may be unique, and therefore the results of this study may not be reflective of the experiences of students who prefer courses offered in a traditional modality. Finally, some students may have previous experience, either positive or negative, learning in collaborative educational settings. For other students, this approach may be unfamiliar to them. This is a potential limitation because participants may have preconceived ideas about the effectiveness of peer learning and collaborative learning strategies.

**Organization of the Study**

In addition to this introductory chapter, this study includes an extensive examination of the literature in Chapter 2 as it relates to student-centered learning, collaborative learning, SLA, and peer learning. The review of the literature further explores the research done in the field of student development theory and learning theory. The third chapter includes a description of the research methodology and research design for this study. The fourth chapter presents an analysis and evaluation of the findings of this study. Finally, Chapter 5 includes a summary of the study conclusions, and recommendations for practice and further study.
CHAPTER 2—LITERATURE REVIEW

In the United States, there has been a gradual but consistent shift toward a model of student-centered learning in higher education. Faculty and academic leaders are considering new ways of designing curricula and creating opportunities for increased student interaction. With an increased focus on student-centered learning, researchers have worked to identify the techniques and best practices in education that put the student at the center of policy and practice (Barkley et al., 2005; Center for Community College Engagement, 2010; Cross, 2005; Sydow, 2000).

Among the many student-centered learning techniques, collaborative learning is possibly one of the most powerful and effective ways to shift the focus to the student. The potential benefits of increased student collaboration are powerful. By creating a class structure that includes formalized, frequent, and structured collaborative assignments in class, students learn to apply the principles they learn, develop new skills, build relationships with fellow students, and develop a stronger connection to the educational institution where they study. In educational research, there is extensive support for using collaborative learning strategies to engage students, promote interaction, and create environments where students take a more active role in their learning (Bruffee, 1999; Cuseo, 1992; Gay, 2000; Kuech, 2004; Rendón, 2002).

Research on what type of interaction is most effective in the classroom continues to emphasize the importance of engaging students in the learning process (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Bender, 2003; Bruffee, 1999; Doyle, 2008; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998a). Activities based on collaboration and cooperation among students have steadily become common practice in higher education (Kim, 2008; Kuech,
The use of collaborative activities has reached a wide variety of disciplines. Researchers and educators in the disciplines of mathematics, business, engineering, physics, nursing, and foreign language have demonstrated success in applying the methods of collaborative learning (Christiansen & Bell, 2010; Graham, Graham, & Whiting, 1997; Holton & Clarke, 2006; Kuech, 2004; Lee, 2008; Smith et al., 2005). Over the past two decades, the use of student collaboration as a teaching tool has steadily increased in practice and popularity. As its practice has steadily become more common, research shows that students are also finding it more helpful in their overall educational experience (Smith et al., 2005).

**Teacher-Centered Learning**

The traditional model of education in the United States has been primarily teacher-centered. In this model, the instructor is the focus of all classroom interaction; power is primarily with the teacher. The instructor functions as the expert and the principle source of knowledge and information. The student plays an opposite role, one of learner and novice. Harden and Crosby (2000) defined teacher-centered learning strategies as “focusing on the teacher transmitting knowledge from the expert to the novice” (p. 335). In this model, students passively receive the information and work independently to absorb the material being presented. In a typical teacher-center classroom setting, the instructor transmits knowledge to the students in the form of class lectures. The class is generally quiet as the instructor talks and the students listen. If the instructor presents the information well, those who can learn will. This model is based on a culture of individual performance that intrinsically fosters competition among students.
who must meet the instructor’s criteria for performance. In models of teacher-centered learning, students are charged with finding solutions to tasks based on specific, narrow instructions given by the instructor. Here the teacher is the decision maker in regard to class content, class format, and learning objectives. In this model, the instructor remains in the role of leader while students are followers.

Critics of teacher-centered learning are quick to describe the factors that limit its effectiveness. Bruffee (1999) asserted, “teaching is not dishing out information for students to swallow. Learning is not swallowing what teachers say” (p. 84). Researchers have characterized teacher-centered learning as a passive experience (Bender, 2003; Slavin, 1980). Johnson et al. (1998a) described teacher-centered learning as a competitive and individualistic context where students are considered passive vessels to be filled with faculty’s knowledge. In this model, the focus is so limited that interaction among students in the classroom is discouraged; all attention should be on the instructor at the front of the class. As a result of limited opportunities to interact in class, the frequency with which students work together, interrelate, or get to know one another is limited. Furthermore, this practice creates a dynamic that also limits the interaction that occurs among students outside of class.

Although teacher-centered learning is often criticized for its emphasis on lecture-style instruction, Doyle (2008) asserted that lecturing does play an important role in the learning process: “The purpose of lecturing is to explain ideas and concepts that students cannot easily learn on their own” (p. 42). However, Doyle maintained that lecturing is a poor choice “when lectures waste students’ time by including information they can learn better on their own,” deprive them of “learning from their peers through
discussion,” or causes them to stop reading “because everything will be discussed in the lecture” (p. 43).

Educational experts have grown increasingly skeptical of the effectiveness of teacher-centered learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Bender, 2003; Prince, 2004; Terenzini et al., 2001). Research points to several areas where this model fails to engage students, promote learning, or teach skills such as teamwork that are applicable to the workforce. The teacher-centered environment puts the focus of achievement on a student’s ability to perform well on examinations and tests, thereby fostering a competitive learning situation where “students believe that their rewards are a result of their own performance and that the success or failure of their peers is irrelevant” (Graham et al., 1997, p. 149).

These findings represent an even greater challenge to addressing the needs of the underrepresented and underprepared student in community colleges. Rendón (2002) recognized the unique struggles facing students who come from backgrounds where few adults have gone to college and argued that nontraditional student populations suffer in “fiercely competitive learning environments that pit students against each other” (p. 644). O’Neill and McMahon (2005) described this “so-called educational atmosphere” as creating an environment where “students become passive, apathetic and bored” (p. 27).

In a teacher-centered model, students are not only bored in their classes; they have few opportunities to make interpersonal connections with other students or faculty. Teacher-centered instruction affords no opportunities for students to participate in the social process of learning. In an environment where interaction with others is limited, so is a student’s sense of belonging to the educational institution. When students lack social
connections within the institution, they are more likely to withdraw or fail. According to Engstrom and Tinto (2008):

To promote greater student success, institutions have to take seriously the notion that the failure of students to thrive in college lies not just in the students but also in the ways they construct the environments in which they ask students to learn.

(p. 50)

When considering the growing number of students who do not succeed in attaining their educational goals, it is critical that more be done to create learning environments that meet the needs of students from a wide variety of backgrounds and abilities. “As they strive for equity, well-intentioned educators may insist on treating all students the same. Yet in actuality, varied teaching and learning experiences will more effectively meet the needs of culturally pluralistic classes” (Crossman & Kite, 2007, p. 154).

**Student-Centered Learning**

As challenges and deficiencies increasingly arise with the faculty-centered model, more attention has been given to engaging students via a model of student-centered learning. As teacher-focused formats, such as lecturing, have increasingly been criticized, it “has paved the way for the widespread growth of student-centered learning as an alternative approach” (O’Neill & McMahon, 2005, p. 27). Educators have recognized the limitations to using a teacher-centered format and as a result have responded by shifting toward a model of student-centered learning. “Subtly but profoundly we are shifting to a new paradigm: A college is an institution that exists to produce learning. This shift changes everything. It is both needed and wanted” (Barr & Tagg, 1995, p. 12). By
shifting from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach, not only is learning optimized for students, but also it is optimized for more types of students.

Terenzini et al. (1994) conducted a qualitative study to examine the transition to college from high school for a diverse group of students. Results from that study highlighted the importance of making meaningful changes to the types of interaction students experience in class so that students get the message that they “can learn, they are valuable as people, their experiences and ideas have legitimacy in and out of the classroom, and the instructor and institution are there to help the student learn” (Terenzini et al., 1994, p. 70).

This is particularly important in educational environments that serve increasingly large numbers of nontraditional student populations. Hope and Rendón (1996) asserted that:

Creating a nation of learners requires changing the flawed paradigm in which higher education presently operates. . . . It cannot be assumed that a new student majority can become involved and socialized in a college environment that is vastly different from their home/community realities. (p. 465)

The student-centered learning model describes a very different type of interaction from that of the teacher-centered classroom. In a student-centered environment, faculty serve as facilitators rather than lecturers. Specifically, the role of the instructor is to create a learning environment that fosters active participation among students and puts much of the responsibility for that learning on the students. In this model, emphasis is on the student in an active, rather than passive role. Villa and Thousand (1991) described active learning as a powerful learning technique, as this type of learning “involves action
—students doing things during the process of learning . . . it means empowering students to determine what and how it is they will learn” (p. 50). In a student-centered learning approach, student participation is solicited in the development of assignments, as well as in their resolution. In this regard, students must take responsibility for their learning, yet they are granted flexibility in determining course content under the guidance of the instructor. Carmean and Haefner (2002) have defined student-centered learning using five “deeper learning principles.” These principles identify effective learning as: (a) social, (b) active, (c) contextual, (d) engaging, and (e) student owned. Increasingly, researchers support the use of a variety of student-centered learning techniques: active learning, collaborative learning, cooperative learning, and problem-based learning (Prince, 2004).

Further, there are several important conditions necessary to develop a student-centered learning model. Brandes and Ginnis (1986) presented five main principles of student centered learning including: (a) the learner is responsible for his learning, (b) participation and involvement are necessary for learning, (c) the relationship between learners is more equal, (d) the teacher becomes a facilitator and resource person, and (e) the learner experiences a convergence in his education. These traits highlight a learning process that is increasingly popular, but difficult to put into practice. Most institutions of higher learning have been slow to make institutional changes to promote a student-centered learning model, leaving faculty to create these experience on their own.

A growing practice in the implementation of student-centered learning is the writing of student learning outcomes, which can be seen in the requirements placed on colleges and universities through their accrediting institutions. By establishing learning
outcomes, emphasis is placed on identifying what the student will be able to do as a result of successfully completing the course, rather than on the content covered by the instructor. Removing the focus from what the teacher does, and instead focusing on the skills and abilities the student will demonstrate, further supports the shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered instruction. However, students are unlikely to see a transformation in their educational experience if other more pragmatic steps are not taken to change the nature of classroom interaction.

Although the shift is likely to happen slowly, more needs to be done, (and can be done) to increase the engagement of students in the learning process. Finally, to reach the goals of student-centered learning, it is essential that active involvement and participation of students be incorporated. An effective and increasingly popular way to increase this student involvement is to integrate the principles of peer learning and collaborative learning.

**Peer Learning**

One of the ways that educators have created student-centered learning environments has been through the use of students helping other students, a process known as peer learning. In this method, students learn from one another and further enhance their own learning. Doyle (2008) asserted that having students learn from one another promotes deep learning. More experienced students guide their peers through the subject matter and offer their knowledge and understanding as a way to scaffold learning for other students. It is thorough this scaffolding that the more knowledgeable peer serves as a guide from whom a less experienced student can learn. Vygotsky (1986)
supported a model of peer learning and argued that the skills that a student achieves with peer guidance are greater than the skills that can be attained alone.

In addition to the acquisition of skills, peer learning can serve to facilitate mutually supportive learning relationships among students. These relationships can become a powerful force that supports the learning process in and outside of the classroom. Christiansen and Bell (2010) found that through peer learning partnerships, students were able to reduce feelings of social isolation, deal more effectively with educational challenges, and reduce the factors that impact attrition. In a study conducted at a community college of predominantly part-time students in suburban Detroit, Dixon and Gudan (2000) found that as a result of participating in peer learning, students demonstrated significantly higher course success rates and lower course withdrawal rates as compared to nonparticipants. Additionally, the students who participated in this study reported that peer learning “helped them to learn more and to improve their grade in the class” (Dixon & Gudan, 2000, p. 98).

Topping (2005) defined peer learning as “the acquisition of knowledge and skill through active helping and supporting among status equals or matched companions. It involves people from similar social groupings who are not professional teachers helping each other to learn and learning themselves by so doing” (p. 631). Peer learning may occur in a variety of formats, either formally or informally. However, the most common forms of peer learning, particularly as used in higher education, are (a) peer tutoring and (b) cooperative or collaborative learning.

Peer tutoring is generally defined as a student relationship, in which the more knowledgeable student serves as a tutor to the less experienced peer, the tutee. Typically,
a structured program of training and preparation for the peer tutors characterizes the peer-tutoring model. This training serves to prepare students for their role as tutors, and it is done before students begin to work with their peers. In this model, the peer tutor plays a specific role, and his or her duties are clearly defined in each of the activities. For this reason, the tutor’s role is, at times, expanded to that of a mentor. However, the tutors are typically seen as having a fixed purpose: to serve as a guide to less knowledgeable peers and not necessarily as a learner herself. “It is the instructional task and the asymmetrical tutor and tutee roles that distinguish peer tutoring from other forms of peer learning” (Roscoe & Chi, 2007, p. 535).

Another common form of peer learning is cooperative or collaborative learning. In cooperative and collaborative learning models, students must work together in order to accomplish learning tasks. In these paradigms, students, either explicitly or implicitly, negotiate their roles in the learning activity. Students participating in these learning environments often switch roles from leader to follower, or from expert to novice, sometimes within a single activity. An advantage to this type of peer learning is that it creates interdependence among students who work together, usually in pairs or small groups. Johnson and Johnson (1999) argued that by structuring learning models where students work cooperatively, students interact in ways that support each other and promote student success. In contrast, competitive and individualistic learning models cause students to oppose each other’s success or result in no student interaction at all. Collaborative and cooperative learning promote interaction among students, thereby supporting the building of student-student relationships and the development of group cohesion through teambuilding and group activities. “The opportunity for students to
discuss, to argue, to present and hear one another’s viewpoints is the critical element of cooperative learning with respect to student achievement” (Slavin, 1995, p. 5).

In describing the attributes of collaborative learning, it is important to mention the distinctions made between the terms collaborative learning and cooperative learning. In many instances, the terms collaborative and cooperative are used interchangeably to describe learning environments where students work together to accomplish tasks. Researchers have defined both of these models as involving student interaction around learning tasks, but there is no strong consensus on how to distinguish between the two models. For some, cooperative and collaborative learning are synonymous. Bruffee (1999) defined collaborative learning and cooperative learning as “two versions of the same thing . . . where human relationships are the key to welfare, achievement, and mastery” (p. 83). Although there is no clear agreement among researchers, cooperative learning is often understood to be a form of collaborative learning. For some, the role of the instructor is more authoritative in a cooperative model, whereas, in a collaborative model, the instructor transfers more, or all, authority to the group members. For others, cooperative learning occurs in a more structured learning environment than collaborative learning (Panitz, 1996). Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1998b) defined cooperative learning as “a pedagogical technique that involves students working together in small groups to accomplish shared learning goals and to maximize their own and each other’s learning” (p. 24). Prince (2004) described cooperative learning as having an increased focus on cooperation, as opposed to competition. Slavin (1991) developed specific cooperative learning methods that emphasize individual responsibility for group members. In either case, groups work together to achieve common goals, and each
member is responsible for fulfilling a particular piece of the learning task in order to reach the goal.

Ultimately, peer learning, either in a tutoring, collaborative, or cooperative format, is powerful because it facilitates meaningful interaction with peers, greater exposure to ideas, new perspectives on learning, and enhanced and increased student engagement. For the purposes of this study, the term collaborative learning will be used to describe both cooperative and collaborative learning methods.

**Collaborative Learning**

As discussed earlier, collaborative learning is an approach to classroom interaction that engages students in the learning process. In a collaborative learning model, students are given tasks that must be completed through active interaction in small groups or pairs, thus promoting engagement and motivating students to cooperate in order to succeed. Instead of focusing on student’s individual accomplishments, collaborative learning puts the focus on the interaction occurring between students as they work to complete tasks. Kowal and Swain (1994) defined collaborative learning as involving “group work situations where participants learn from the expert knowledge of their peers and, in turn, provide assistance to the group” (p. 88). The basic principle in this instructional method is that learning is enhanced by interaction with others, and as a group, students can accomplish and learn more than when working alone.

Research on the use of collaborative learning demonstrates that collaboration benefits students, promotes learning, and allows for the building of valuable social connections with peers. Dornyei (1997) asserted that collaborative learning is:
A highly effective classroom intervention, superior to most traditional forms of instruction in terms of producing learning gains and student achievement, higher-order thinking, positive attitudes towards learning, increased motivation, better teacher-student and student-student relationships accompanied by more developed interpersonal skills and higher self esteem on the part of the students. (p. 482)

Prince (2004) found that collaborative learning promotes “a broad range of student learning outcomes. In particular, collaboration enhances academic achievement, student attitudes, and student retention” (p. 227). Researchers also have examined the role of collaborative learning methods as compared to the traditional teacher-centered model. A study by Terenzini et al. (2001) found that collaborative learning methods produced greater gains in student learning when compared to conventional teaching methods, particularly in the development of students’ communication skills.

When specifically considering community college students, the benefit of collaborative learning is two-fold: collaboration increases students’ academic and social experiences. Due to the nature of community college environments, opportunities for social interaction have traditionally been much more limited than in university settings. Tinto (1997) found that the use of collaborative learning among community college students creates a bridge that joins the academic and social needs of students. Tinto (1997) asserted:

Participation in a collaborative or shared learning group enables students to develop a network of support—a small supportive community of peers—that
helps bond students to the broader social communities of the college while also
engaging them more fully in the academic life of the institution. (p. 613)
The research of Johnson et al. (1998a) further supported the use of collaboration to
improve academic achievement, the self-esteem of students, and the quality of
interpersonal interactions. It is through collaborative learning that students develop
the very skills that educators look to promote among students: critical thinking,
problem solving, and teamwork. Bruffee (1999) challenged the notion that knowledge is
transmitted from teacher to learner, and he supported the work of Vygotsky maintaining
the idea that knowledge is “constructed through negotiation with others. . . .
Collaborative learning models the conversation by which communities of knowledgeable
peers construct knowledge” (p. 53). Consequently, in collaborative learning, knowledge
is not transmitted but, rather, constructed by learners as a result of interaction,
scaffolding, and consensus building among the members of a community of
knowledgeable peers. In this model, every student contributes to the building of
knowledge.

**Characteristics of Collaborative Learning**

In a collaborative learning model, the role of the teacher is not denied, but rather
refocused. In this model, the teacher serves as a facilitator of student learning: creating
opportunities for student interaction, guiding student discourse, and developing learning
environments where students actively engage in the co-construction of meaning.
“Co-construction takes place when students are actively engaged in reasoning, when they
try to achieve mutual understanding, and when they build on each other’s contributions”
(Hoek & Seegers, 2005, p. 21).
Students benefit from collaborative tasks that are concrete and well defined. Hence, collaborative activities work best when each student is assigned a specific role to play or job to carry out. Barkley et al. (2005) suggested two elements to creating effective and appropriate learning tasks: (a) designing collaborative activities that are appropriate learning tasks for the given discipline, and (b) developing structured procedures that engage and involve students in performing the task. When students are given specific duties to carry out, they are more likely to become engaged in the learning process. For this reason, it is important that students be given clear and structured assignments that identify the steps needed to complete the activity, and the role that each participant must play in order to successfully complete the task.

Further, as students complete group work or paired activities in a collaborative learning model, the learning of each individual must be monitored and supported. Students themselves, or the instructor, can work to evaluate the progress of a task. By asking students to participate in the group monitoring process, weaknesses can be identified and addressed as students serve as evaluators of each other’s work. When working collaboratively, “many of the weaknesses experienced by members of the group are augmented by the strengths of others” (Graham et al., 1997, p. 150). In this situation, high-performing students gain satisfaction from helping others learn, as long as they do not feel they are carrying the workload for the group.

Terenzini et al. (2001) conducted a quantitative study to examine the extent to which courses taught via collaborative learning methods differed from lecture-style courses. Data in that study revealed that students taking courses taught using collaborative learning methods reported statistically significant advantages in a variety
of learning outcome areas when compared with students using noncollaborative methods. Specifically, Terenzini et al. (2001) found that students working collaboratively reported learning advantages in three areas: (a) design skills, (b) communication skills, and (c) group skills. Engstrom and Tinto (2008) conducted a longitudinal study of the impact of learning communities on the success of community colleges students using both quantitative and qualitative case study and interview methods. Results from that study further supported collaborative learning as a method to help students overcome the fear and anxiety they feel about studying in college. In the words of one student who participated in the collaborative environment of a learning community, “You are scared and maybe somebody speaks much better than you and writes better, so you feel more comfortable seeing the same faces every day, and you communicate more and more often, little by little” (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008, p. 48).

**Student Success and Collaborative Learning**

There are several reasons why collaborative learning is successful. When students participate in small groups or pairs to complete a task, they are engaged in the learning process. Students working collaboratively are required to use the skills being studied, instead of just observing them via the instructor. When students are able to put their skills to use in accomplishing their assignments, it gives purpose and meaning to what is being studied.

Research supports the use of collaborative learning to increase personal connections and positive relationships among students. Smith et al. (2005) found that the collaborative learning promotes positive interpersonal relationships, resulting in increased social adjustment to college life, the creation of social goals for continued attendance, and
the reduction in uncertainty about attending college. This can be particularly valuable for community college students who often feel isolated in their educational environment. Tinto and Goodsell-Love (1993) conducted a study to examine if and how collaborative learning programs made a difference. Data in that study were gathered quantitatively via students’ academic performance levels and persistence outcomes, and qualitatively via observations and interviews conducted of program participants. The study’s findings showed that as a result of active involvement with peers in classroom activities, community college students received social, emotional, and academic peer support. Results of the study revealed that these relationships contributed to students’ learning, as well as the creation of supportive peer groups that continued outside of class.

Participating in collaborative learning programs helps students to feel less social isolation and develop a stronger connection to the institution where they study. Research supports the use of collaborative learning methods to address the needs of nontraditional student populations who often feel less connected to the academic community. Rendón (1994) conducted a qualitative study to examine how students in four educational institutions described the factors that influenced their involvement in the academic community. Interviews with students in that study found that meaningful interactions with faculty and peers, as well as “learning experiences that allowed students to experience themselves as capable of learning” led to students’ academic development (Rendón, 1994, p. 40).

Collaborative learning techniques can be applied to nearly every aspect of students’ learning. Innovative techniques have been used to enhance interest among participants while still ensuring that a collaborative learning model benefits everyone.
Graham et al. (1997) evaluated the benefits of giving students the opportunity to take exams collaboratively. In this study, students took two exams. For the first exam, students worked individually in a traditional manner. For the second exam, students were asked to work collaboratively in small groups to complete the same exam without knowing the results of the first. Results of this study showed that by making a traditionally individualistic activity, such as test taking, a collaborative endeavor, students assume responsibility for teaching and learning and “the test becomes a learning device” whereby “students participated in the ‘give and take’ of decision making and gained insight into the ways others reasoned to arrive at their answers” (Graham et al., 1997, p. 151). Results of this study found that by taking exams in groups, students gained an appreciation for their peers’ learning, felt satisfaction from helping others learn, and found ways to answer each other’s questions and resolve issues themselves.

**Expert-Novice Peer Relationships**

In expert-novice pairs, the more knowledgeable learner works to encourage the less knowledgeable learner to engage in the task. Through scaffolding, the expert student models skills that the novice student does not have, but can achieve through the assistance of the expert peer. However, an important characteristic of collaborative learning is the opportunity for all students to migrate into the role traditionally held by the instructor, the role of expert. Huong (2007) examined the nature of group participation among peers learning English in a Vietnamese university. The data in this study were gathered in video and audio observations that were recorded during class meetings. This study examined the peer interactions among students in two groups: a group of students assisted by a more knowledgeable peer identified as the group’s leader and a group of
students who worked unassisted. Findings in this study showed that in situations where one student is identified as more knowledgeable, that student took on a leadership role similar to the role of instructor and the students in the group worked under the management of that student. However, in the unassisted groups, the students were “learners who shared ideas to facilitate a discussion; they formed a small society in which every member understood the convention of taking turns to talk and of participating in the discussion” (Huong, 2007, p. 346). These findings suggest the importance of peer-learning model where learners can act as both expert and novice, constructing their roles through varying levels of expertise.

As students collaborate, they find themselves taking a leadership role during some tasks, and a more subordinate role during others. This technique affords all students the opportunity to lead. A low-performing student in one area will have strengths in another and is likely to take an interest in a challenging assignment, if he or she is able to function as an expert in at least one part of the project. High-performing students also benefit from student collaboration. “Strong students faced with the task of explaining and clarifying material to weaker students often find gaps in their own understanding and fill them in” (Felder & Brent, 2007, p. 34). Barkley et al. (2005) described this collaborative learning model as reciprocal teaching: “It is active rather than passive, requiring students to both give and receive as they help each other gain knowledge or understanding” (p. 133).

Kuech (2004) studied the collaborative interactions of students enrolled in a university-level physics course. Instead of lecture, students were asked to spend the majority of class time working in small groups to conduct investigations and work
collaboratively on physics assignments. The student groups were videotaped, and the researcher took field notes as students collaborated. The findings in this study showed that “during collaborative problem solving, the students engaged in informal elaborative and reflective discourse that critically examined the data the students had collected during the investigations” (Kuech, 2004, p. 30). In these activities, students participated in a process of scaffolding, where the novice students benefitted from the explanations of the more knowledgeable students, and the more knowledgeable students solidified their understanding of the concepts because they were required to explain and defend their interpretations.

De Guerrero and Villamil (1994) conducted a study using quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the collaborative interaction among 54 university students enrolled in an English as a Second Language course. The findings from this study revealed that as students collaborated, different patterns of relationships were formed. In most cases, an asymmetrical relationship was formed “where learning was fostered by the more skilled peer assisting the other” (p. 491). The findings suggest that asymmetrical relationships are desirable because both the stronger and weaker students benefit in these activities because problem solving becomes a joint action. These findings support the notion that collaborative activities promote learning because the expert student is encouraged to reorganize and clarify the material for the novice student, and as a result the expert student benefits by filling in the gaps in his own understanding.

The more experienced peer also helps to assist students of low-ability when it comes to motivation. Felder and Brent (2007) studied the benefits of using collaborative learning methods in university-level chemistry courses and asserted that students are less
likely to give up or put off doing assignments when they work collaboratively. “Weak students working individually are likely to give up when they get stuck; working cooperatively, they keep going” (Felder & Brent, 2007, p. 34). Felder and Brent also argued that “when a low-performing student is paired with a mid to high-performing student, the likelihood of that student completing the task increases because students are obliged to rely on one another to achieve the goal” (p. 35).

Watanabe and Swain (2008) studied the perceptions of three Japanese students who collaborated with their peers in an English as a Second Language program at a Canadian university. This study also examined quantitatively the pair talk of students in terms of words, turns, and patterns of interaction. The results of this study revealed that students are least collaborative in situations when the groups were made up solely of students of similar low-ability, but suggested that the proficiency level of each peer is not the most important factor in determining the effectiveness of collaboration. Specifically, the way in which students perceive each other’s proficiency level and how they choose to interact with their partner based on that perception has a greater impact on the success of the pair’s collaboration.

**Cultural Interaction and Exchange**

Among students enrolled in the U.S. system of higher education, particularly in community colleges, a tremendous level of diversity exists: ethnic, racial, cultural, social, economic, and in learning ability. Students must not only be exposed to a variety of perspectives, but also be given opportunities to work alongside people of differing points of view. As Astin (1993a) noted, “there are many developmental benefits that accrue to students when institutions encourage and support an emphasis on multiculturalism and
diversity” (p. 431). This is an invaluable benefit of a collaborative learning model. When students work in pairs or groups of heterogeneous students, the communication and interaction that occur reflect real world situations in which individuals are expected to collaborate regularly.

Because collaborative learning provides for increased interaction, it also enhances cultural understanding and appreciation among students. Through exposure to many types of ideas and views about the world, students learn that there are multiple approaches to life, and each is of equal value. “Culture is central to learning. It plays a role not only in communicating and receiving information but also in shaping the thinking process of groups and individuals” (Crossman & Kite, 2007, p. 154). As students are exposed to the values, cultures, personalities, and opinions of their classmates, they develop an increased understanding of how others experience the world. Terenzini et al. (2001) found that through collaborative learning interactions, students develop respect and tolerance for others, particularly in terms of gender and ethnicity. Just as there are more opportunities for interaction, there are increased possibilities for conflict. However, these types of interactions mirror situations that also occur outside of the classroom. Collaborative interactions allow students to gain experience navigating through difficult interpersonal situations, and they learn techniques that can be useful when facing unacceptable behavior or discrimination. Additionally, increased student interaction helps to provide models of appropriate behavior that can serve to temper students’ biases toward others.

Cuseo (1992) contended that through collaborative learning, diversity is transformed “from a pedagogical liability, which instructors must somehow adapt to or
accommodate, into a pedagogical asset to be used by faculty as an instructional vehicle for reaching and realizing the goals of multicultural education” (p. 87). Through these types of opportunities, cultural sensitivity is increased, and students are exposed to a greater range of perspectives. Tinto and Goodsell-Love (1993) maintained that through enhanced student interaction, diversity is not an additional component, but rather an integral part of student learning: “The diverse ages, ethnic backgrounds, and life experiences of students become part of the class content” (p. 18). As a result of increased diversity, students in this study reported a heightened appreciation for multiple perspectives and a willingness to express their own ideas and questions. Zhao and Kuh (2004) explained that interaction with peers from different cultural backgrounds introduces students to complex and diverse perspectives, which promote critical thinking. In a study of ESL and English speaking students, Crossman and Kite (2007) found that students learned to think differently about themselves, as well as others, as a result of collaborating with students of different ethnic backgrounds. “Given students’ multiracial, multiethnic and varied language, religion, and economic backgrounds, collaboration can give voice to potentially marginalized students” (Crossman & Kite, 2007, p. 152).

In examining the purpose of education, Thousand and Villa (1989) asked parents, educators, and community members to describe the outcome of receiving an education. Two overarching categories of responses emerged: (a) the development of skills of independence, as well as (b) the development of skills of positive social interdependence. If these are in fact goals for higher education, students must be given opportunities to engage and collaborate with one another in order to build these skills. Furthermore, education in a diverse and multicultural society must include ample interaction among
students of diverse experiences, beliefs, and abilities. Shapiro (2005) described institutions of higher education as “a place where learning, knowledge, skills, and traditions are preserved, reevaluated, and transmitted; where new ideas, scholars, and teachers are born; and where interests and cultural commitments of all kinds meet and inform one another” (p. 10). The ability to function successfully requires the development of interpersonal skills. However, as the world becomes increasingly interdependent, students must develop global skills and cultural competencies. Collaborative learning methods increase interaction among students, provide opportunities for the exchange of ideas and foster an appreciation for other views, thereby empowering and preparing students to participate in a complex and diverse society.

**Student Involvement, Engagement, and Validation**

Astin (1999) defined student involvement as “the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience” (p. 528). He argued that as students become more involved in college, their learning and personal development increase. Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, and Slavin Miller (2007) studied the effects of ethnicity and first-generation status on student involvement and learning. The researchers found that students of color and first-generation students face similar obstacles when it comes to learning; and involvement alone does not address all of these students’ needs. The authors suggested the creation of student programs that focus on engaging students “more frequently with diverse others and with course learning activities that involve collaborating with others and expressing their ideas” (p. 77). Researchers have identified the need to go beyond involvement and engagement and
create learning environments that provide validating experiences for students. Terenzini et al. (1994) defined validation:

Validation is empowering, confirming, and supportive. It is a series of in- and out-of class experiences with family peers, faculty members, and staff through which students come to feel accepted in their new community, receive confirming signals that they can be successful in college and are worthy of a place there, have their previous work and life experiences recognized as valuable and so on.

Validation can be something that is done for and in conjunction with the student, but for some students it may also be a self-affirming process as the student discovers new competencies or reaches levels of achievement previously thought unattainable. (p. 60)

Collaborative learning activities benefit students in ways that extend beyond the classroom. “The skills gained from interactions and relationships with diverse peers are important as a means not only for enhancing college success but also for providing experiences that will benefit graduates as they live and work in an increasingly pluralistic society” (Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008, p. 280). Terenzini et al. (1994) conducted a qualitative study examining the transition to college for diverse students. The study utilized a combination of Astin’s (1999) theory of involvement and Tinto’s (1993) student departure theory to examine the college experience for nontraditional students. Findings from this study reinforced the importance of creating opportunities for student collaboration. Locks et al. (2008) examined the relationship between students’ interactions with diverse peers and their transition to college. This study collected data in the form of surveys that were conducted among students from 10 public universities.
Findings from this study showed that students who experienced positive interactions with a diverse group of peers felt a greater sense of belongingness to the institution where they were studying. Furthermore, the findings showed that:

Positive interactions with diverse peers have a stronger effect on sense of belonging than the total amount of time students spend socializing. Thus, to feel a sense of belonging, it is not only important to interact frequently with one’s peers but also to engage with a diverse range of peers in a substantive manner. (Locks et al., 2008, p. 277)

The results of this study suggest that more needs to be done to validate the experiences of culturally diverse students who “experience the transition to college not only as an adjustment to a new academic environment, but also as an adjustment to a new social and cultural context.” (p. 259).

**Collaborative Learning in Second Language Acquisition**

Educational experts in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) have increasingly supported the use of collaborative learning as an important instructional technique (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Kim, 2008; Kim & McDonough, 2008; Watanabe, 2008; Watanabe & Swain, 2007). Collaborative learning activities are a natural complement for SLA. Over the past two decades, SLA research increasingly has been grounded in the work of Vygotsky and sociocultural theory (Lantolf, 2004; Lantolf & Poehner, 2008; Ohta, 1995, 2000; Swain, 2000). These studies support the notion that collaborative learning techniques facilitate language learning and are an effective tool for increasing second language (L2) communication within the classroom (Kim, 2008; Lapkin, Swain, & Smith, 2002; Lee, 2004; Swain & Lapkin, 1998).
Dornyei (1997) explained that collaborative learning creates a highly effective and supportive L2 learning environment for two reasons: (a) the collaborative learning process creates strong cohesiveness among learners, and (b) generates a specific motivational system that energizes learning among students. Second language acquisition studies have pointed out the effectiveness of collaborative and peer learning techniques to increase students’ language skills (Watanabe & Swain, 2008), allow learners to mediate each other’s learning in the zone of proximal development (ZPD; Donato, 1994), and improve grammatical accuracy (Ohta, 2000).

Second Language Acquisition Research and the Sociocultural Approach

Vygotsky (1986) argued that learning is a social process and that language functions as a meditational tool to promote the learner’s cognitive ability. In this regard, language is central to learning. To Vygotsky, a clear understanding of the relationship between thought and language is necessary for an understanding of intellectual development. However, Vygotsky (1978) argued that learning is not development, but rather that “properly organized learning results in mental development and sets in motion a variety of developmental processes that would be impossible apart from learning” (p. 35). For Vygotsky (1978), this cognitive development, such as language, thought and reasoning, occurs through social interaction that is mediated by “more knowledgeable others.” Schütz (2004) supported the use of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory: “Language is not merely an expression of the knowledge . . . acquired. There is a fundamental correspondence between thought and speech in terms of one providing resource to the other; language becoming essential in forming thought and determining personality features” (para. 7).
Lantolf and Thorne (2006) asserted “sociocultural theory is a theory of mediated mental development . . . most compatible with theories of language that focus on communication, cognition, and meaning” (p. 4). Sociocultural theory highlights the fundamental “role of linguistic activity in the development of higher level metal functioning” (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 17). Researchers have studied a number of ways in which the theories of Vygotsky apply to second language development (Antón & DiCamilla, 1999; De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Donato & McCormick, 1994; Swain et al., 2002). As previously discussed, the principles of collaborative learning have by and large emerged from the framework of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory. Donato (2004) studied the various aspects of collaboration in learning and examined a range of SLA studies that utilized collaborative methods. In his analysis of multiple studies on collaboration, Donato found that sociocultural theory provides “an overarching explanatory framework of learning in the collaborative setting” (p. 284). Donato argued that goal of collaborative learning is not just to transfer information to learners, but also to transform individuals.

Collaboration transforms individuals from marginal members of a community to contributing participants in expanding circles of community practices that they reciprocally help to forge. Thus, collaboration, and the mutuality of learning it brings about, is the reason for and the result of goal-directed, mediated social relations. (Donato, 2004, p. 289)

Central to the principles of sociocultural theory is Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (ZPD). As proposed by sociocultural theory, a process of learning via social interaction known as “scaffolding” creates a setting that allows learners to develop skills
that they could not have achieved on their own. The notion of scaffolding has been researched extensively in SLA (Antón & DiCamilla, 1998; Camhi & Eisenstein Ebsworth, 2008; Donato, 1994; Ohta, 1999, 2000; Swain, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 2000). Second language researchers have examined the use of scaffolding in order to understand and analyze the interaction that occurs among peers, among novices and experts, and between student and teacher. Ohta (1999) examined the interactional routines of university students studying Japanese over a period of 1 year. Specifically, the study examined the interactions in teacher-fronted activities and the interactions that occurred solely among learners. Data were gathered in the form of audio and videotaped recordings that were examined in order to identify patterns of interaction. The findings in this study supported the power of observation, active participation among learners in paired work, and the important role of scaffolding as a tool of socialization. Through a process of observing language interactions and scaffolding, students are afforded opportunities to join in meaningful L2 exchanges and assume interactional routines appropriate to the language.

Gánem Gutiérrez (2008) studied the use of collaborative activities in a university-level Spanish class and used a process of microgenetic analysis to examine instances in the students’ speech in which language, either the L1 or the L2, is used as a meditational tool. The study found that knowledge is co-created among expert and novice students through a process of scaffolding. It is this process that supports students of lower-ability and creates opportunities for them to reach a higher level of learning. Antón and DiCamilla (1998) also studied the collaborative interactions of university students studying Spanish. Through a qualitative analysis of students’ interaction, this
study examined the role of L1 (i.e., English) in the collaborative speech of students learning Spanish. Findings demonstrated that learners “use L1 as a tool to evaluate and understand the meaning of a text in L2” (Antón & DiCamilla, 1998, p. 326). The findings from this study noted that language students, collaborating through the use of their L1, were able to assist their peers and scaffold learning for one another in the L2 classroom. In their study, Antón and DiCamilla (1998) asserted that in SLA, students’ native language is a powerful tool that facilitates scaffolding and effective collaboration among language learners.

Scott and De La Fuente (2008) conducted a qualitative study using a process of conversational analysis to examine the role of the L1 in the collaborative interactions of university students learning Spanish and French. The findings from this study suggested that when students were allowed to use the L1, as well as the L2, they enjoyed more effective collaboration. Furthermore, when students were prohibited from using the L1, collaboration was hindered and students’ interaction was less effective. These findings support the important role of dialogue as a cognitive function and the use of language as a tool in the process of scaffolding.

Collaborative Dialogue

As discussed previously, collaboration among students enhances learning. Research suggests that students working collaboratively on language acquisition tasks benefit in a variety of ways. Through collaboration, students improved grammatical accuracy (Ohta, 2000), resolved their linguistic problems more effectively (Kim, 2008), and benefitted from increased repetition (DiCamilla & Antón, 1997). Collaboration
enhances the language learning experience, and this is especially true in the case of activities that promote collaborative dialogue among language learners.

In L2 classes, students are often asked to work in pairs or small groups to complete listening and speaking activities in the target language. In this regard, collaborative speaking activities are designed to increase students’ opportunities to use the language within the classroom, increase the frequency with which each student speaks, improve pronunciation, and to acquire new vocabulary. However, the term collaborative dialogue refers to more than just L2 speaking activities. “In collaborative dialogue, learners work together to solve linguistic problems and/or construct language or knowledge about language. Language mediates this process—as a cognitive tool to process and manage meaning making; as a social tool to communicate with others” (Swain et al., 2002, p. 172). Through a process of collaborative dialogue, students use language to exchange thoughts and ideas that then create the basis for solving problems and building knowledge. In this way, language exchange is not only the goal of the learning activity, but also the tool by which the goal may be reached.

Kim (2008) examined the collaborative dialogue that occurred among university students collaborating to learn Korean. Transcriptions of recorded student interactions in the classroom were examined, and the number of language related episodes were identified. The findings from this study showed that as a result of participating collaboratively, students performed significantly better on vocabulary tests, as compared to students who had practiced individually. Kim argued that there is a positive relationship between collaborative dialogue and the acquisition of language and that “collaborative dialogue in which speakers engage in problem solving and knowledge
building is seen as central to the joint construction of L2 knowledge” (p. 114). Kim maintained that collaborative dialogue is beneficial because students developed individual mental capacities as they practiced communicating with others in the target language. The findings from this study demonstrated that, through peer support and collaborative dialogue, students were able to achieve more than when they worked independently.

Collaborative dialogue is dialogue in which speakers are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building. In studies that examined the nature of peer interaction in collaborative dialogue, research supports the notion that peer-to-peer dialogue, specifically collaborative dialogue among language learners, mediates students’ learning (Swain, 2000; Swain et al., 2002; Watanabe & Swain, 2007). However, as can be seen in the studies described earlier (Antón & DiCamilla, 1998; Gánem Gutiérrez, 2008; Scott & De La Fuente, 2008), collaboration is most effective when students are permitted to use their native language, as well as the target language. Therefore, there should not be restrictions on the type of language that students can use when participating in collaborative activities. Clearly, the goals of any linguistic task should be for students to communicate in the L2. However, in order to make best use of the opportunities for collaborative dialogue, students should be encouraged to communicate and build understanding with one another using whichever language tools they prefer (i.e., the L1 or L2).

Kim (2008) suggested that further research be done to examine the patterns of interaction that occur during collaborative dialogue among different age groups, proficiency levels, and cultural backgrounds. The present study examined the perceptions
of students from different cultural backgrounds and proficiency levels (i.e., Spanish language learners and native speakers of Spanish) who made use of collaborative dialogue in both English and Spanish to learn the Spanish language and the cultures of the Spanish-speaking world.

**Student Interaction and Proficiency Levels**

Various studies have examined the complicated nature of peer interaction. Some groups of students work well collaboratively, while others are less successful. Watanabe and Swain (2007) studied the effects of proficiency level on the patterns of peer interaction among ESL students. The researchers examined the data using quantitative and qualitative methods and found that when students engage in collaborative interactions they were more likely to achieve higher test scores, regardless of the proficiency level of their partner. In a subsequent study, Watanabe (2008) studied ESL learners at a Canadian university who were asked to interact with a higher- and a lower-proficiency peer. Watanabe found that for students, the proficiency level of their partner was less important than working with a partner who “shared many ideas” during group and pair interactions. Students prefer working with a partner who makes an effort to engage in the collaborative activity. “Proficiency differences do not seem to be the decisive factor in affecting the nature of peer assistance” (Watanabe, 2008, p. 627). This study suggested the need for further research to determine how to encourage learners to work collaboratively.

Storch (2004) examined the nature of interaction among students working in pairs in a university-level ESL writing class. As students worked together, their interactions were audiotaped, and the transcriptions of the dialogue that occurred were examined to identify patterns of interaction. The results of this study determined that one important
factor contributing to the success of collaborative language learning is that participants share common learning goals. Storch found that group and pair work is most effective in L2 classes when students have shared motives and goals. The findings from this study suggest that instructors dedicate time to preparing students for group work by engaging in discussions about its advantages. Swain et al. (2002) examined the findings of several studies centered on the nature of peer-peer dialogue and argued that an important step in the success of peer collaboration is to teach students the reasons why collaboration is beneficial and how it works.

**Collaboration Among Language Learners and Native Speakers**

Language learners benefit from interaction with native speakers through exposure to authentic language and by engaging in meaningful interaction using the L2. Sieloff Magnan (2008) emphasized the importance of language learners developing communicative competence based on social interaction with native speakers.

Communicative competence lies in the interactive framing of thought that occurs at the intersection of cultures, as members of one society interact with members of another, creating a new discourse about new content and new meaning which they construct together through their interactions (Sieloff Magnan, 2008, p. 352).

Tudini (2003) studied the use of native speaker (NS) collaboration among nonnative speakers (NNS) in an online chat format. The data used in this study were gathered from chat logs where students studying intermediate-level Italian at an Australian university used a web-based chat program to communicate with native speakers of Italian. The transcripts from the chat sessions were examined to determine the length of the interactions, and the types of negotiation that occurred. The findings of
this study demonstrated that chatting with a NS provides “an authentic and purposeful cross-cultural experience which is otherwise limited to the language teacher, members of the local community or other learners” (p. 157). These findings support the inclusion of NNS in collaborative activities because they can serve as linguistic and cultural experts who are able to guide language learners in many of the same ways the instructor can.

In large part, researchers have identified collaboration as a necessary component of language learning that takes place in an online environment. Lee (2004) examined the online collaborative interactions of students studying Spanish at an American university who worked with NS. The results of this study showed that online collaboration among NS and NNS promoted scaffolding among the participants, and as a result the NNS learned new lexical and grammatical structures. Additionally, Lee (2004) contended that this type of collaboration “allowed the NNSs to expand and enrich their learning experience within a socially engaging context” (p. 97).

Increasingly, SLA studies examining NS and NNS collaboration have focused on web-based learning environments to create interactional L2 activities (Belz & Vyatkina, 2005; Lee, 2007; Liaw, 2007). However, few studies have examined the use of collaborative learning activities among NS and NNS within in face-to-face contexts (Hauser, 2004), and even fewer studies have examined face-to-face NS-NNS collaboration within the L2 classroom. Zhu (2001) studied the interaction of native and non-native English speakers collaborating in an English writing class. The findings from this study demonstrated that NNS of language benefit from increased collaboration with native speakers. However, Zhu suggested that in order to facilitate equal participation, it
is beneficial to structure activities so as to allow for equal participation among participants.

In a similar study, Qi (2001) investigated the role of collaborative dialogue among Chinese NNS of English and Canadian NS of English in the acquisition of English vocabulary. Results of this study suggested, “it is collaborative inquiry that can help make input comprehensible to learners, help them modify their own output, and provide opportunities . . . to negotiate and co-construct meaning” (p. 269).

Conclusion

As described above, a model of teacher-centered learning fails to engage students in the learning process and limits the interaction that occurs among students. Because interaction and engagement is limited in a teacher-centered environment, students’ participation in the classroom and involvement in their learning also are restricted. Furthermore, a teacher-centered learning environment limits the students’ ability to establish relationships with peers or develop a sense of identity and belonging to the larger college community. In short, the teacher-centered model is ineffective because it does little to support student learning, increase student involvement, or validate the experiences and knowledge that students bring to the classroom. This deficiency is a problem for all students. However, educational environments that fail to engage students can be more detrimental to nontraditional student populations who typically face more educational barriers, and have increased doubts about their ability to succeed in college.

A student-centered learning model is vastly different from the teacher-centered model. A student-centered learning environment is based upon the principle that students learn by playing an active, rather than passive, role in the learning process. In this model,
the center of classroom activity is with the students, and the instructor functions as a facilitator of learning by offering students a range of opportunities for interaction, practice, and the application of the skills and knowledge being studied. The student-centered model also provides for increased understanding among students of diverse backgrounds, because students interact, exchange ideas, and cooperate regularly with their peers in class. Moreover, students are encouraged to share information with one another, as opposed to being in competition. This type of interaction encourages students’ increased involvement and engagement in the educational experience. By creating a student-centered environment within the classroom, students are invited and supported to become members of a community of learners. This is particularly important for minority students, first-generation college students, and low-income students. The present investigation examined the use of collaborative learning as a technique of student-centered instruction.

As mentioned previously, collaborative learning as a teaching and learning methodology offers several advantages. From a pedagogical view collaborative learning is an effective way to enhance learning for students. By putting students at the center of classroom activity, students are offered a chance to apply the principles they are learning, develop new skills, and participate in a richer learning experience. From the perspective of language acquisition, collaborative learning methods offer students the opportunity to use the language in a dynamic and interactive setting that mirrors the manner in which authentic language is used. Additionally in terms of the students’ development, collaborative learning gives students the opportunity to interact with one another, build relationships with peers, increase their understanding of others, and join a larger
community of learners within the college. Building these types of relationships within the classroom further develops the students’ connection to the college they attend and their identity as students. As a result of collaborating with peers, students take a more active role in their learning experience, and this mirrors the interaction that is expected in the workforce and in a diverse society.

Research in the field of SLA supports the use of collaborative learning methods to facilitate language acquisition. Learning a new language is a complex and challenging task, particularly in a classroom setting. Lee (2004) remarked that language learning is not an individual act; rather, “it is the process by which learners engage in co-constructing their L2 knowledge” (p. 83). In order to gain language skills, particularly speaking skills, students must be given opportunities to use the language with others and to exchange ideas. Collaborative learning strategies in the field of language acquisition are a particularly effective way to accomplish this. For this reason, the use of collaborative learning techniques is common in foreign language education. However, the use of sociocultural theory is a relatively new theoretical approach in the field of SLA. It has been during the past 20 years that SLA studies have been grounded in sociocultural theory and the work of Vygotsky (Lantolf & Poehner, 2008).

Although SLA researchers have begun to examine the social nature of learning from a Vygotskian perspective, much of the research conducted in the field of SLA has been quantitative in nature. A number of studies have used some qualitative methods, yet typically these studies examined students’ use of grammatical and lexical forms, the nature of interaction form a linguistic perspective, or the proficiency levels of L2 students. Few studies in the field of applied linguistics and SLA have examined
collaborative language learning qualitatively through interviews or questionnaires conducted among students (Lee, 2004, 2007; Watanabe, 2008). Additionally, there is a paucity of research done to examine the experiences of students studying a foreign language in a community college. The present study is unique in that it examined qualitatively the interactions and perceptions of students who participated in a peer learning experience based on the principles of collaborative learning as applied to SLA. Furthermore, this study examined the use of peer learning methods among language learners and native speakers who collaborated to learn Spanish in a large, suburban community college.
CHAPTER 3—METHODOLOGY

This study was designed to understand the interactions and perceptions of community college students who participated in collaborative and peer learning activities in an elementary-level Spanish course. For this study, a learning intervention was designed that brought together Spanish language learners enrolled in a Spanish 101 course and native speakers of Spanish. Students worked together on collaborative learning tasks focused on the use of the Spanish language and the cultures of the Spanish-speaking world. The behaviors of and interactions among the participants were examined, and students were interviewed regarding their perceptions of the peer learning experience. The study also examined the extent, if any, that these perceptions influenced the participants’ educational experiences as community college students and their sense of belongingness to the educational institution. This chapter contains a description of the methodology that was used in this study and is organized into the following sections: research design, research methodology, research questions, a description of the intervention, a description of the participants, the recruitment of participants, the instrumentation used, data collection, data analysis, limitations, and the role of the researcher.

**Research Design**

The research method chosen for this study was a qualitative design. As previously mentioned, extensive research in the field of language acquisition has been conducted in the areas of collaborative learning and paired student work. The greater part of these studies has been quantitative in design, and a smaller portion of these studies has studied qualitatively the interactions among students learning language. Few studies have
examined the perceptions and experiences of students who participate in these programs; even fewer examined the perceptions of expert and novice students collaborating in peer learning groups. However, the researcher found no studies that focused on the experiences of community college students who collaborated with a peer who is a native speaker of the language they wish to learn.

It is through the present qualitative study that the researcher examined the interactions and perceptions of community college students, both speakers of Spanish and learners of Spanish, regarding collaborative and peer learning methods. The design of this study permitted the researcher to explore the students’ perceived educational experiences and their perceptions of the collaborative learning process. Additionally, this study examined the observable behaviors among students as they collaborated and interacted in the classroom. For this purpose, the researcher collected data via participant observation during eight class sessions, and from 12 students as shared in personal interviews. The themes and categories drawn from students’ responses and the field notes recorded via participant observation served as a method for constructing a deeper understanding of collaborative language learning and peer learning in an introductory-level Spanish course. A qualitative design was chosen for this study in order to examine the methods of collaborative learning from the students’ own point of view and to contribute to a body of research in this field that has largely been quantitative.

**Research Methodology**

The specific methodology used in this study was a grounded theory. Grounded theory allows the researcher to conduct a systematic comparative analysis of the qualitative data gathered. Patton (2002) described how grounded theory focuses on the
process of generating theory rather than the process of applying a particular theoretical content to the study. Grounded theory was originally developed by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss in 1967 to advocate for the development of theories from research grounded in data and to counter the then dominant practice of deducing a hypothesis from existing theories (Charmaz, 2006). In grounded theory, the researcher first gathers data via interviews, observations, and/or written texts. Next, the researcher seeks to identify the major themes or categories that may emerge from the data being collected. Patton (2002) described the process used in grounded theory as beginning with data collected in the form of a basic description, followed by conceptual ordering of the categories or themes that the researcher identifies within the data, and then culminates in the development of theory. Although the process may appear linear, the methods used in grounded theory require the researcher to continuously engage in a systematic comparative analysis of the data.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) described this systematic and rigorous process of comparison as the “flip-flop technique” which allows the researcher “to obtain a different perspective on the event, object, or actions/interaction” (p. 94). Charmaz (2006) asserted that the comparative method leads researchers “1) to compare data with data from the beginning of the research, not after all the data is collected, 2) to compare data with emerging categories, and 3) to demonstrate relations between concepts and categories” (p. 23). In order to examine the data continuously throughout the study, a method of participant observation was used to record the interactions of students. This process allowed the researcher to collect and analyze data early in the study, and continue to gather data throughout the semester. The constant comparative method was used to
examine findings gathered via participant observation, which were then used to help inform the researcher and shape the interview questions.

A grounded theory methodology fit well with the nature of this study because the research questions sought to understand the classroom interactions and personal experiences of two groups of students: (a) Spanish language learners who collaborated with native speakers of Spanish, and (b) the Spanish native speakers who served as language facilitators in the collaborative activities. The purpose of this study was to examine students’ perceptions of the learning intervention so as to better understand the nature of classroom interaction from a student perspective. A grounded theory strategy was used because it allows the researcher to “seek data, describe observed events, answer fundamental questions about what is happening, then develop theoretical categories to understand it” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 25).

**Research Questions**

The focus of this study was on the following research questions:

1. How do Spanish language learners who worked with peers from the native language group (native speakers of Spanish) perceive what they have learned in the second language as a result of this collaborative learning experience?

2. How do Spanish language learners who worked with peers from the native language group (native speakers of Spanish) perceive what they have learned about the culture associated with the second language they are studying?

3. What are the perceptions of Spanish language learners and native speakers of Spanish regarding collaborative learning and the peer-learning method used in this Spanish language class?
4. How do Spanish language learners and native speakers of Spanish who participate in collaborative and peer learning describe their sense of belongingness and connection to the college?

5. How do native speakers of Spanish who participate in collaborative and peer learning experiences perceive themselves as language learners and language facilitators?

6. What are the observable learning behaviors and interactions that occur among the Spanish language learners and native speakers of Spanish in class?

**The Intervention**

The study examined the interactions and perceptions of students who participated in a language-learning environment that focused on the use of collaborative learning and peer learning techniques to create an active and student-centered learning experience. This environment was created through enhanced interaction that occurred among the students who were enrolled in Spanish 101, and the language facilitators who were native speakers of Spanish enrolled in courses other than Spanish 101 at Suburban Community College. This study focused on the experiences and interactions of these two groups of students: (a) Spanish language learners enrolled in Spanish 101, and (b) the native speakers of Spanish who will serve as language facilitators to the Spanish 101 students.

Students in two sections of Spanish 101 participated in this study. During the 16-week semester, students enrolled in section A attended class meetings on Mondays from 11:00-1:20 p.m. and students enrolled in section B attended class meetings on Wednesdays from 11:00-1:20 p.m. These two sections of Spanish 101 were unique because instruction in these classes was offered in a hybrid format. Hybrid instruction
included a combination of online instruction, which students completed independently during their preferred time, and face-to-face instruction that occurred during the regularly scheduled class meeting times mentioned above. During online instruction, students in this course made use of discussion boards, video lessons, audio recordings and computer-graded language activities to learn and practice grammatical structures, vocabulary, and cultural lessons. During scheduled class meetings, students did additional practice in all of the aforementioned areas. However, the focus of class time was on developing the ability to speak Spanish at the elementary level. With this purpose in mind, activities during class meetings emphasized pronunciation, conversational skills, and spoken forms of Spanish. Class time was also dedicated to the study of the cultures of the Spanish-speaking world.

The intervention designed for this study included an additional pedagogical component within the class meetings: the inclusion of language facilitators. The role of the language facilitators was to model the spoken language for the Spanish language learners, and to offer additional examples and expertise in the areas of Spanish vocabulary, pronunciation, conversational skills, and culture. The task of the language facilitators was neither to teach Spanish nor to serve in the capacity of an instructor. Rather, the purpose of the language facilitators was to guide and serve as models for students as they were practicing the language, particularly during speaking activities. Additionally, as native speakers of Spanish, the language facilitators were asked to share their cultural and social experiences. The practices and views of native speakers in regards to cultural topics reflect the values of their families and communities, thereby
serving as examples of some of the cultural values and practices of the Spanish-speaking world.

Students in these two sections of Spanish 101 participated over the course of the semester in a variety of activities that required collaboration among participants in order to successfully complete class assignments. During class time, students were assigned a variety of activities that required them to work in pairs, small groups, or with members of the whole class. These activities included collaborative learning techniques designed to boost active engagement among students, thereby promoting meaningful and lasting learning (Barkley et al., 2005). The collaborative language activities in which students participated included, information gap exercises (i.e., activities where students are required to seek missing information), vocabulary and verb competitions, group quizzes, classroom surveys, short interviews, role play exercises, and collaborative writing tasks.

During some activities, the language facilitators were asked to participate in the same way as the Spanish language learners. For example, during survey activities the language facilitators, as well as the Spanish language learners, participated in surveying their peers in Spanish. In the survey activities, students were given a list of descriptions partially constructed in Spanish and were instructed to create full sentences using the pieces provided. During other activities, the language facilitators functioned as a resource person to the Spanish 101 students. For example, during information gap activities, the language facilitators assisted the Spanish language learners as they worked in pairs to complete the missing pieces of a linguistic puzzle. In these information gap exercises, one student received half of a story or half of the images needed to create a full picture, and the student’s partner received the other half. Together, pairs of students were
required to speak to each other in Spanish in order to share information and fill-in the
gaps (i.e., the missing information). In all of the collaborative situations, the purpose of
the language facilitators was to model correct uses of grammar and vocabulary, to create
additional opportunities for language learners to hear native or native-like pronunciation
in Spanish, and to offer additional assistance as language experts to novice students.

**Participants**

The sample for this study was drawn from the population of students enrolled in a
first-semester elementary-level Spanish course (Spanish 101), as well as native speakers
of Spanish enrolled in other courses at Suburban Community College. The study was
limited to Spanish language learners who were enrolled in the fall 2010 semester in one
of two specific sections of Spanish 101 that were taught by the researcher (i.e., section A
or section B). To be eligible to participate as a language facilitator in this study, students
were required to be enrolled in courses at Suburban Community College during the fall
2010 semester and be a native speaker of Spanish.

**Language Facilitators**

There were a total of six language facilitators who participated in this study.
Four of the language facilitators were student employees working part-time as student
laboratory assistants in the language laboratory on the Suburban Community College
campus. The other two language facilitators were students enrolled at Suburban
Community College, but were not employed by the college. These students learned of
the study through an acquaintance and were subsequently recruited by the researcher to
participate. These students and those who were employees of the language laboratory
were invited to participate in the study on a voluntary basis and without obligation. The
student employees who chose to participate in this study as language facilitators received compensation at their hourly rate of pay because they participated during their regularly scheduled work hours. The two language facilitators, who were not employed in the language laboratory and volunteered to participate freely, did not receive compensation for their participation.

The six language facilitators were all native speakers of Spanish who came from Mexican, Mexican-American, or Latin American families where Spanish was spoken as the primary language in their homes. All of the students from this group spoke Spanish with native fluency. With the exception of one student who moved to the United States as an infant, all of the language facilitators had completed some level of formal schooling in a Spanish-speaking country. The students in this group spoke English at varying levels. One of the native speakers had lived in the United States most of her life, while the others had only recently moved to the United States.

In preparation for their role as language facilitators, the students that chose to participate in this study were required to attend an informational meeting during the first week of the semester. During this meeting, the researcher described the nature of the study, the types of activities that would be conducted in the Spanish 101 class, and the role of the language facilitators in those activities. Additionally, student language facilitators were given samples of the activities that would be used in the classroom throughout the semester.

**Spanish Language Learners**

In general terms, students who enroll in Spanish 101 at Suburban Community College are predominantly native speakers of English. However, Suburban Community
College serves a diverse population of students, thus it is not uncommon to have students enrolled in Spanish 101 who are native speakers of languages other than English. Because enrollment in Spanish courses at Suburban Community College is open to any student, there are frequently students of other linguistic backgrounds enrolled in these classes, such as students who come from Spanish-speaking families. These students speak Spanish at a range of levels, and are not necessarily considered to be native speakers of Spanish. During the fall 2010 semester, in section A there were 31 students enrolled, and in section B there were 30 students enrolled for a combined total of 61 students. All of the 61 students enrolled in the participating courses were native English speakers, with the exception of one international student from Japan, and 3 students who learned to speak some Spanish prior to learning English but for whom English was their primary language.

**Recruitment of Participants**

As a component of the course, all students enrolled in the Spanish 101 courses participated in collaborative learning activities with the native speakers who attended class. During class time, the language learners collaborated with one another and with the six native speakers of Spanish, while the researcher examined the interactions of students and recorded detailed notes via participant observation. These observations examined the interactions of all students enrolled in the class. However, semi-structured interviews were conducted among just six Spanish language learners and all of the six native speakers of Spanish.

During the first week of the semester, the researcher announced in class the design of the study and informed students of the purpose of having native speakers attend the
class meetings. Students were asked to sign a consent form describing the nature of the study and acknowledging that the researcher would be recording participant observations. A complete copy of the consent form is included in Appendix A. Students were informed orally and in writing that their participation in the data collection portion of the study (i.e., the student interviews and participant observations) was completely voluntary. With the exception of four language learners, all of the students enrolled in Spanish 101 and all of the native speakers consented to be participants. The researcher made note of those language learners who did not wish to be participants, and during the data collection process conducted in class, those students were given a space to work at a distance from the audio recorder.

Semi-structured personal interviews were scheduled for the 12th week of the semester. During the 10th week of the semester, language learners were invited via email and class announcements to volunteer to take part in a semi-structured interview regarding their views of the collaborative learning activities. As an incentive for their participation, the language learners were informed that participants would be given a $10 iTunes gift card as a token of appreciation. In class, a sign-up sheet was circulated and interested students were asked to provide their email address or telephone number so that the researcher could contact them to arrange an appointment. During week 11, a second invitation was extended to all students, and an individual reminder was sent via email to the students who had previously expressed an interest. In response to these requests, eight language learners responded, but because of scheduling conflicts, only six language learners participated in an interview.
When the language facilitators were initially recruited to participate, they were sent an invitation that explained the nature of the study, the data collection methods, and the schedule for the personal interviews. A complete copy of the invitation letter is included in Appendix B. As a reminder, the native speakers received an email from the researcher during week 11 asking them to schedule appointments for their interviews. All six of the native speakers of Spanish who served as language facilitators participated in a semi-structured personal interview during the 12th week of the semester. Additionally, as a token of appreciation, the researcher provided lunch for the native speakers during one afternoon in week 12. The six native speakers met as a group for lunch and socialized during the lunch hour.

**Instrumentation**

This study utilized the methods of participant observation and semi-structured personal interviews as the principle methods for data collection. The participant observation data served to inform the researcher early on in the study and thereby guide and improve the design of the protocol used for the personal interviews. Furthermore, the data gathered via participant observation served as a means to triangulate and further understand the data gathered from the student interviews.

**Participant Observation**

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), numerous studies have made use of observational techniques in order to understand the interactions among language learners. However, the vast majority of these studies use the data gathered via observation to examine language learning empirically with a focus on the participants’ production of linguistic structures (Kim & McDonough, 2008; Park, 2007; Pica, 1998;
Springer & Collins, 2008). As mentioned previously, the present study sought to examine the behaviors of students as they collaborated in order to understand the lived experiences and social contexts in which students learn a second language. By gathering data via participant observation, the researcher was able to examine the interactions of students and give special attention to the details of those interactions. Through a process of participant observation, the researcher took detailed and careful notes of the students’ behavior as they participated to complete language tasks in class. Careful consideration was given to observing the type and level of interaction among students, the students’ choice of English or Spanish, and the students’ social interaction as it related to the course and to outside topics. Additionally, observations considered three specific types of interactions among students: the ways in which (a) the language learners interacted with other language learners, (b) the language learners interacted with native speakers, and (c) the native speakers interacted with language learners.

In studies using methods of participant observation, it is essential to make mention of the role of the observer (i.e., the researcher) as a participant in the setting being examined. The role of the participant observer is not to observe from afar, but rather to “combine in their field notes data from personal, eyewitness observation with information gained from informal, natural interviews and informants’ descriptions” (Pelto & Pelto, as cited in Patton, 2002, p. 265). In the present study, the researcher was the instructor of the courses being observed and therefore in several ways was immersed in the classroom as a participant. The researcher had designed the collaborative tasks that students were asked to complete, and in several instances chose or assigned students to the groups with which they would be working. Students were made aware that the
instructor would be taking notes of their interaction, yet it was emphasized that the purpose of the research was not to evaluate students individually, rather to understand the nature of their interaction as a group. Nevertheless, students were conscious of the fact that they were being observed and the act of having the instructor take notes would have some level of influence, albeit small, on the interaction of the students. Also, at times the researcher became a direct participant in the interaction. During the observations, students interacted with the researcher by approaching her to ask questions, make requests for further examples, and to seek advice about the task. The nature of the researcher’s interaction in this study can be understood in this way: “The participant observer employs multiple and overlapping data collection strategies: being fully engaged in experiencing the setting while at the same time observing and talking with other participants about whatever is happening” (Patton, 2002, p. 265).

The role of the researcher in the present study must also be considered in that the researcher’s own reality, assumptions, and previous experiences played a role in the trajectory of this effort. In the postmodern understanding, interpretation is everything; reality is only an expression of how individuals have experienced the world (Patton, 2002). In examining the role of the researcher via a postmodern perspective, it is maintained that data gathered in any study cannot be separated or detached from the innate biases of those who gather it. Postmodernism contends that true meaning does not exist in an absolute sense; it can only be constructed, and those constructions are created by individuals or groups who base their findings on their own subjective understandings of reality. “Postmodernists argue that because there is not a truth that exists apart from the ideological interests of humans, discontinuity of knowledge is the norm” (Turner, as
cited in Patton, 2002, p. 100). Therefore, when conducting research of their own
students’ behavior in the classroom, faculty inevitably play a role not only in the way the
data are collected and analyzed, but also in the formation of that data. Brown and Jones
(2001) described the role of the teacher who serves as researcher in this way: “I affect the
way I see it, thus the way I act in it, the way I am and hence the way I subsequently
describe it (since it has also been changed by my actions)” (p. 8).

For the reasons mentioned above, it is important to consider the identity of the
researcher and her experiences with collaborative methods in foreign language
instruction. At the time of the present study, the researcher was a full-time faculty
member teaching Spanish language courses at Suburban Community College. The
researcher had 15 years of foreign language teaching experience, and during those years
utilized the methods of collaborative learning to a varying degree. Additionally, as a
student, the researcher herself had studied in multiple foreign language courses, some of
which utilized the methods of collaborative learning. Finally, the researcher served for an
extended period of time as the director of the language laboratory, where she recruited
and hired native speakers to assist students learning a foreign language.

**Personal Interviews**

In addition to data gathered via participant observation, this study utilized two
additional qualitative instruments: a protocol for language learners consisting of 12
open-ended interview questions and a separate protocol for native speakers consisting of
12 open-ended interview questions. As previously mentioned, data were collected from
two groups of participants: (a) the students enrolled in Spanish 101 who participated in
the study’s collaborative and peer learning activities, and (b) the native speakers of
Spanish who served as language facilitators during the activities. The questions utilized in the personal interviews were developed in direct connection to the study’s research questions. In order to address the study’s specific research questions, the instruments were designed to elicit the opinions and views of students in the following areas:

1. Students’ perceptions of group work and collaborative learning activities.
2. Students’ perceptions of what they learned about the Spanish language as a result of collaborating with their peers.
3. Students’ perceptions of what they learned about the cultures of the Spanish-speaking world as a result of collaborating with their peers.
4. What students found to be effective about collaborative and peer learning.
5. What students found to be difficult or problematic about collaborative and peer learning.
6. How their opinions of language learning may or may not have changed as a result of participating in collaborative and peer learning.
7. Students’ feeling about attending class and their sense of belongingness to the college as a result of collaborating with their peers.
8. How students from the native language group (i.e., native speakers of Spanish) perceived themselves as language learners and facilitators as a result of collaborating with their peers studying Spanish.

All of the instruments used to gather data were prepared by the researcher expressly for this study. A description of the nature of each instrument continues below.

Two types of personal interviews were conducted to gather data during this study. The first interview protocol (Interview Protocol 1) was used to understand the
experiences of Spanish language learners enrolled in the Spanish 101 courses participating in the study. As mentioned previously, language learners who were interested in participating in the interviews were asked to provide their contact information, and the researcher make an appointment to meet with students according to their availability. The student interviews in protocol 1 consisted of 12 open-ended questions, as well as prompts, that were used to conduct semi-structured interviews during the 12th week of the semester. A total of eight language learners volunteered to participate in this portion of the data collection. However, due to scheduling difficulties, only six language learners participated in an interview.

At the time of the interview, students were reminded verbally and in writing that their participation in this study was completely voluntary and that their responses would in no way negatively effect their course grades or their standing with the college. The researcher informed the participants that the interviews would be recorded using a digital audio recorder, and that the recordings would be available only to the researcher and destroyed at the end of the study. Furthermore, the researcher informed students that their identities would not be linked in any way to the answers they provided during the interviews. As a token of appreciation, the participants were given a $10 iTunes gift card at the end of the interview. The complete interview protocol for this group (Interview Protocol 1) is included in Appendix C.

The second interview protocol (Interview Protocol 2) was used to understand the experiences of the native speakers of Spanish who served as language facilitators. As mentioned previously, the native speakers were asked to provide their contact information, and the researcher made an appointment to meet with students according to
their availability. The interviews in protocol 2 also consisted of 12 open-ended questions, as well as prompts, that were used in semi-structured interviews during the 12th week of the semester. All six of the native speakers serving as language facilitators volunteered to participate in this portion of the data collection.

Just as with language learners, the native speakers were reminded verbally and in writing that their participation in this study was completely voluntary and that their responses would in no way negatively effect their standing with the college or their employment on campus. The researcher informed the participants that the interview would be recorded using a digital audio recorder, and that the recordings would be available only to the researcher and destroyed at the end of the study. Furthermore, the researcher informed students that their identities would not be linked in any way to the answers they provided during the interview. As a token of appreciation, the researcher provided lunch for the language facilitators one day during week 12. The luncheon was held on campus and all six native speakers chose to attend. The complete interview protocol for this group (Interview Protocol 2) is included in Appendix D.

As described, the instrumentation for the present study was designed to understand the collaborative interactions of students and explore the perceptions of students in regards to the areas identified through the study’s research questions. The purpose of gathering these qualitative data was to provide insight regarding students’ behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions regarding group work, collaborative learning, and working with peers who are native speakers. The combination of data collected in the form of participant observation and personal interviews provided the researcher with the opportunity to examine students’ perceptions in a variety of ways. Also, collecting data
in a variety of formats permitted the researcher to examine data early in the study, to utilize the constant comparative method of qualitative data analysis, and to identify emerging themes.

**Data Collection**

Central to this study are the perspectives of the students as they relate to their individual experiences in the collaborative learning environment. The students’ behavior as observed by the researcher and the students’ responses as shared during the personal interviews were used to examine the nature of collaborative learning methods used in a foreign language class. The data were collected in order to reveal the nature of collaborative behavior and students’ personal experiences, opinions, and perceptions as related to the research questions. The qualitative data were collected over the course of the 16-week semester in the fall of 2010 at Suburban Community College.

As previously discussed, data were collected in the form of participant observation during eight class meetings and via 12 personal interviews conducted among students. At every step, the researcher was responsible for the data collection. The researcher served as participant observer, prepared the interview protocols, and conducted all of the personal interviews. The design of this study allowed the researcher to utilize the methods of participant observation to gather data throughout the course of the semester. By gathering data at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester, the researcher was able to examine data throughout the study in order to detect emerging themes. Furthermore, collecting data at multiple points in time facilitated the process of data triangulation.
Via a process of participant observation, the researcher recorded careful field notes during eight class meetings. The researcher observed the interactions of students in four class meetings of section A and four class meetings of section B. The observations were conducted during weeks 2, 4, 7, and 10. During these observations, the researcher examined carefully the interactions of students and gave special attention to the details of those interactions. The researcher took detailed and careful field notes to record the students’ behavior as they participated to complete the language tasks collaboratively. Careful consideration was given to the level of interaction among students, the students’ choice of English or Spanish, and the students’ social interaction as it related to the course and to outside topics. Additionally, the researcher paid close attention to the interactions among the language learners themselves, and the interactions of language learners in the presence of the native speakers.

There were several students who expressed an interest in participating in a personal interview, but only a limited number were able to attend due to scheduling conflicts. There were a total of 12 interviews conducted, 6 among language learners and 6 among native speakers. All 12 interviews were conducted on campus in the researcher’s office during the 12th week of the semester. The office location was near the students’ Spanish 101 classroom and in an area adjacent to a public gathering space on campus that students used frequently. The six language learners were all interviewed using the same questions (i.e., Interview Protocol A). Likewise, the six native speakers were all interviewed using a protocol designed for language facilitators (i.e., Interview Protocol B).
Before beginning the interview, the researcher took several minutes with each participant to explain the nature of the study and the goal of understanding collaborative learning experiences from a student perspective. The participants were reminded that there were no incorrect answers to the questions asked and that the researcher was genuinely interested in hearing the students’ view. Next, the researcher explained to each participant that the interview would be recorded using a digital audio recorder, and that the recording would be available only to the researcher and destroyed at the end of the study. Furthermore, the researcher informed students that their identities would not be linked in any way to the answers they provided during the interviews. As a token of appreciation, the language learners were given a $10 iTunes gift card at the end of the interview, and the language facilitators were invited to attend a luncheon provided by the researcher later during the same week.

**Data Analysis**

The purpose of these data collection methods was to understand the meaning that participants assigned to their experiences and their interactions as they participated in peer learning and collaborative learning exercises in Spanish. Additionally, the researcher sought to understand language learning as a socially mediated process and to examine the use of collaborative learning methods as a means for increasing students’ sense of validation. The specific methodology used in this study was grounded theory. Grounded theory allowed the researcher to conduct a systematic comparative analysis of the qualitative data gathered and to allow for categories and themes to emerge from within the data. The categories and themes then served to create a conceptual framework or theories about what the researcher found in the data. In using the constant comparative
method, the researcher examined early field notes and made changes to the interview protocol as themes and concepts emerged.

In order to identify common themes within the field notes and among participants’ responses, a method of qualitative analysis known as “coding” was used. Coding is a process that allows the researcher to “define what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). To explore students’ perceptions of their experiences in this learning intervention, this study employed the coding techniques and procedures of grounded theory. Glaser and Strauss (1967) described the process of grounded theory as close analysis of the data through a method of “constant comparison.” By applying a code to each segment of text, the researcher was able to discover, name, and categorize the emerging themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The data analysis process began early in the study through an examination of the observations recorded in field notes resulting in analytic memos. As mentioned previously, participant observation data helped the researcher to make some adjustments to the interview protocols. For example, as a result of early findings, the researcher included several follow-up questions in the interviews that asked students to expand or elaborate on the ways in which they found collaborative learning to be helpful or problematic.

A copy of the digital recordings from each of the 12 interviews were reviewed by the researcher who listened to the audio and transcribed them into text using word processing software. Additionally, the researcher transcribed the hand-written field notes gathered via participant observation into digital text using word processing software. Finally, the researcher listened and compared the audio recordings to the written transcript that was prepared. The purpose of this step was to verify that the transcripts
accurately reflect the students’ comments and answers as recorded. Once this was confirmed, the researcher uploaded the digital documents into the software program, HyperResearch, a software package used for qualitative data analysis.

Next, the researcher used a three-step process of coding to attach meaning to the data. Charmaz (2006) described a process of qualitative coding that occurs in three phases: initial coding, focused coding, and axial coding. During coding, the researcher attached qualitative codes to the data that had been gathered. In order to attach codes to the data, Charmaz (2006) recommended that the researcher “try to see actions in each segment of data rather than applying preexisting categories to the data” (p. 47).

The process began with initial coding where the researcher reviewed the data word-by-word and line-by-line. The aim of initial coding was to organize the data into discrete parts so that it may be closely examined and allow patterns or similarities in the data to become apparent. The researcher read the transcribed texts and attached codes, in the form of words or phrases, to the comments and responses of students. This process required the researcher to examine closely the events or incidents that appeared in the data. Charmaz (2006) argued that an important component to initial coding is openness, “to remain open to all possible theoretical directions indicated by your readings of the data” (p. 46) and that this process will “spark your thinking and allow new ideas to emerge” (p. 48).

In initial coding, “the goal is to remain open to all possible theoretical directions indicated by your reading of the data,” whereas focused coding is used “to pinpoint and develop the most salient categories in large batches of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). During focused coding, the researcher examined the work done in the initial coding
process and began to synthesize and categorize the most significant codes that had emerged from within the data. The process of focused coding was used to organize the data into larger, more conceptual categories so that themes and subthemes would emerge.

Finally, the researcher moved to a process of axial coding. In axial coding, the researcher examined the work done in the two initial phases of coding and attempted to reassemble the data into larger more global categories. These larger categories, or axial codes, can be understood as “an axis around which the analyst delineates relationships and specifies the dimensions of this category” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 186).

Relating codes to one another, linking categories with subcategories, and allowing major themes to emerge, is the essence of qualitative coding. The central purpose of the coding process in this study was to compare data to data, and to allow the emerging themes to inform the researcher of the conceptual framework or theories present within that data. The coding process permitted the researcher to examine the range of data collected and to compare students’ experiences, perceptions, and interpretations as recorded within the data.

Much of the coding, particularly the initial coding, was completed within the HyperResearch software. The software facilitated the initial coding process by allowing the researcher to attach the same code to multiple pieces of text. The software also organized and grouped the text by the codes that the researcher had applied. This facilitated the data analysis process because large quantities of data were managed more easily.

In addition to coding, the researcher was mindful of the importance of reviewing the data several times and using the constant comparative method to identify themes that
upon first glance may not have been apparent. It is through the constant comparative process that categories and theory will begin to emerge (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researcher examined the data and the codes that were applied and then compared the data, the codes, and the emerging categories in order to identify major themes and lesser themes from within the different pieces of data. The researcher also used the constant comparative method to set aside isolated incidents which did not emerge as central to the perceptions and behaviors of students. Because the principle source of data in this study were the behaviors, experiences, and perceptions of students themselves, the researcher followed a careful process of allowing themes to emerge from the data and did not make assumptions about what was present in the data.

**Methodological Limitations**

As with any study, there are potential limiting factors to be considered when reviewing the data that are gathered. The present study was qualitative in nature and therefore the perceptions’ of the participants were reflective of their personal experiences and beliefs. Because data were gathered from a limited number of students who participated in the interviews, it may be difficult to take a broad view about the experiences of language students in general. Additionally, students participating in interviews in the presence of their teacher may have chosen to give socially acceptable answers as opposed to sharing their true thoughts.

Another limitation to consider is the diverse backgrounds, socioeconomic circumstances, and educational levels of the students who participated in this study. Although students in this study were not asked to reveal details of their personal backgrounds, it is understood that community colleges serve a very diverse population of
students. This diversity may have played a role in how students perceived this experience and the gains that they made as a result of peer learning and collaborative learning. The present study relied on information that was gathered from a limited number of students who chose to respond to the call for volunteers to participate in the personal interviews. The interviews were conducted outside of class time and therefore some students were not available to attend these sessions.

Moreover, as mentioned previously, the role of the researcher must also be considered. In this study, the researcher herself was the instructor of record for the Spanish 101 classes participating in this activities and had previously served as the director of the language laboratory where the language facilitators were employed. For this reason, the participating students may have felt inclined to provide answers that they believed the researcher wanted to hear. Some students may have felt hesitant about making criticisms or speaking negatively about their experiences with the collaborative and peer learning exercises in the presence of their instructor. In an attempt to encourage students to share their opinions freely and openly, the researcher reminded students verbally and in writing that they were welcome to share their opinions and experiences without repercussion, and that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions that were raised. It is important to note that as an instructional practice in class, the researcher regularly invited students to share their opinions about a wide-variety of topics. In class, students were encouraged and accustomed to speaking freely and to challenging the ideas presented in the class readings and lessons. Therefore, this practice may have helped to reassure students participating in the study that the researcher was open to hearing a wide
variety of opinions and that she was genuinely interested in hearing what the participants had to say.

Finally, at the time of the study the researcher was a faculty member with several years of experience utilizing methods of student-centered learning, collaborative learning, and peer learning to teach Spanish to community college students. Therefore, the researcher’s personal biases, experiences, and beliefs may have served as a limitation in this study. For this reason, the researcher was mindful of any personal biases, particularly upon examination of the data.

**Summary**

This study was qualitative in design and employed the principles of grounded theory to examine the behaviors and perceptions of community college students who participated in collaborative and peer learning. The researcher examined the participants’ perceptions of the peer learning experience and the effect it may have had on their ability to learn the Spanish language and the cultures of the Spanish-speaking world. The study also examined the extent, if any, that these perceptions influenced the participants’ educational experiences as community college students and their sense of belongingness to the college. The study employed the methods of participant observation and personal interviews as the principle methods of data collection. The chapter that follows presents the findings from the qualitative analysis of the data that were gathered.
CHAPTER 4—RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study, based on a grounded theory design, was to collect information from Spanish language learners and native speakers of Spanish about their experiences in and perceptions of collaborative learning. Additionally, this study examined the observed interactions and learning behaviors of these students as they collaborated in class. Participant observations were recorded during eight class meetings in the fall semester of 2010. Students who had participated in the learning intervention were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews during the 12th week of the semester.

Interviews were conducted among 12 students: 8 female students and 4 male students. Of these students, 6 were students enrolled in Spanish 101 (i.e., Spanish language learners) and 6 were students who speak Spanish and had served as language facilitators in the class (i.e., native speakers of Spanish). In terms of ethnicity, all 6 of the language facilitators were Latino, as was one of the language learners. Three Spanish language learners were White, and one Spanish language learner identified himself as “non-White.” As can be seen in Table 1, titled Interview Participants, the 12 student participants have been, throughout this chapter, identified using numerals in place of their names.

All of the interviews among Spanish language learners were conducted in English. However, the native speakers were given the option of having the interview conducted in Spanish or English. Students 2 and 11 chose to respond to the interview questions in English, and students 8, 9, 10, and 12 chose to respond in Spanish. For the purposes of
Table 1

*Interview Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Student type</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1</td>
<td>Spanish language learner</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2</td>
<td>Native speaker of Spanish</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3</td>
<td>Spanish language learner</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Latino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4</td>
<td>Spanish language learner</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S5</td>
<td>Spanish language learner</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Other, non-White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S6</td>
<td>Spanish language learner</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S7</td>
<td>Spanish language learner</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S8</td>
<td>Native speaker of Spanish</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S9</td>
<td>Native speaker of Spanish</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S10</td>
<td>Native speaker of Spanish</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S11</td>
<td>Native speaker of Spanish</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S12</td>
<td>Native speaker of Spanish</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Latino</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This study, all interviews conducted in Spanish were first transcribed and then translated into English by the researcher.

This chapter details the qualitative findings gathered by using a grounded theory method of data analysis. This study investigated the use of a curricular innovation to teach Spanish at Suburban Community College, a large 2-year educational institution. The research questions that were investigated were designed to understand (a) the perceptions of language learners in regards to what they had learned in the second language, (b) what language learners perceived they learned about the culture associated with the Spanish language, (c) the perceptions of language learners and native speakers of Spanish in regards to the collaborative learning methods used, (d) the participants’ sense
of belongingness and connection to the college, and (e) the perceptions that native
speakers had of themselves as language learners and language facilitators. Finally, as a
means of triangulation, this study examined the observable and recorded classroom
interactions among native speakers and language learners as they collaborated in class.
The researcher (R) gathered data during eight class meetings. The data were collected in
two forms: (a) the hand-written notes taken by the researcher, and (b) audio recordings of
the students’ interaction in groups during class. As the language learners and native
speakers collaborated on the language activities, a digital audio recorder was used to
record the interactions of a particular group. As the group was being recorded, the
researcher took notes of the group’s interactions and provided a description of the group
dynamics, proximity of the students, their level of participation, their body language, and
their use of Spanish and English to communicate. The field notes yielded 26 pages of
transcribed text. Together, the transcriptions of the group’s conversations and the filed
notes taken by the researcher were used to further understand the interaction that occurred
among language learners and native speakers who collaborated to learn Spanish.
Through students voices, the findings of this study provide insight into the perspectives
and behaviors of students. These students shared in their own words their views on the
collaborative learning experience, what they learned about the language and the culture,
and how they describe their sense of belongingness.

Findings

As a result of this qualitative research, the following overarching themes emerged:
(a) psychological comfort, (b) a desire for interaction, (c) scaffolding, and (d) validating
experiences. Within each of the overarching themes, subthemes also emerged. A
complete map of the themes and corresponding subthemes appears in the code map displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Code map of themes and subthemes.
Psychological Comfort

A strong theme that emerged from each of the student interviews was student psychological comfort. Students expressed the need to feel comfortable in the classroom in order to learn the language. They described how the opportunity to talk to other students and build relationships helped to increase their level of comfort, and that led them to participate more in class. Also, as a point of comparison, students identified experiences in other classes when they had felt comfortable and when they did not. Within the general theme of comfort, various subthemes emerged. The subthemes included were (a) the need to feel comfortable, (b) a preference for asking questions of their peers, (c) fear of speaking, and (d) feeling that “I’m not the only one,” as depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Code map for Theme 1.

The need to feel comfortable. Students described their desire to attend classes that made them feel comfortable. Student 7, a white male student who is learning Spanish, shared the reasons he enjoys doing group work and making connections with students in his Spanish class.

S7: Comfort. Comfort always has value. If you are comfortable somewhere, you are going to be more willing to accept the information. If you’re uncomfortable,
you’re worried about what is all around you. If you are friends with somebody, you can say “Hey, what’s up?” It is more casual, like I said, less formal. I think for me it is a better way to learn.

R: So making relationships with other students helps your comfort level, and your comfort level helps you learn. Is that right?

S7: Yes, yeah, of course. Yeah, it is just more comfortable. If you enjoy being where you are, and comfort helps with that, then you’re going to be more willing to go and to learn something while you’re there. And more willing to want to stay there and not thinking about outside stuff. You get more drawn into the group of people you’re with, instead of thinking about the other people I know, and I don’t know anybody here.

Among the participants interviewed, both language learners and native speakers, the theme of psychological comfort was commonly addressed. Students described the need to feel comfortable in order to feel engaged and want to participate in class. Student 6, a white, female student learning Spanish, shared her experiences as a returning, adult student and the reasons she values a comfortable learning environment.

S6: Being an older student, it is a little bit harder in the sense of, you don’t think that students that are as young as some of the ones that are here, would be interested in even talking to me because I’m an old lady. (She laughs.) No, I mean for them, I know, I mean age is relative. So to be in a class that then makes it so that it is easier to at least engage people in conversation is nice because it’s then . . . I don’t know. It takes the tension off so then it is easier to . . . you feel more relaxed when you have had more interactions with the students in the class.
The data gathered from the participant observations support the importance of students’ level of comfort. During one of the initial classroom interactions among the language learners and native speakers, students appeared shy and hesitant to approach one another. In one instance, a language learner glanced nervously at the native speaker as he completed his pronunciation activity. The native speaker listened as the language learner struggled to pronounce the words, yet hesitated to correct him or to offer assistance. The two students said very little to one another. However, the same two students were observed later in the semester, during week 7. During this interaction, the native speaker played a more active role by suggesting answers and laughing easily at jokes made by students within the group. The native speaker spoke to the students in the group in Spanish and at a level she knew to be higher than the one they understood. When the language learners protested, she laughed and teased the students by saying, “No comprenden?” (You don’t understand?). The language learners laughed and proceeded to work with the native speaker on the activity assigned. Once a level of psychological comfort was established, students were observed to participate and share their ideas more easily. Also, as students got to know one another, they were observed talking about topics unrelated to the class. These observations support the views expressed by students in regards to the importance of psychological comfort.

A preference for asking peers. In addition to the need to feel comfortable, a common subtheme that emerged from the interviews was the students’ preference for asking their peers questions instead of asking their instructor. Students described feeling more comfortable asking questions of other students because they viewed the instructor as “superior,” or someone “you see with more respect.” Student 8, a female native
speaker of Spanish said, “If you are asking a professor, you feel intimidated and you think, ‘Oh, I can’t ask.’ And so you don’t ask the question.” The opinion that there was a level of discomfort when having to ask the professor a question was a common view among participants.

Student 9, a female native speaker, described her view of the students she worked with in this study and described how she would feel if she would have been given the opportunity to collaborate with peers when she was learning English.

S9: I think it’s easier, student-to-student because they can identify more with us. And always with the professor it is like um . . . it’s like someone who is superior, so it’s different. And with another student I think it is better. For me in my opinion, if they give me a teacher to practice English with or another person who is new and who could become my friend, I would feel more comfortable with a person like that.

Students described how they recognize that the professors are there to help them, but that did not change their preference for having a peer to turn to when they feel confused or uncertain. One situation in which several students described they felt uncomfortable was asking questions in front of the class. Student 1, a white female student learning Spanish, described that she felt embarrassed to ask some questions in front of the whole class because some teachers are “not really approachable, or really strict, or not the nicest of teachers.” Student 1 said that she appreciated working with groups because it gave her the opportunity to ask questions that she otherwise would not have asked.
Student 2, a female native speaker, and student 12, a male native speaker, shared similar thoughts. Student 2 commented, “I think sometimes you feel more comfortable to ask your peers than to ask in the middle of the class, particularly for shy people, to get all the attention on you when you ask the professor.” Student 12 shared, “Probably when they ask the teacher they think that their question might be silly or they might not feel that they can ask things that don’t have anything to do with the grammar or the lesson.”

Two students commented that they felt comfortable asking the professor a question, but that having a peer to ask was easy or convenient. Student 5, a male student learning Spanish, said, “It is easier to ask the group because they are right there. So it is kind of nice.” Student 4, a female student learning Spanish, said that she does not have a problem speaking in front of the whole class, “I say my answers anyway. I say what I think it is, and then I’ll check with them [her peers] if I am not exactly sure. You know they are there, so I might as well ask them.”

Student 11, a female, native speaker of Spanish expressed the strongest sentiments about approaching the professor with a question. She shared the following thoughts:

S11: I think it is good to be able to have students come and help other students, because I know that sometimes they feel more comfortable with other students. So I think it is a really good idea. Because I know I hate sometimes going and talking to my professors, and I feel kind of out of place with them. I feel like anything I am going to ask is going to be a dumb question. Which I know it’s not because I know that you’re here to help us and everything, but sometimes I do feel like—I don’t know—it feels weird going and asking the professors. But with this, with students asking other students, I think they feel more comfortable because we
are about the same age, and we know what they are going through more or less sometimes. And they can ask us. They feel more relevant and more confident with us sometimes than with the professors.

R: So do you think there are situations where students are more likely to ask questions in small groups than as a large class?

S11: I think, at least from my perspective, I know that I am more comfortable asking my peers than asking the professor. So sometimes if I can go ahead and ask my group, and they can answer it, then it feels more comfortable sometimes. I’m shy, and I hate when people stare at me. So if the person is all the way in the front and I have a question, it kind of feels awkward cause everybody is just staring and all eyes are on me.

Fear of speaking. The comments made above indicate that there are situations in which students are afraid of speaking in class and having a peer they are comfortable with reduces their fear. This subtheme, fear of speaking, was also expressed in the comments made by Student 4, a female language learner. She stated, “You learn better because you’re not afraid to ask questions. I don’t just sit there and ponder to myself, ‘Is this right? Is this wrong?’” Student 10, a female native speaker, described a specific fear that she felt within her own community when she was learning English.

S10: When you are trying to learn English, even the people from your own community laugh at you and tell you, “That’s not how you say it,” or they criticize how you say it. But it is more from your own community, not so much from people outside of your culture.
Student 12, a male native speaker, described how he believed students benefited from working in groups in class. He expressed this view: “It’s not necessary to focus on so many grammatical things and not speak the language. I think it helps a lot because it makes you lose your fear and make mistakes, and not be afraid that you’ll be corrected.”

The data gathered from the participant observations did not reveal evidence of students feeling fearful of making mistakes. However, it was noticed that students were reluctant to participate in groups where they had not yet gotten to know their peers, and this reluctance could be attributed to those fears or to their overall sense of comfort in class.

**I’m not the only one.** Another subtheme that emerged within the topic of comfort was what one student described as feeling like “I’m not the only one.” In her words, student 11, a female native speaker, shared how working in groups with her peers gave her more confidence to ask questions in class. She described how uncomfortable she felt asking questions or speaking up in her classes. However, a source of confidence for her was the realization that her peers had the same questions or doubts that she had.

S11: It feels more comfortable if I ask them [my peers] and they don’t know, then I can ask the professor and I feel like I’m not the only one. If the professor is in the front, and I am in the class and I don’t ask anybody, then it feels weird asking the professor because then I feel like I’m the only one who has that question. But if I ask my peers and they ask the same thing, then I’m not the only one and it makes it more comfortable asking the teacher.

R: So you like to ask the group first and if they don’t know then it gives you more confidence to ask the professor?
S11: Yeah, to ask the teacher. Yeah.

Another example of feeling that “I’m not the only one” came from a female language learner, student 1. When asked to describe how this collaborative experience affected the way she felt about coming to class, she said that she felt like “we’re in the same boat.” She continued:

S1: So because of the fact that we have gotten together in groups, I guess we feel more comfortable showing that we are both kind of confused, instead of just holding it all in and not communicating with other people about that.

R: So knowing that someone else is in the same boat as you, and you know that person and they know you . . . .

S1: So it’s not just me that doesn’t get it. Because if it’s just me that doesn’t get it, I think I would get more frustrated. Because I’m just like, “Why is everybody else getting it and I’m not?” So then I’m beating myself up more, but knowing that the people around me are in the same boat and they are confused too, then I don’t feel so bad.

Student 6, a female language learner, described how knowing people in her classes helped her to realize that other students have similar struggles learning the material. She remarked, “You see that you’re not the only one who cannot pronounce certain words and everybody makes mistakes. So yeah, it makes you more comfortable and you feel like trying.”

**Desire for Interaction**

Students from both groups, the language learners and native speakers, described a strong desire and preference for spending class time interacting with their peers. In some
cases, students identified the importance of interaction as a tool for learning, and in other cases students described the need to interact with one another in order to feel connected and not feel isolated. Within the overarching theme of desire for interaction, there were four subthemes that emerged, as shown in Figure 3: (a) opportunities for practice, (b) making personal connections, (c) variety of classroom interaction, and (d) distaste for lecture classes.

![Figure 3. Code map for Theme 2.](image)

**Opportunities for practice.** Student 10, a female native speaker of Spanish, described her view of working with her peers in class and how she valued the interaction with her peers. She stated:

S10: I like to work in teams because you learn. In other classes that I have taken, I have worked in teams and you learn more. You remember more of what you are learning, and it helps you to interact with other people, people who are learning the same language.

Student 10 was asked to identify any advantages or disadvantages to group work. She described the need to have an opportunity to practice speaking the language. She explained that students benefitted from this opportunity, but acknowledged that just completing an activity was not sufficient.
S10: Well, I think there are more advantages because you are practicing. You are practicing what you are learning. You have the opportunity if you make a mistake for someone to say, “Oh, no it’s not like this.” You can learn to say it correctly. Disadvantages . . . well, it depends on the students. Like if they finish the activity too quickly, they aren’t really practicing it.

Student 2, a female native speaker, shared a similar view about having the desire for opportunities to practice language skills in class. She described how she values communication in a personal setting over language practice that is done independently.

S2: I think that participating in a group you get to practice. You practice even the simple things like “Hi, How are you doing?” things like that. So it’s an opportunity to use the language. Language is communication with other people. I guess you can do work on your computer, and that is one way to use the language, but mostly language is to communicate with people, so being in a group is . . . well, you’re applying that.

**Making personal connections.** Through classroom interaction, students in this study developed personal connections that extended outside of the classroom. Student 1, a female language learner, described the interaction that she experienced in the Spanish 101 course and how that interaction extended to interactions that took place later outside of the classroom.

S1: There’s a couple times when we’ve left the class and we’ve all walked out to our cars, and we still stay and talk about different things. Or after last class “Jennifer” was driving by and she waved. It’s not like we just walk out of class and it just ends. We’re still going to say, “Hi” and we’re still going to talk. This
is probably the one time that I have had a class, and I know people’s names in the whole class, more so than in any other class that I’ve been in.

These personal connections that students made in the classroom also led one student, Student 6, to seek additional help with the language and interact with one of the native speakers outside of class. She shared this description of the interaction she experienced with the students and native speakers in her class.

S6: In my other Spanish class, there wasn’t as much interaction. Your class definitely has a lot more interaction. I should say consistent interaction, and so I didn’t have as much interaction with them. But this time, because of being in groups and the oral presentations, I ended up lucking out because I had a native speaker, and I used them to learn from. I’ll email and say, “How come this is like this?” Or talk to them and say, “What did I do wrong?” So it has been helpful that there is somebody there beside just the teacher that has that amount of knowledge.

Student 2, a female native speaker of Spanish, also described the value of making personal connections with her classmates. She said, “I think that you’re more prone to participate if you get to know the people, if there is a relationship.” She was then asked to describe the role those personal connections played outside of class.

S2: It makes it so that it becomes part of your family and you feel comfortable and you have that resource of knowing that you know people. And I think that’s important for a human being, to know that you belong to a place, a group, so you become part of a group. And it’s always nice for people to say, “Hi. How are you
doing?” even from other semesters. This is my third semester and people recognize me. And you know, it’s nice.

The data gathered from the participant observations revealed that the relationships that students built in class extended outside of the classroom. Students were observed discussing plans to eat lunch together, talking about the assignments they had in other classes, and sharing stories about their personal lives. Among the student groups observed, the researcher noticed that several times students began a group activity by making some type of personal comment, unrelated to the task at hand. In one instance, as students pulled their desks together to begin an activity one student said, “What are you taking next semester? Have you decided yet? I need to take math.”

In another instance, two students, both language learners, were observed working together on a task when the topic of friendships was raised. One student shared this comment, “I don’t come to class to make friends. I have friends. I come to class to learn. But in this class we really get to know each other and I feel like, I like coming because I know people.”

**Variety of classroom interaction.** Another subtheme that emerged from within this topic of interaction was the importance of variety. Students expressed a desire to interact and make personal connections with one another, but they also valued the variety of activities that were conducted in class. Student 5, a male language learner, described his preference for doing a variety of activities in class.

S5: I like the variety. It makes it a lot more relaxing, a comfortable environment. Instead of a very structured, like, “This is what we’re going to do for the next 12 weeks, or whatever.” So it is a lot easier, I like the variety. Even the activities
I don’t like, someone else might like. So if you are trying to cater to 30 students, variety is best, I think.

When asked if there were a particular activity that he preferred doing in class, Student 7 described several activities he liked. He said, “I like the pair activities, and when you get five or six people in a group . . . even if you split the class in three groups. I like the variety.” Student 6 shared similar thoughts when asked if there were a particular activity that she preferred doing in class.

S6: I like the variety. I don’t know that I would want to be stuck with always having to work only with one person, or having to work with six or seven. For me, the variety has been good. It makes it more interesting, so the class isn’t as boring for me.

One of the native speakers, Student 12, also commented on the importance of using a variety of techniques in the classroom. However, his comments reflect the importance of variety from a pedagogical standpoint and the need to try a variety of methods in order to improve teaching and learning. When asked what he thought about having native speakers work with students in the classroom he said:

S12: It’s pretty interesting because it is a way to improve the techniques used to teach a language. Obviously, no technique is . . . well nothing is perfect. But if teachers only stick to one way of doing things then there comes a point where, they don’t analyze to see if what they are doing is good or something else works better.

R: So you like the idea that teachers consider new ways of doing things?
S12: Yeah, to try to see what works and try to improve things. And if something doesn’t work, to eliminate it. Yeah.

**Distaste for lecture class.** Although students expressed a desire for variety in the classroom, another emerging subtheme in this area was their distaste for lecture classes. Student used words such as, “boring,” “not as fun,” and “strict” to describe the lecture-style environment. Student 7 said that he liked group work because, “It kind of takes away from the seriousness of the class, not in a bad way. But it takes away from like, the lecture. You know, the teacher is talking and talking, and he is still talking.”

Upon close examination, a common thread became apparent among students’ descriptions of their experience with lecture-style classes. Students explained how the lecture environment lacked the personal connections that they desired to make. When asked to describe her view of the group work she had done in the Spanish class, Student 4 offered this comparison.

S4: Oh, it’s so much better. Like in my other classes, it is just boring. Like take my reading class for example. My teacher doesn’t teach us anything. It is all just lab work that we do on our own. So yeah, we have lab work in our class [the Spanish class], but we also go over things during class time. And then in my English class, we just kind of sit there, and everyone is in their cliques because they signed up for classes together or something. And up until last week, or the week before, we would just have lecture. And now okay, we started to do discussions.

R: So the discussions are as a whole class or as a small group?
S4: The whole class, and in that class I think I only know like five people’s names.

Student 6, a female language learner, compared her experiences from the Spanish class in this study to those of other classes she has taken. She described them in this way: “In other classes, they are okay, but in some of them you just have to, you know, take them. And they are not as much fun because there is less human interaction.” Student 7, a male language learner, gave a similar account of his experiences in some of the classes he has taken. He described how the structure of certain courses does not enable students to make personal connections.

S7: Some teachers have such a strict regimen. They give you no time to even meet the people in your class. You get in, they are teaching, the clock goes, and bam! They’re out and everyone is gone, they spread out. It is good when you can actually leave a class at the end of the semester, and in the next one, you see someone and actually remember their name, or say, “Hey, what’s up?” You can see people you know, and then maybe possibly they are in your future class.

Student 1 described a course she took based entirely on class lectures. She believed that she learned the material in that format because, “I don’t know how much group work you can do in astronomy. It is just basic facts and history.” When asked to describe that learning experience she shared this description:

S1: He lectured, and the only homework we had the whole semester was to go home and go over our lecture notes and write two questions about something we didn’t understand. And the next class we would come back in, and he’d call on random people, and you don’t want to be like, “Um . . . I don’t have anything.”
There was one time that somebody didn’t have anything twice and he said, “Get out of my classroom.”

Student 1 described how, in her view, a lecture-style class is effective for learning some disciplines, but that “getting into groups” is more effective in language instruction because “it is not just straight facts . . . like learning a language isn’t just straight facts. There are different things that factor in, like talking to other people.”

Student 12, a male native speaker, identified some of the pitfalls to using the lecture-style format to learn a language. He described his experience studying English in a lecture-style environment that offered little opportunity for interaction.

S12: Well, it’s been a while. But what happens is they only focus on teaching the class, but not on doing anything to practice the language. It is only the theory about the language, and they don’t do anything for you to practice using it. There is no situation to force you to use the language. So the teacher goes and teaches his class, then the exams are the kind where you have to choose the correct answer, multiple choice. So you are not speaking the language. And there is nothing else, no music or radio in English. Maybe now with the Internet it’s different, but before there wasn’t any opportunity to listen to people speaking in English.

These comments reflect students’ desire to engage with others and interact during class time, particularly in language classes. Students described that they enjoy variety and doing an assortment of learning activities in class. Furthermore, students described the need to have opportunities to make personal connections with other students and that those connections help them to learn and feel more comfortable in class. Finally, students
revealed distaste for the lecture-style format and described that they believed the lecture
class does not facilitate making personal connections with their peers.

**Scaffolding**

The term scaffolding is used to describe what Vygotsky (1978) explained as the
assistance that an individual receives from a “more knowledgeable other.” According to
Lantolf and Thorne (2006), the assistance provided through the use of scaffolding enables
learners to complete tasks that they would be not be able to complete on their own. Upon
examination of the qualitative data and displayed in Figure 4, the overarching theme of
scaffolding appeared by grouping together the following subthemes: (a) filling in each
other’s gaps, (b) levels of ability, (c) group size, and (d) student personalities.

![Figure 4. Code map for Theme 3.](image)

**Filling in each other’s gaps.** The code “filling in each other’s gaps” emerged
from various students interviews in which students described how, by working with their
peers, they were able to learn something, as well as contribute to the learning of others.
This was the case in situations where students worked with native speakers, as well as
when they worked with peers who also were language learners. Student 6, a female
language learner, described what she thought about the group activities. “In the groups
that I have been in, it has always been a group effort. Somebody will remember one thing
and somebody else won’t remember it. So it has been very nice.” Student 6 described a
classroom dynamic in which her role alternated between being the expert and being the
novice. She described that she was learning by doing the group activities because the
students in her group could help her with the answers to questions she didn’t know, “And
then they won’t know the ones that you know. So sometimes you’re the learner, and
sometimes you know the answers. It rotates.”

Student 7, a male language learner had a similar view. He said, “Well, in the
groups I was in everyone was participating and came up with things that others didn’t
have, or couldn’t remember. So yeah, I liked it.” Student 3, a Latino male language
learner, described the notion of scaffolding as getting the opportunity to see things from
another point of view. He shared his perspective of how he learned from the students he
worked with in groups.

S3: The helpful part is you get to see the other people’s strengths. Say, there is a
way that you didn’t look at it. They can say, “Well, if you look at it this way, this
is how you can remember this conjugation, and remember that, or remember this.”
So you get different ways of learning when you are in a group setting like that.

When asked to elaborate, Student 3 continued to explain the ways in which he found
group work to be helpful.

S3: I think the helpfulness is when there are times that I take quizzes, and I am a
little unsure. When you erase the right answer, and you put the wrong answer
instead. You know, you doubt yourself. But when you’ve got other people there,
you can talk about it and they can say, “Yeah, that was right.” So when you work
together, you can figure stuff out and then you feel more confident, like, “Yeah,
that is it and I know it.” So it is helpful, you know. You want to learn it and then you feel better that, “Yeah, I got this.”

As a component of the learning intervention conducted in these two Spanish classes, students took weekly quizzes, alternating between individual quizzes and group quizzes. During group quizzes, language learners were assigned randomly to work in groups of three to four students. As a group, students read the quiz questions, consulted, and decided upon their answers. Groups were asked to submit their answers on a single sheet of paper that was graded and returned the following week in class. On the day when students received the graded quiz, they were instructed to gather with their groups and examine the results. At that time, a native speaker joined the language learners and offered clarification and answered questions that the group had.

Several students commented on the helpfulness of the group quizzes and how this method of collaboration helped them to fill in the gaps in each other’s learning. Student 5 said:

S5: I like the group quizzes because there will be some things that I know that they won’t, and then that kind of helps them. And then they’ll know something that I don’t remember. So I like the group quizzes a lot; it helps.

When Student 4 was asked to describe her feelings about doing group work and working with other students, she gave this description:

S4: Um . . . before this class, I didn’t like group work because I was always the one who was doing most of the work. I would just rather do things on my own and I kind of think that the way I do things is right and other people are wrong
(laughs). So I didn’t like it before this class, but I really like the group work and the group quizzes.

R: What do you like about the group quizzes?

S4: Just that you have the ability to ask someone else’s opinion as well. And it is easier to learn from your mistakes, I think, because you have someone there telling you what they think of your answer. So you actually have to sit there and think about it, instead of just writing something. And it counts for points, so it’s important. So then you sit and say, “Oh, why is it like that?” so I know for the future.

These students described key elements that are outlined in Vygotsky’s notion of scaffolding. In this subtheme, “Filling in each other’s gaps,” students described learning from their peers through the group activities and group quizzes. Students asserted that there were times when working with their peers they were able to accomplish more than when working alone. Additionally, students recognized that during group interactions they were able to shift between the role of expert and novice, thereby learning from their peers as well as helping their peers to learn.

The data from the participant observations revealed that students appeared to participate at an increased level once the group quizzes began. Students, who appeared quiet or withdrawn minutes before, began to pay more attention during the group quiz. Each group appeared to discuss the questions differently. In one group, an individual student played a dominant role, and she also did the writing for the group. The dominant student offered her answers and then polled the group to hear their answers before writing them down on the quiz paper. When there were disagreements or the dominant student
was unsure of her answer, a more lengthy discussion followed. In another group, students did a lot of talking before coming up with any answers. Students in this group were observed talking about all of the steps before putting together any answers. Students said, “What’s the verb?” “What form do we need?” “Ok, here are the endings to the -er and -ir verbs.” They discussed each question before choosing to write down their answers. The pen was passed around, and the student who felt most sure of an answer wrote it down. Also, the students in this group were observed asking each other for clarification on the answers. The researcher observed examples of how students in these groups used the techniques of scaffolding to guide their peers, model what they knew about the language, and ultimately to complete the group quiz activity.

**Group size.** Within the theme of scaffolding, an emergent subtheme was group size. Students’ responses indicated that some prefer to work in pairs, while others prefer working with a small group of peers. Although there was no consensus on the ideal number of students who should be in the groups, there was a general agreement that paired work and group work is better than activities where students mingled with the whole class. Student 7 said, “I like the paired activities and when you get five or six people in a group. The focus is more there, there are not so many outside distractions. You’re not walking around the class.” Student 1 described what she found to be problematic about doing the whole class activities, “going around [the classroom] and some people just want to write the answers down and just get it done.”

Student 5 believed that pair work was less helpful than working in small groups. He raised the issue of feeling accountable to his peers and how that feeling of accountability increases when more students are working in a group.
S5: The paired stuff is less effective because I’m not sure why, but when I am working with just one other person, it is just a lot easier to just slack off and talk to him. When you are doing the work, there’s not as much accountability. You’re not worried about the two other people or the three other people in the group. You just kind of sit there and talk and say, “Ok, what are you doing for number 1?” and you don’t even say the whole thing in Spanish, you just kind of say it in English. Then you just start talking, “Hey, what are you going to do this weekend?” You don’t really do the exercise.

R: So you tend to get off-task when it is just one other person, but if it is a group of four or five of you, then you tend to stay involved?

S5: Yeah, yes.

**Levels of ability.** In addition to students’ preferences in terms of group size, participants described preferences in levels of language ability and how the ability level of their peers played a role in the type interaction they experienced. Student 4 described her views on working with peers of mixed ability and her preference for having a peer from whom she can learn and who can learn from her.

S4: I like the group work that is not just between me and one other person. I like when it is more than just two people. Sometimes the other person doesn’t really know what they are doing, and you want to keep going, and then it can get really annoying.

R: So when it is a bigger group, like three, four, or five people, what are the advantages? What do you like better about that?
S4: You have, like two people on the same level, or three people on the same level. And it’s usually more . . . um, better matched I’d say. Because you have two people who will be smarter and they can work together if they need to. Instead of just the smart one who is having to help out a lot the not smarter one. You know what I am saying?

R: So you’re saying, if there are more people, then . . .

S4: (She interrupts to say . . .) So then the smarter one can grow as well.

R: How do you think they do that?

S4: Because they have someone else who is on the same level as them, so they can help each other.

R: So there’s more of an exchange?

S4: Yeah. Yeah.

R: So what if you are working with a student who knows a lot less than you?

S4: Then you’re not going anywhere because you’re just helping out that student the whole time. But if you work with someone who is at your level, then you’re both growing because you’re bouncing ideas off each other and teaching each other things.

Students shared other views on the role of ability level on the interactions they experienced. Student 1 described what she liked about working in pairs. She said,

S1: I like it when we have to find a partner because it is kind of like more one-on-one. As long as you have a partner that knows somewhat what is going on or completely understands it. If we go back and forth with each other, there are times when I ask her, “Could you say it like this?” and she’ll say, “Yeah.” So it’s
kind of like what I am thinking and she is confirming it for me. When you have
the one-on-one, it kind of reassures you that you are doing it correctly, and when
you hear it back from them, it makes sense in your head, that this is the correct
way you’re supposed to do it.

Student 2, a native speaker, indicated a preference for working with groups of
students of mixed ability. She described the importance of having peers who understand
the concepts being studied. She said:

S2: It doesn’t matter how much group learning you have if you don’t know the
concepts you should be learning. It is not helpful for anybody; you’re stuck in the
level. Of course you need the input from somebody like the professor. That’s
why I think it is necessary to have somebody who really knows the subject
because you can get stuck in a group where everybody is kind of low in their
knowledge of the subject.

**Student personalities.** A final subtheme within the theme of scaffolding was the
role of students’ personalities. Participants identified the ways in which the personalities
of their peers either increased or decreased the effectiveness of the interaction they
experienced. Student 2 described how students’ level of motivation could compensate for
the lack of ability among the participants. She described group interaction among
students of similar ability level in this way:

S2: If everybody was in the same low or high level, then in that situation I guess
there could be two consequences. One, they can help each other to achieve, to
pull each other to the next level, or they would get stagnant at that level and not be
able to progress. If there were no motivation to learn more, then they’d just stay
at that level. On the other hand, if they are all low at the same level, they might feel confident that they don’t know and then they help each other to learn more. So it could be an incentive, too.

Student 6 described the motivation level of her peers as a key factor in the quality of the interaction she experienced. She said, “I think that in the group it depends on who you are partnered with and their motivation in the class and whether you’re going to have as much interaction with that person.” Student 6 also recognized that student interaction might be limited because “some people are more shy.” Student 5 shared a similar observation. He said, “Some people are not “people people. Some people are very shy.”

Student 7 described how his peers might misunderstand a student of lower ability and he gave his opinion about working with peers who seem to be uninterested or underprepared. Student 7 identified this situation as an opportunity to be a leader to a student who knows less or feels shy. He said:

S7: As far as the interaction goes, even myself in different subjects um, well, you don’t interact as much, because you don’t know the subject as well. You know, you may be in a group where you are the person who is helping somebody. And instead of looking at it as, they aren’t interacting because they just don’t care, sometimes they just don’t know, or they are shy. And group work helps because I’ll be stuck on something and someone will remember the verb and say, “Oh, no it’s like this.”

Validating Experiences

The final theme to emerge from within the data is validating experiences. Rendón (2002) defined validating experiences as the interactions with faculty, staff, and other
students in which students feel supported and encouraged to pursue their educational endeavors. As a component to building a validating model of education, Rendón (1994) identified the need to acknowledge the previous experiences and abilities that students bring with them to the classroom. The native speakers participating in this study were asked to use their language skills to assist the students learning Spanish. In this way, students were encouraged to draw on their previous experiences and use those experiences to help their peers to learn the language.

During the individual interviews, the native speakers were asked to identify the ways in which they believed that they had helped their peers, their perceptions of the collaborative learning activities, and their sense of belongingness and connection to the college as a result of participating in these activities. The responses from interviews conducted with native speakers echoed many of the ways in which Rendón (2002) described that students receive a sense of validation.

Native speakers in this study identified several factors that contributed to their level of satisfaction with the learning intervention, and they suggested additional ways that they believed the intervention could be improved. Students’ responses within the theme of validation were organized from three emergent subthemes: (a) satisfaction from helping others, (b) identifying with language learners, and (c) a desire to share culture, as displayed in Figure 5.

**Satisfaction from helping others.** The native speakers of Spanish expressed a feeling of satisfaction when they were able to help their peers learn Spanish. They described helping their peers with pronunciation, vocabulary, and some grammatical lessons. During this process, they found that they were able to identify with the language
learners and could relate to their experiences. Several native speakers connected those experiences to similar feelings they had as students learning English. Finally, the native speakers of Spanish described how they enjoyed sharing aspects of their culture and they shared a strong desire to incorporate more cultural activities in the classroom lessons.

When asked to describe the ways in which she had helped her peers to learn, Student 11, a female native speaker, offered this example. She said:

S11: I hope I have helped them at least with some of the pronunciation. Some of the students I have worked with have asked me, “How do you pronounce that?” I hope I have helped them with that at least. There was one of them who, I guess that she got married to someone that is Mexican and her last name, she couldn’t really pronounce it. So I told her a little trick about how to separate it into little vowels and it made it sound better.

Another female native speaker, Student 9, enthusiastically described how she was able to help her peers with the adjectives that correspond to the gender of a person. She said:

S9: There were pictures, and in one picture the lady was old and in the other she wasn’t. So in the picture of the old woman he put “viejo,” and I told him, “It isn’t
‘viejo,’ it’s ‘vieja.’” And he asked me, “Why?” and I told him, “Because it’s feminine.” So then he asked me, “If it’s masculine it’s ‘o’ and if it’s feminine it’s ‘a’?” and I told him, “yes.” But I told him there are other cases when some feminine things can end in “o,” but that’s another thing.

The native speakers interviewed described a feeling of satisfaction they received from helping their peers to learn Spanish. Student 12, a male native speaker, said:

S12: I think it has affected me in a positive way. I like it a lot because I have done this before. I was a tutor, and I like to explain things to people, and I know more or less the problems that I had [as a student], and I can explain why things work that way.

When asked to describe how this experience has influenced her feelings about coming to campus, Student 11, a female native speaker, shared how she made an extra trip to campus every week solely to participate in the study and how this experience had given her an opportunity to consider a career in Spanish.

S11: I enjoy it. I like it. I am not sure about my major yet, I was kind of leaning towards, I want to teach Spanish, or I want to be an interpreter because I want to do something with my language, something I can be proud of. So this has kind of like given me an insight into how to teach it and how I would feel to teach it. I enjoy it and I like coming. I don’t have anything to do on Wednesdays and I just do this. I like it and I like helping people. I like seeing when I can help them pronounce something and they feel that they are sounding okay, and it doesn’t sound bad or anything. I like that.
When asked to describe how she felt about working with the language learners, Student 11 shared her feelings about the satisfaction she received from seeing students who are trying to learn the Spanish language. For her, seeing that other students were interested in her native language was a source of satisfaction and pride.

S11: It makes me glad that they are trying to learn a language other than their own. I have a cousin who is Mexican, and she was born in Mexico, and she lives here now, and she doesn’t like speaking Spanish at all. Which, I feel kind of bad because you are kind of neglecting, not being true to yourself. And these people [the students in Spanish 101], they are trying, and they want to learn. So it just makes me proud that they want to learn how to do something that I do, that they don’t think your language is like, below them or anything. They want to learn because they know it is a good language to know and it helps them. Right now, in life it helps you with anything if you are bilingual.

Rendón (2002) described the importance of creating learning environments in which “Latinos can be valuable contributors to the body of knowledge that is studied in the classroom” (p. 653). Students interviewed in the current study supported this assertion. When asked to describe her feelings about working with students who want to learn from her, Student 10 said, “Well, it feels good, because they want to know about your culture and your language.” Student 11 described how this experience has affected her feelings about coming to school. She said,

S11: It makes me feel good that they [the college] want to involve us, and they are taking our language into consideration, and they want to make it better. It’s good because you can get involved and you can help people learn.
Student 2, a female native speaker, described how helping her peers to learn allowed her to expand on her own understanding of the Spanish language. She believed that she had learned by teaching others. She hesitated to claim that she is an expert, rather she saw herself as a student who was learning even as she helped her peers to learn.

S2: Even though I’m able to help and I’m at a different level, you really don’t know something until you are able to teach it. So for me, it’s an opportunity to be sure of what I know and to be able to express, or try to express, or to explain concepts, that even though I know them myself, until I express them, I don’t know if people are able to understand it or not. So for me it’s a very good opportunity to do that, to practice being a teacher kind of. (She laughs nervously.)

**Identifying with language learners.** The native speakers also described the ways in which they identified with the language learners and their struggles to learn Spanish. The native Spanish speakers interviewed pointed out the ways in which their experiences learning English were similar to the difficulties they observed the students to have in the Spanish 101 classroom. Student 12, a male native speaker, said, “I identify with them a lot because I have had to try to learn a language from the beginning. It is the same process, the same process.” Student 8, a female native speaker, described her realization that the process of learning a new language is just as difficult for other students.

S8: It makes you realize that it is not just us that are breaking our heads to try to learn English, but that there are also people making the effort to try to learn another language that is just as difficult as learning English. . . . I feel like I am not
the only one who feels like this and who is going through this. I feel like I can identify more.

Student 11 was raised in a bilingual home and learned both Spanish and English as a child. However, she described how she felt she could relate to the language learners. She compared how the students’ feelings of insecurity are similar to her feelings about speaking Spanish in Mexico.

S11: Sometimes I do kind of feel like they do [the language learners] when I go to Mexico. Because even though I’m Mexican, and my parents are Mexican, and I can speak Spanish and everything, sometimes it makes me feel that I don’t know the proper way of doing it down there [speaking Spanish in Mexico], and it just makes me feel kind of out of place sometimes.

Student 9 observed how the students she worked with struggled to pronounce new words correctly and speak in Spanish. She described how she shared similar feelings when she speaks English.

S9: I think the way they feel is the same. The way they are trying to speak and pronounce words, that is the same way I feel, or how I used to feel. Still now I feel that way, it is pretty much the same thing.

**Desire to share culture.** The native speakers expressed a desire to share with their peers not only their language, but also their cultural views and traditions. During the interviews, students described the type of interaction they experienced when given the opportunity to speak about their culture. One of the native speakers described several interactions she had, while others had a difficult time recalling any moments of cultural exchange. When asked to describe the ways in which she shared culture with her peers,
Student 11 gave the longest and most detailed account. As she described these interactions, she became animated, and in several instances she used a combination of Spanish and English to express her thoughts.

S11: I was talking to somebody about how in Oaxaca they eat “chapulines” [grasshoppers] and they were like, “What is that?” and I was like, “I have some at home if you want me to bring you some.” They were asking if they were like jumping (she laughs) and I said, “No, they’re dead, but they’re good.” (She laughs again.) Then someone asked me what “mole” [a Mexican dish] was and I was like, “Oh, it’s really good.” I think food-wise, I think people would be really surprised by a lot of foods. Like today we talked about papaya and some of them didn’t even know what papaya was.

R: Really?

S11: Yeah, which I thought was amazing because it’s just a fruit and I thought everybody knew about it, but there were people who didn’t. And like El Día de los Muertos [the Day of the Dead], I know what it is, and I’ve gone to festivals and things like that. I went to one of them when I was little and it was nice, a little scary (she laughs) because you go to the cemetery and stuff. They [the students] are like, “Why do they take food to the cemetery? Why are they eating on top of the people?” (She laughs.) But it’s culture and it’s what people believe. That is what we were talking about today, about beliefs like la salud [health]. Like parents, like my parents say, “No camines con los pies descalzos” [Don’t walk barefoot] because “Te vas a enfermar” [You’re going to get sick] or
whatever reason. Everybody has a different culture. So the little things that
everybody has, it’s kind of interesting what people think about it.

The other native speakers interviewed had a difficult time recalling specific
examples of when they shared topics of culture with their peers. Student 10, a female
native speaker, struggled to recall specific details about instances when she spoke about
culture. She said:

S10: Well, no not much. But when we talk, sometimes we say like, there are
people who say things differently because they are from different countries or
whatever. I think it is good to teach them the variations that exist in Spanish, that
sometimes a word can be said in different ways, there is more than one way to say
things.

Students 9 and 8 shared similar comments about culture. Student 9, a female
native speaker, said, “I haven’t seen it yet, but it is good, good to talk about the culture
and the people.” Student 8 described how her interactions with students had been
focused on practicing the written and spoken forms of the language. She said, “We
haven’t really done that much with it. They are more focused on doing the activities and
the spelling and the pronunciation. That stuff.”

Student 2, a female native speaker, believed the topic of culture was limited to
conversations in which her peers expressed an interest in learning about it and when time
permitted. In this way, Student 2 saw the topic of culture as something additional or extra
that could be discussed after the main tasks were completed. When asked to describe the
ways in which she shared her culture, Student 2 gave this response.
S2: We talk about our childhood and things we had done as we grew up. You know, it’s different. I think it comes up, but it depends on the students in the group. Sometimes we are busy working, and maybe we don’t talk because we are on task. So it depends on the people.

R: Are there other examples of where culture was part of the interactions you’ve had?

S2: Well, yeah like I said, it comes up when you have the opportunity to talk about culture, but we talk about the lesson and then if we have extra time and the person is interested, you know.

Student 12, a male native speaker, also believed that the opportunities for cultural exchange had been limited to instances in which the students he was working with expressed an interest in the topic. When asked to describe those instances, Student 12 mentioned the activities that were done in class on the topic of food. He believed that more could be done to bring culture into the classroom and to break down cultural stereotypes. Student 12 offered detailed suggestions on how to incorporate more culture into the class lessons, and he shared his thoughts on the importance of music and dance as an expression of culture.

S12: About culture, well no, not that much. We seem to focus more on grammar. We have talked a little about foods, and they sometimes have incorrect ideas about what the food is. Like here in the United States, there are stereotypes about the food and what people eat. But they don’t ask me about it that much. Sometimes I think about what methods I would use if I were the teacher, and I think that, like for me, I really like music. And I think the students, they have the
idea that Mexicans or Latinos only listen to reggaeton [Latin urban music] or norteñas [music from the northern region of Mexico]. I think they would be surprised to know that there are artists who sing other genres of music. Like I would play for them José José, or that type of music, or music that is regional Mexican music, like Mariachi music, that style. It is a little bit old, but yeah. R: Ok, and why? Why would you . . . ?

S12: Because I think that is the foundation of the identity of people like me, Mexicans. It’s in Mariachi music, in the folkloric celebrations. And another thing that I would share are the dances. There are many, many dances in Mexico. In Oaxaca, I don’t know if you’ve heard about the dances. That’s also really interesting. Like during the break [at the middle of the class], put on some type of music every day. Then they can listen and see it on the projector. Sometimes people don’t have any idea that this exists. And with music, you don’t have to understand what they are saying. I think with the Internet, it is incredible in that way that you can discover lots of things about the culture. There are videos of all kinds, on music and history.

During subsequent interviews, native speakers were asked if there were a particular cultural activity that they would like to see covered during the Spanish 101 class. Student 10 shared the following suggestion:

S10: Well, like in my house we never really celebrated El Día de los Muertos [the Day of the Dead], but it would be good because it is something really big that a lot of people in Mexico celebrate. I don’t know about other countries, but another thing that we used to celebrate in school was United Nations Day on October 24.
We used to always have like, an assembly and the kids, we would dress up with clothing from different countries and bring food and do dances.

Student 9 was one of the native speakers who believed that she had done little to teach culture to her peers. When asked if she had suggestions for a cultural activity, she named several traditional Mexican celebrations. “Las posadas, parades like for [Mexican] Independence Day, and for the Batalla de Puebla.”

Native speakers expressed a desire to help their peers to understand their culture and their traditions. Several native speakers described the cultural interaction they had experienced as limited, and others had a difficult time recalling any cultural exchange at all. Student 11 was the only native speaker who described in detail the conversations she had with students about her culture. However, the emergent subtheme in this area was the enthusiasm and desire that all of the native speakers expressed in regards to sharing aspects of their culture with their peers.

In terms of validation, the native speakers who were interviewed explained the ways they were able to help their peers to learn Spanish. They described the satisfaction they gained from helping their peers to learn and from seeing their peers take an interest in their language and culture. Native speakers described feelings of validation when they saw that their peers value the skills they possess. The native speakers also observed how students struggle to learn English and Spanish in many of the same ways. They were able to identify with the difficulties their peers were experiencing and relate those experiences to the ways they had struggled to learn English.
Summary

The qualitative analysis conducted for this study revealed several emergent themes and subthemes. The four overarching themes were (a) psychological comfort, (b) desire for interaction, (c) scaffolding, and (d) validating experiences. Each of the overarching themes was developed by grouping together subthemes that revealed a larger and more significant concept. The four themes that emerged from the student interviews were supported by the data gathered from the participant observations.

Based upon the data collected in individual interviews, students expressed a preference for learning environments that provide a sense of psychological comfort, where they feel comfortable speaking, making mistakes, and asking questions of one another. Additionally, students expressed a strong desire to interact with their peers during class time. Students said that they wanted to take classes where they made personal connections with other students, and they believed that those personal connections could benefit them in other ways. Among the students interviewed, there were several who expressed a strong distaste for lecture-style classes. Students preferred classes where there was a variety of interaction, and they believed that interaction was limited in lecture environments.

Although students did not use the term scaffolding, they described the effectiveness of doing activities that provided opportunities to learn from one another. Students described the factors, such as group size and ability level, that contributed to the effectiveness of learning from others. Students enjoyed doing activities, such as the group quizzes, in which they were able to learn from their peers, as well as help other students learn. Finally, the native speakers identified the ways in which they experienced
validation. The students interviewed shared their feelings about how this learning innovation had helped them to identify with their peers. The native speakers of Spanish learned that their difficulties learning the English language were very similar to the difficulties their peers experienced studying Spanish. Also, the native speakers described feelings of satisfaction when they were able to help their peers learn Spanish. This satisfaction came from the understanding that their peers valued their language. In terms of culture, the native speakers expressed a desire to do more activities in class to share their cultural traditions and views. In these ways, the native speakers who participated in this study were able to communicate the feelings of validation they experienced.
CHAPTER 5—SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of community college students in regards to the collaborative learning experience. The previous chapters in this study included an overview of the problem, the purpose of the study, the theoretical framework used in this study, a review of the literature, an outline of the methodology used, and the results of the qualitative research. This final chapter begins with a summary of the four previous chapters and includes an analysis of the findings as they relate to each of the six research questions. In the conclusions and key findings portion of the chapter is an examination of the four emergent themes and the implications that these findings present. The chapter concludes with recommendations for further study and recommendations for practice in the field of second language instruction and community college education.

Community colleges, particularly in California, serve an extremely diverse population of students. Students attending community colleges come from varying socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds; and many community college students speak languages other than, or in addition to, English. Yet, little has been done to recognize or make use of the language skills and cultural expertise that these students bring to the educational setting. Clearly, English is, and should be, the dominant language of instruction in higher education in the United States. However, nearly every community college and university offers foreign language courses; and most degree
programs require students to gain some level of proficiency in a foreign language (Furman et al., 2007).

Community college administrators and faculty should consider ways to bring together students who speak a foreign language and the students who seek to learn that language. The benefits of this type of collaboration can serve to enhance the social and academic experiences for both language learners and native speakers. Research in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) supports the use of collaborative language activities to improve proficiency and to create opportunities for students to communicate with others in authentic settings that mirror real-life situations (Foster & Snyder Ohta, 2005; Haneda, 2006; Huong, 2007; Kim, 2008; Mackey, 1999; Swain et al., 2002). The opportunities for genuine communication and the advantages of language exchange among native speakers and nonnative speakers are also extensively discussed in the literature (Nakahama, Tyler, & Van Lier, 2001; Park, 2007; Pica, 1998; Qi, 2001; Valdes, 2005). Additionally, research in the field of student development supports the value of recognizing and acknowledging the abilities and previous experiences of students, particularly nontraditional students. Rendón (1994) contented that faculty and other institutional agents must take the initiative to create opportunities for students to feel welcomed and valued as members of the institution. One of the ways in which Rendón (1994) argued that this is accomplished is by recognizing “the importance of experience as a base of knowledge and that out-of-class learning is equally powerful” (p. 48).

As faculty in the field of foreign language look for authentic ways to involve their students in the use of the target language, consideration should be given to the rich linguistic experiences of students who attend classes at the institution and are native
speakers of the target language. In the case of the most commonly taught foreign language, Spanish, there are large numbers of Spanish-speaking students enrolled in the community colleges, particularly in California. In situations like this where there are large numbers of speakers and learners of a language, the opportunities for native speaker and nonnative speaker collaboration must be investigated.

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of community college students who participated in a curricular innovation where native speakers of Spanish collaborated on a weekly basis with students enrolled in a first-semester Spanish course. During class, native speakers of Spanish joined language learners in the completion of collaborative tasks. The present study drew on student voices and participant observations to examine the dynamics of collaboration among peers of mixed ability and of varied cultural backgrounds. This study examined the use of collaborative learning as a technique to learn language, learn culture, and increase students’ perceived sense of belongingness to the college where they study.

A number of studies have examined the collaborative interactions among students who work with peers to learn language (Donato & McCormick, 1994; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Ohta, 2005; Storch, 2004; Swain, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Wu, 2009), but there have been no studies to examine collaborative learning methods specific to language learners in the community college. Furthermore, there are no qualitative studies in the field of SLA that have examined the perceptions of community college students in regards to collaborative learning.

The present study seeks to contribute to an understanding of language learning and collaborative learning in several ways. First, this study involved the development of
a curricular innovation in which two types of students, Spanish language learners and native speakers of Spanish, collaborated to learn language and culture. As a framework for developing and researching this curricular innovation, this study was constructed on the principles of student development theory (Astin, 1999; Rendón, 1994, 2002; Tinto, 1975, 1997) and sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1986). Additionally, this study used qualitative methods to examine the perceptions and behaviors of students in regards to collaborative learning. Finally, the data in this study were gathered from community college students, a population of students that has scarcely been examined in SLA research.

Students in this study were enrolled in a first-semester, Spanish 101 course in which students participated in collaborative activities on a weekly basis. During these collaborative activities, native speakers of Spanish attended class meetings to work with the language learners and serve as language facilitators. During class meetings, students worked on a variety of activities in pairs, small groups, and with the whole class. During these activities, the researcher recorded participant observations during eight class meetings. These observations focused on the interactions that occurred among students as they worked with one another to complete the collaborative activities. During the 12th week of the semester, students who had participated in the learning intervention were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview conducted by the researcher.

This qualitative study investigated students’ perceptions about their experiences with collaborative learning methods used to learn Spanish in a community college setting. Data were gathered from six language learners and six native speakers of Spanish. The interviews were conducted in either Spanish or English, depending upon the preferences
of the interviewee. The interviews were then transcribed and translated into English, where necessary. The data gathered were analyzed using the methods of grounded theory, and the researcher conducted a systematic comparative analysis of the qualitative data. Additionally, as means of triangulation, the researcher examined the 26 pages of notes gathered from the eight participant observations and utilized the data to illustrate the findings that emerged from the interviews conducted among students. The data gathered via student interviews were compelling and powerful; and therefore the observational data were used to support those findings.

**Summary of Results**

This study investigated the use of a curricular innovation to teach Spanish at Suburban Community College. The structure of the classroom activities was designed to compel students to collaborate with other students enrolled in the class, and with language facilitators who were native speakers of Spanish and who attended class meetings. The research questions were intended to understand the perceptions of language learners and native speakers in regards to their experiences participating in the collaborative activities with their peers. Additionally, participant observations were conducted in order to understand the observable classroom interactions among students. The data gathered from the interviews with language learners, native speakers, and from the participant observations were examined in order to answer the study’s six research questions.
Results for Research Question 1

How do Spanish language learners who worked with peers from the native language group (native speakers of Spanish) perceive what they have learned in the second language as a result of this collaborative learning experience?

The students interviewed were asked to described what they believed they had learned about the Spanish language as a result of participating in collaborative learning activities with their peers. Students identified the general areas that they worked on (e.g., grammar, vocabulary). However, there was no consensus regarding a specific lesson or skill that students believed they had learned from their peers. During the interviews, students used general terms to describe a variety of topics they had learned from one another. These topics included Spanish vocabulary, grammatical points, verb conjugations, and pronunciation. Although students struggled to find specific examples of lessons they had learned in class, they were able to articulate the ways in which they learned via collaboration. Students shared their opinions in regards to the type of collaborative activities they preferred, those they found to be less helpful, and the ways in which they believed they had benefitted from group and paired activities. Students found the group quizzes to be a particularly successful collaborative activity.

Results for Research Question 2

How do Spanish language learners who worked with peers from the native language group (native speakers of Spanish) perceive what they have learned about the culture associated with the second language they are studying?

Language learners were asked to describe what they believed they had learned from their peers about the culture of the Spanish-speaking world and how this curricular
experience had affected their ability to learn about culture. The purpose of this question was to understand students’ perceptions of what they learned about culture from their peers who are members of the Spanish-speaking culture being studied. Language learners gave limited examples of cultural lessons they had learned from their peers. Areas in which they believed they had learned about culture were identified as holidays, foods, and childhood activities. As compared to the native speakers, the language learners seemed to have difficulty remembering the conversations they had in class about culture. In this area, language learners’ responses indicated that they had perceived learning less about culture as compared to what they described as having learned about the language.

During the interviews conducted with the native speakers, the topic of culture was addressed with a greater level of interest. The native speakers described the conversations they had about culture and they were able to share specific examples. However, all native speakers described their conversations about culture as being limited in nature. Some native speakers believed that these conversations were limited because their peers (i.e., language learners) did not demonstrate interest in the topic. Several of the native speakers described a desire to include more classroom activities incorporating lessons on culture. In some cases, native speakers believed that their peers viewed the cultural lessons as secondary to the grammatical and vocabulary lessons. During the interviews, several native speakers offered suggestions for cultural lessons that they would like to see presented in class. These suggestions included topics such as food, music and dance, holidays and festivals, and breaking down cultural stereotypes. As can be seen in the data, native speakers were interested and prepared to share more about their
cultural views and traditions. The native speakers believed that more should be done to include the topic of culture in the classroom activities.

**Results for Research Question 3**

What are the perceptions of Spanish language learners and native speakers of Spanish regarding collaborative learning and the peer-learning method used in this Spanish language class?

The purpose of this question was to better understand the effectiveness of the collaborative learning experience for all students. Upon close examination of the data gathered in the interviews, students were best able to articulate answers in this area. When asked to describe the ways in which they had learned from this collaborative experience, all of the students interviewed gave detailed and lengthy examples of the aspects of collaborative learning that they found beneficial and the aspects that they found to be ineffective. Also, as a point of comparison, students described difficult or problematic learning environments that they had experienced in other classes.

Although there was not a strong consensus on the type of collaborative activity or the group size that worked best, all students commented that activities that promote interaction in the classroom are more appealing than attending classes offered in a lecture-style format. Students identified their need to feel comfortable in class (i.e., psychological comfort), and they described how participating in the collaborative learning activities helped to create a setting where they were able to practice the language in a nonthreatening environment.

During the interviews, students described the fears and anxieties they experience in their classes. Students identified their fears of speaking in class, speaking to the
professor, asking questions, and making mistakes in front of others. Students described feeling more reluctant to speak or ask questions in front of other students when they were in lecture classes. Students favored the collaborative learning environment because they worked regularly in small groups and pairs, and were able to get to know their peers and build relationships with one another. These relationships created a favorable learning dynamic where students could share their concerns and ask questions of their peers before asking their instructor.

One important aspect for students was the opportunity to connect with their peers and to hear about the difficulties that their peers were having. As a result of those peer interactions, students realized that often they were not the only ones who had questions or difficulties with the material. Because the collaborative activities allowed students to interact with one another, they identified common problems and then felt more inclined to ask questions in front of other students and approach their instructor.

A strong theme that emerged from the interviews was the students’ desire for personal interaction in class. Students shared their preference for classes that offer opportunities to interact in a sociable and relaxed way with their classmates and where they felt comfortable approaching their instructor. The interactions that students found to be most limited and uncomfortable were those that took place in lecture-style classes. Students described how the setting of collaborative activities allowed them to get to know one another and interact with their instructor in a more personal and individualized environment. Students who participated in this study enjoyed getting to know their classmates and building relationships, and they argued that those interactions helped them to take a greater interest in the material covered in class.
Students asserted that the class setting created by the instructor plays an important role in the level of interaction they experience with their classmates. Students described that in classes where the instructor lectured for the entire session, they knew few, if any, of their classmates and therefore students felt less inclined to ask questions or speak to their peers in class. Conversely, as a result of participating in collaborative learning activities, students described experiencing more personal interaction with their peers, and as a result of those interactions they were more inclined to participate and were able to learn from one another.

Students commented on how the personal connections they made in class continued when they were outside of class. These relationships helped students to learn the material and extended into areas unrelated to the course. They were observed asking each other for advice about academic issues (e.g., classes to take, transfer requirements), as well as personal issues. In the interviews, students described greeting each other on campus, studying together, and contacting each other when they needed help. In their minds, it was the collaborative dynamic of the classroom that facilitated interaction among them and helped them to build personal relationships. Once that connection was made, students described how they could draw on those relationships in other situations. Ultimately, students described a preference for learning environments that foster interaction and allow them to make personal connections with one another.

**Results for Research Question 4**

How do Spanish language learners and native speakers of Spanish who participate in collaborative and peer learning describe their sense of belongingness and connection to the college?
The purpose of this question was to understand the ways in which students’ perceived sense of belongingness could differ as a result of participating in a course where they were asked to collaborate regularly with their peers. In order to promote students’ thinking in this area, they were asked to describe how participating in these collaborative activities influenced them in three ways. They were asked to share how this experience influenced (a) their feelings about attending class, (b) their opinions of the college, and (c) their opinions of the way they are treated as students on campus.

As a result of the collaborative activities, students explained that they formed connections with their classmates, and those connections helped to put them at ease in class. Students described how their level of psychological comfort directly influenced their feelings about coming to class. Students described feeling more inclined to attend class, to pay attention, to participate, and to ask questions because of the rapport they had built with their classmates. Students also described feeling an increased sense of accountability when they participated in collaborative activities with their peers.

An important detail for several students was the fact that they knew the names of all, or most, of their classmates in the Spanish 101 class. Students described how they were able to address one another by name, and they compared this experience to the interpersonal dynamic of their other classes. They pointed out that in their lecture classes they knew very few of the students enrolled, and interaction among students in those classes was limited. Several students remarked on the advantages to getting to know one another. Students said that they valued knowing other students because they could see and greet each other on campus, take classes with students they had studied with previously, and feel less isolated.
The native speakers shared their views on how the collaborative learning experienced influenced their feelings of belongingness and their opinions of the college. Students described feeling valued for knowing Spanish, and they appreciated that their knowledge of the language was seen as an asset by the institution. Native speakers felt a sense of satisfaction and pride from knowing that the language learners were genuinely interested in learning to speak Spanish. This valuing of the Spanish language helped to validate the experiences and abilities of the native speakers and, as a result, they felt more inclined to share their expertise with their peers.

**Results for Research Question 5**

How do native speakers of Spanish who participate in collaborative and peer learning experiences perceive themselves as language learners and language facilitators?

The native speakers identified several ways in which they believed they had helped their peers to learn Spanish. They offered examples of how they helped with pronunciation, spelling, using adjectives correctly, telling time, conjugating verbs, and choosing vocabulary. The native speakers modeled the correct use of the language, gave examples, answered students’ questions, and offered corrections. However, the native speakers who participated in this study explained that they also were learners in this experience.

The native speakers remarked that there were times when the language learners used expressions and vocabulary in Spanish that they were unfamiliar with. When the language learners used vocabulary that appeared in the textbook, the native speakers found themselves to be playing the role of learner. They described learning to use expressions such as *piscina* instead of *alberca* (swimming pool), and *tablero* or *pizarra*
instead of *pizarrón* (chalk board), and to tell time by saying, “*son las dos menos cuarto*” instead of “*son quince para las dos*” (it’s one forty-five).

In additional to vocabulary and other ways to tell time, they described, practicing spelling, learning the names of cities in Latin America, and grammatical terminology. Native speakers said that there were several instances in class when they knew how to express themselves correctly in Spanish, but they struggled to describe the reasons why it was done that way. Native speakers described their own limitations when language learners used grammatical terminology, such as the expressions of “*present progressive,*” “*reflexive verbs,*” and “*personal pronouns.*” As a result of this collaborative experience, the native speakers described giving more thought to spelling, grammar, and to understanding the rules of the Spanish language.

**Results for Research Question 6**

What are the observable learning behaviors and interactions that occur among the Spanish language learners and native speakers of Spanish in class?

During eight class meetings, the researcher carefully observed the interactions of students in their collaborative groups and took detailed notes that served as participant observations. These participant observations showed that students’ sense of comfort with one another developed over time. Initially, students were reluctant and reserved when asked to work with one another, particularly in groups where a native speaker was present. Early in the study, language learners seemed to defer to the native speakers, and they looked for their approval before asserting their answers. However, this behavior was much less prominent in subsequent class meetings. Language learners were observed
speaking and sharing ideas easily and in some cases correcting or disagreeing with the
native speakers’ answers.

Another observation was the frequency and volume of the interaction that
occurred among students. When the instructor was speaking to the whole class, the
majority of the students remained quiet and in some cases appeared withdrawn or
uninterested. Once students were given an activity and instructed to form groups, the
noise level in the classroom increased dramatically. Students who were not paying
attention as the instructor spoke in the larger class setting were observed to participate, be
more talkative, and take an increased interest when they sat with a group of their peers.
At times these conversations focused on the task at hand, and at other times students
spoke of unrelated topics.

Students were observed to begin their activities by making conversational
comments that were unrelated to the Spanish task. In most cases, students spoke briefly
of topics such as how they were feeling, their jobs, their homework, and their other
classes. Some students would make funny comments or jokes, others could be heard
commenting on the format of the activity they were given. Students spoke about the
activities they preferred and could be heard complaining about the activities they did
not like, such as those which required students to walk around the room and gather
information from many students. In most cases, these discussions were limited and
students transitioned easily into the assigned activity. During activities, students were
observed to call each other by their first names, and when they did not know a
classmate’s name, they turned to someone they knew to ask.
Students interacted with one another at varying levels and these differences seemed to be attributed to students’ individual personalities. Within the groups, some students played a more dominate role, the role of group leader, while others seemed to stay quiet and observe other students before beginning to participate. Initially, the native speakers played a more passive role in the groups. In several instances, the native speakers waited to offer assistance until one of the language learners asked a question. Early in the semester, it appeared that the native speakers waited for a group member to invite them to participate. As the semester progressed, this behavior was less common, and the native speakers were seen initiating the activities, as well as following the lead of the other students.

When speaking to one another, students used a combination of English and Spanish in class. Spanish was used most often by the language learners in the completion of linguistics tasks, such as answering interview questions, doing a survey activity, or describing drawings on a handout. English was used more when the language learners asked for an explanation or needed clarification about a topic. When the native speakers needed clarification, they asked the language learners in English, but would ask the instructor or other native speakers in Spanish. There were no instances of native speakers collaborating with other native speakers in groups. However, native speakers were observed seeking out and consulting with the native speakers in other groups when they needed help or clarification.

**Key Findings and Conclusions**

Using a method of grounded theory, the data gathered from 12 student interviews were examined for emergent themes and subthemes. Additionally, as a means of
triangulation, participant observations were conducted in order to understand the observable classroom interactions among students. The data gathered in this study revealed several subthemes in a variety of areas, which when closely examined produced four overarching emergent themes. The central themes in this qualitative study were (a) psychological comfort, (b) a desire for interaction, (c) scaffolding, and (d) validating experiences. In this section, the emergent themes and subthemes are reviewed and the implications of these findings are examined.

**Psychological Comfort**

As revealed by the data, psychological comfort plays an important role in the learning experience for students. Students participating in this study identified the importance of psychological comfort as a precursor to learning. During multiple interviews, students described the need to feel comfortable in their classes and shared how feeling comfortable in class helped them to relax and to focus on the information being presented. Students described feeling more willing to accept information and participate in classes where they felt comfortable. These findings suggest the important role that faculty play in creating learning environments that are welcoming and comfortable for students. Faculty should give attention to the dynamics of classroom interaction so that students have opportunities to establish a rapport with their peers and with their instructor. In any course, faculty are responsible for establishing and communicating their expectations of students. In the same way, it is the responsibility of faculty to set the tone of the classroom and the type of interaction that will occur. Attention should be given to establishing comfortable learning environments where students can get to know one another and work regularly in pairs and small groups. This
is especially important early in the semester. The use of activities, such as icebreakers, can be used to reduce students’ feelings of nervousness and anxiety.

An element that increased students’ reported level of comfort was having opportunities to share their questions and concerns with their peers. Students described feeling reluctant to ask questions in their classes. Several students found that they felt intimidated when asking a question in front of the whole class, and some students said they avoided asking their instructor questions because they perceived some instructors to be unapproachable. Students described situations where they had questions, but would not ask because they did not feel comfortable. Students said that they valued the small group setting because they were provided the opportunity to form relationships with a group of peers to whom they could turn in order to ask the questions that they were uncomfortable asking in a larger setting. These findings support the use of collaborative learning techniques in order to create what Tinto (1997) called “a network of support” (p. 613). As can be seen in this study, when students are given opportunities to interact with other students, they make use of these relationships in order to learn the material, build self-confidence, and reduce their sense of anxiety.

In general, students described feeling fearful of speaking in class and of making mistakes in front of others. However, as students worked in small groups and got to know each other, their fears dissipated. An additional advantage to peer interaction was the opportunity for students to realize that their peers had many of the same questions and concerns as they had. Students felt encouraged when they learned that they were not the only ones who were having difficulties with the material. Seeing that their peers made mistakes and struggled just as they did reassured students that they were not alone. Once
they knew that their peers had the same questions, several students commented that they were more inclined to ask their instructor for help or raise their concerns in front of the whole class.

These findings support the inclusion of learning activities in which students can share their questions and concerns with one another. When given the opportunity to interact in this way, students work to help reduce each other’s fears and anxieties. Also, collaborative interaction helps to build students’ level of confidence in what they know and encourages them to seek assistance in the areas they are unsure of, or in which they are weak. In general, the students’ level of psychological comfort plays an important role in their ability to learn. Students in this study found that by working collaboratively with their peers, they were more willing to participate and to ask questions. Results of this study also indicate that students believe that their instructors are the ones responsible for creating a comfortable learning environment. Therefore, just as faculty focus on the subject matter, they also should pay close attention to the environments in which they ask students to learn.

Desire for Interaction

Students identified interaction as an important tool for learning. As can be seen from the data, an important theme that emerged from the interviews was students’ desire to interact in class with their peers and their instructor in more personal and meaningful ways. Students were keenly aware of the need to speak Spanish in class and interact meaningfully in Spanish in order to learn the language. Consequently, students valued the opportunity to practice speaking in class with their peers, and they preferred interactive and group activities to those that required them to work independently.
However, students recognized that by having opportunities to interact with one another, they also could develop valuable personal connections with their peers.

In essence, students’ preference for interaction is based on their desire to make personal connections with others. Students described multiple ways in which they benefitted from these personal connections. Students said that after making personal connections with their peers, they felt less tension and anxiety about coming to class. Students found that they were more comfortable participating in class, asking questions, and making mistakes in front of others as a result of having built these relationships. Furthermore, students described how these relationships continued to benefit them outside of class. Students described contacting each other to ask questions, to ask about other classes, to advise each other, and to share information about their personal lives. Students described the value of things as simple as having someone who says “hi” to them when they walk across campus. Finally, students appreciated these classroom interactions because they identified them as opportunities to get to know students who they may see in subsequent classes.

When asked to describe the collaborative activities that they found helpful, students hesitated to choose only one. Some students preferred small groups to pair work and vice versa; others described the format of the activities they enjoyed most (e.g., flash cards, groups quizzes, etc.). There was no consensus among students as to the best or most effective collaborative activity. However, students concurred with the importance of doing a variety of activities. They recognized that certain activities were more attractive to them than others; yet for students, the most appealing aspect was the opportunity to practice the language in a variety of ways. Students also acknowledged
that they might learn differently from their peers. They pointed out how an activity that may not work for one student could be the best way for another to learn. In general, students valued the variety of interaction they experienced in class.

In addition to asserting their preference for interaction and for participating in a variety of activities, students described their distaste for lecture classes. Students argued that the lecture format is not only boring and less fun, but also hinders students from making the personal connections with one another that they desire. Students compared their experience with collaborative learning to their experiences in lecture courses. Students said that in lecture classes they knew few, if any, of their classmates, and they felt isolated and alone. Moreover, students recognized the limitations of using a lecture format to learn a language. Students pointed out that in order to learn a language, they needed to be given opportunities in class to interact and use the language.

Results in this area suggest the potency of taking even small steps to facilitate personal interaction among students. For students, something as simple as knowing the names of their classmates or having someone to say hello to them can be a source of encouragement. Therefore, class time should be recognized as a commodity that is to be used wisely to promote positive interaction among students and create authentic opportunities for practice. As can be seen from the data gathered, students do not care for classes based entirely upon the presentation of lectures. Students find the format of lecture classes to be ineffective, and it limits their ability to get to know their classmates and their instructor. While the lecture format can be useful at times, it probably should not occupy the majority of class time. In any discipline, faculty should create a variety of opportunities for students to interact with one another and actively participate in class.
Findings from this study suggest that when students work collaboratively, they benefit from the opportunity to practice what they are learning, and they are able to make personal connections that benefit them in and outside of the classroom.

**Scaffolding**

Scaffolding emerged from within the data as the third overarching theme. Without using the term itself, students effectively described the notion of scaffolding one another’s learning. They were able to articulate how they used collaborative activities to help one another and to fill in each other’s gaps. While working with their peers, students described alternating between playing the role of expert and the role of learner. At times students learned from their peers, and at others their peers learned from them.

Students found collaborative learning to be effective because they would know some of the information, and their peers would know other things. Together, students were able to fill in the gaps in each other’s learning and as a result perform at a higher level than they could have accomplished on their own. This is precisely what Vygotsky (1978) defined as the zone of proximal development: the difference between what a student can achieve with assistance from a more knowledgeable peer, as compared to what the student can achieve on his or her own. Students found that the group quizzes were particularly helpful in guiding them to learn from one another. The participant observations also revealed examples of students learning from one another during group quizzes. Students were observed discussing the questions, asking for clarification, and correcting, supporting, and reassuring one another.

One element that emerged from the data was students’ preference for working with small groups or in pairs as opposed to mingling with the whole class. When they
were in small groups, students acknowledged feeling issues of accountability to the
students in their group and feeling a responsibility to contribute towards the learning of
their peers. Some students recognized that they responded less seriously when they were
asked to do activities requiring them to interact as a whole class because they were only
accountable to themselves and not to others in class. When working with a small group
or in pairs, students described feeling more focused on the task and more aware of the
need to accomplish the goals of the activity.

Another important aspect of students’ perceived successfulness with scaffolding
was the level of ability and the personality of their peers. Students favored working
with groups of mixed ability and having peers from whom they could learn. Students
identified the importance of having peers who want to participate and want to learn.
These findings support research conducted by Watanabe (2008) that found that language
learners preferred working with peers who shared their ideas and made an effort to
engage collaboratively. Students in the present study identified the motivation level of
their peers as one of the key factors in the quality of the interaction they experienced.
Students also described how the personality of some students, such as those who are shy,
could also serve to limit the effectiveness of their collaborative interactions. Finally,
students believed that they benefitted from collaborative activities where they could help
their peers. Students described the value of having to explain the material to one another.
The act of explaining the material to their peers helped to reinforce students’ own
understanding of the topic.

The findings of this study support the principles of sociocultural theory, which
assert that learning occurs as a result of interacting and cooperating with others.
Vygotsky (1978) argued that as a result of collaborative peer interaction, learning is internalized and becomes a part of one’s “independent developmental achievement” (p. 90). Consequently, students must be given opportunities in class to activate the zone of proximal development and learn from one another. As can be seen in the comments made by students, group quizzes are a particularly effective tool to promoting this type of collaboration. Faculty should incorporate the use of collaborative activities, such as group quizzes, which increase students’ sense of accountability to one another, allow students to teach and learn from each other, and foster an active learning environment.

Validating Experiences

The final emergent theme in this study was validating experiences. The student interviews detailed several examples of ways in which the native speakers felt a sense of validation. The data from student interviews revealed that native speakers gained a sense of satisfaction from helping the language learners to learn Spanish. Native speakers enjoyed sharing their language, and helping their peers to learn vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. However, native speakers expressed an added interest in having the opportunity to share their culture with their peers.

Close examination of the data revealed that addressing the topic of culture in the classroom was a particularly valuable experience for native speakers. The students who were interviewed appreciated the opportunities they had to speak of their culture in class, but they identified these opportunities as limited. Some native speakers found that the interest level of the language learners limited these interactions because some students perceived the lessons on culture to be secondary to the lessons on language and grammar. Native speakers believed that more could be done to present cultural lessons in class.
They expressed a desire to spend more class time on the subject of culture, and they provided examples of topics and activities that they would like to see included. In general, addressing the topic of culture in class and being given the opportunity to share their cultural experiences and traditions were great sources of validation for the native speakers.

The native speakers expressed a feeling of satisfaction when they were able to help their peers learn Spanish and share aspects of their culture. Additionally, the native speakers described how this experience helped them to realize that they shared common experiences with the language learners. The native speakers identified with the language learners and with their struggles to learn a new language. In many instances, they recognized that the challenges they had faced learning English were just like the challenges the language learners were experiencing studying Spanish. The students who were interviewed found a sense of comfort in the realization that other students struggle in many of the same ways. Witnessing the challenges and struggles of their peers served as a validating experience for the native speakers because they were able to relate those experiences to the ways they themselves had struggled to learn English.

Findings from this study support the importance of recognizing the abilities and previous experiences of students. Just as Rendón (1994) asserted, students benefit from learning environments that validate their experiences, knowledge, cultures, and values. The native speakers participating in this study found the experience of helping others to be satisfying, and it reinforced the notion that their language, culture, and skills have value. In order to more fully engage nontraditional student populations, faculty should consider the skills and abilities that these students bring to the classroom and create
opportunities for students to share their expertise with others. Additionally, having native speakers serve as language facilitators increases opportunities for all students to collaborate and interact using the target language in an authentic context.

In language classes, culture must be emphasized as one of the core competencies. As can be seen from the students’ comments, cultural lessons are often viewed as secondary to the lessons covering grammar and vocabulary. Faculty must emphasize the importance of culture in the language classroom, and lessons should be designed to purposefully stress the value of understanding the customs, values, and traditions of the people who speak the language. For native speakers, lessons on culture serve to strengthen their identity and validate their lived experiences and the expertise that they possess. Having meaningful discussions about culture is especially important in learning environments that serve large populations of nontraditional students because students of all backgrounds are invited to share in the conversations about issues of culture and identity, and reflect on the different ways that people experience the world.

**Summary of Conclusions**

The data gathered from the interviews indicate that students value learning environments that foster a sense of psychological comfort; where they are able to interact in meaningful ways with their peers and feel less anxiety about interacting with their instructor. Students’ responses also support the notion of scaffolding and the ways in which students can help one another to learn. Finally, the data revealed that native speakers found that participating in collaborative learning activities helped them to identify with their peers, and they found similarities regarding the struggles they experienced learning a new language. The native speakers described how they enjoyed
having the opportunity to help their peers learn their language (i.e., Spanish) and they valued doing cultural activities in the classroom. The native speakers interviewed in this study appreciated opportunities to share their culture, traditions, and personal experiences, and they expressed a desire to do more of this in class. Overall, participating in this curricular innovation and facilitating the learning of their peers was a validating experience for these students.

The findings from this study suggest that students are keenly aware of the teaching methods that they find to be most effective, perhaps more aware than educators realize or give them credit for. Students were able to articulate a clear description of the types of interaction that they find most helpful and the reasons why those interactions work to help them learn. Additionally, students provided detailed examples of learning experiences that they found to be unfavorable or problematic. These data reveal that students have well-defined ideas about what they prefer to do during class in order to best learn the material.

The data gathered from student interviews demonstrate that students are genuinely interested in learning and acquiring skills, such as the ability to speak Spanish. Students are often criticized for not being prepared for class, not doing their assignments, and behaving as if they are uninterested. However, the results of this study revealed that when students are given the chance to interact regularly with their peers in a comfortable setting, they feel more engaged and interested in the material being presented, and they enjoy practicing what they are learning. Students described a desire to interact with one another in a meaningful way and at the same time feel a level of psychological comfort. Students described how they valued learning from their peers and having opportunities to
help their peers learn as well. Thus, careful consideration must be given to the environments in which students are asked to learn.

The findings in this study emphasized the social nature of the learning process. Students learned through social interaction (i.e., exchanging ideas and assistance with their peers) and because of it (i.e., having a supportive group of peers they can turn to). Students described the benefits to getting to know other students and they were able to identify the ways in which they could benefit from those relationships. They described calling on each other for help in and out of class, asking peers the questions they did not want to ask the instructor, and seeking one another’s advice about topics unrelated to class. As can be seen from the data gathered in this study, students’ level of perceptiveness in regards to their learning environment is high. Students were mindful of the classroom techniques that they prefer, and they were able to articulate the reasons for their preferences. Although faculty are the discipline experts, students are an important resource for faculty to consider when developing techniques to promote learning.

Finally, students feel empowered when they know their skills and abilities have value. The findings from this study highlight the importance of increasing students’ sense of validation by acknowledging the contributions they can make in the context of their learning environment. When students find that they have something to offer others, they feel a stronger connection to the college and it helps to reinforce their belief that they belong and are members of the campus community.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Upon close examination of the results gathered in this study, there are several recommendations for practice in the field of SLA, community college education, and for
educational institutions serving large populations of nontraditional students and students who speak languages other than English. The following section outlines the ways the data gathered from this study can be used to improve foreign language instruction, create engaging learning environments that favor students’ needs, and foster validating experiences for all students.

1. Faculty should consult with students and ask them to share their thoughts on the ways they learn best. For example, after students have completed a class activity, faculty should spend time asking students to share their opinions about the task. Faculty should ask students to describe what elements they found to be helpful and which were problematic. This can be a conversation the instructor facilitates with the class, or conducts anonymously using written evaluation forms.

2. Faculty must look for ways to create opportunities for students to work in small groups where they can build personal relationships and feel engaged in the learning process. Faculty should create activities that require students to communicate and exchange ideas with one another during class. In order for students to truly build relationships, it is essential that these interactive opportunities become a frequent and regular class activity.

3. Faculty should recognize the important role that psychological comfort plays in the learning process for students and therefore develop activities and techniques that put students at ease. For example, faculty should include some class activities in which students are invited to share their thoughts and views, and in which there are no wrong answers. Assigning group quizzes where
students can query each other and arrive at a consensus answer should be attempted as alternatives to individual quizzes to foster psychological comfort in the classroom. These types of activities are especially important during the first weeks of the course when students are still unfamiliar with the material and have yet to get to know one another. Also, by learning students’ names and addressing them personally, faculty can help to reassure students that they are valuable members of the class and that their thoughts and ideas are valued.

4. Students experience more anxiety in class than faculty may expect and faculty can take simple steps to make themselves more accessible to students. For example, when students are in small groups, the instructor should circulate throughout the classroom and spend time answering questions and offering assistance. Additionally, the act of simply sitting down with a small group of students, as opposed to always standing up or remaining in the front of the classroom, can send a message to students that the instructor is approachable and available to help.

5. Administrators and department chairs should reassure faculty that class time is well spent on activities in which the instructor limits the amount of lecture and instead increases opportunities for students to collaborate and develop personal connections. The faculty evaluation process should put less emphasis on the instructor’s lecture techniques, and instead include observations of the level of interaction that occurs. Interaction among students in groups, and among students with the instructor should be emphasized and encouraged.
6. Faculty should not assume that students will raise their questions and concerns in a lecture class or in front of many other students. Instead, faculty should be mindful of students’ fears of making mistakes in front of others and should consult with students as they work in smaller settings. Another technique is to ask students to work in small groups to develop a list of questions that they have about the material. Faculty can then collect the lists and answer all of the questions for the whole class without identifying individual students.

7. Faculty and administrators should recognize the importance of offering students opportunities to interact socially and realize that this is especially important for community college students because they spend limited time on campus. Administrators should consider designing buildings so that the physical spaces in and around classrooms facilitate group interaction and collaboration. For example, hallways should have spaces for students to sit and meet, classroom furniture should not be fixed with all chairs facing in a singular direction, and study areas (e.g., libraries) should designate sections where students can work and talk in groups.

8. Faculty who teach foreign language courses should be encouraged to include and emphasize lessons on culture so that students view the cultural component and the lessons on grammar with equal importance. In order to achieve this, faculty should devote class time to cultural exercises in which the culture of the target language is highlighted, yet allow students of all cultures to share their own views and experiences.
9. Much in the same way that native speakers in this study helped language learners, opportunities should be created to encourage and involve students to share their previous experiences and out-of-class learning within the educational environment. Faculty should seek out students who have expertise in their disciplines. Generally, expert students do not take courses in the disciplines in which they are proficient. However, identifying and building connections with expert students can lead to creative opportunities for faculty to invite them to interact with novice learners.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

There are several ways in which the present study can be replicated and modified to explore additional areas related to collaborative learning and the interactions of students in the community college environment. Future research may include examination of the following:

1. It may be useful to examine the behaviors and perceptions of students taking the same course, but taught by different instructors. Students may have preferences in terms of the personality and style of the instructor who teaches the course.

2. It may be helpful to conduct research that examines the perceptions of the same students over a year or a 3-semester period in order to determine if students find collaborative techniques to be as effective in subsequent language courses.

3. Future studies could examine the implementation of a similar curricular innovation to teach other foreign languages, or English as a Second Language.
4. Another area for potential research is the role of the native speakers and the outcomes of inviting fewer or more native speakers to participate with language learners in class.

5. Studies can be done to examine the impact of asking the native speakers to play a more prominent or less prominent role in the language activities.

6. Future studies may consider asking native speakers to participate in the preparation and development of the collaborative activities they are asked to facilitate, particularly in the development of activities about culture, and then to determine the effectiveness of these attempts.

7. The topic of collaborative learning should continue to be examined as it pertains to the experiences of community college students. Specific recommendations for further study include the following:
   • The perceptions of faculty in regard to collaborative learning methods.
   • The perceptions of students who collaborate in expert-novice pairs in other disciplines.
   • The impact of implementing collaborative activities, such as group quizzes, in disciplines other than foreign language.
   • The performance of students in collaborative learning environments compared to more traditional methods of teaching a foreign language.
REFERENCES


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Appendix A

Consent Form for Study Participants

The faculty and staff of Palomar College are committed to providing an engaging teaching and learning environment for all students. You are invited to participate in a research project that will help us to learn about students’ experiences with group work, peer learning and collaborative activities. The purpose of conducting student interviews is to learn about your opinions and experiences. This information will help us to better understand what we are doing well and what more we can do to support students and create effective learning environments.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in one personal interview. In the interview, you will be asked questions about your experiences with group work, collaborating with peers, and learning from Spanish native speakers. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions that will be asked. The important thing is for you to share your experience and opinions. Your responses to any of the questions being asked will in no way negatively impact your standing in class or with the college. All of your responses will remain anonymous and no individual student will be identified by name in this study. You may choose to withdraw your consent to participate at any time and there is no penalty for withdrawing from the study. If you have any questions about this study, please contact Kathleen Sheahan, (760) 744-1150 ext. 3268.

I, __________________________________________, ________________________________,
(Name, please print) (Name of College)
understand and agree that:

a. The information gathered in the interviews will be summarized and used to report on the outcome of the discussion.
b. My comments may be audiotaped for the sole purpose of maintaining an accurate record of the discussion that will be a reference for any reports derived from the discussion.
c. While my name may be listed as a participant and my comments may be used in a report derived from the interview discussion, my comments will not be attributed directly to me.
d. Information derived from this interview may be used in publications and presentations to further the educational goals of this and other community colleges.
e. No student will be personally identified in any materials associated with this project.

I agree to participate in this project according to the preceding terms.

Participant’s Signature Date
Telephone (______)_________________________ Email: ______________________
Appendix B

Letter to Prospective Participants

Dear Student Laboratory Assistant,

As a student employee in the world languages laboratory, you are invited to participate in a research project that will examine the experiences of students who do group work and collaborative peer activities. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of two groups of students: 1) Spanish 101 students and 2) students who are Spanish native speakers that serve as language facilitators to the Spanish 101 students.

In this study, Spanish native speakers will attend a Spanish 101 class on a weekly basis. During class, Spanish native speakers will participate in group work and collaborative learning activities with the Spanish 101 students. The Spanish native speakers will serve as “language facilitators” to the students enrolled in Spanish 101. The responsibilities of the Spanish native speakers include: assisting students with Spanish vocabulary and pronunciation, sharing their cultural values and practices, guiding students as they complete speaking activities, and serving as language models.

In order to participate as a language facilitator, you must be:

1. A native speaker of Spanish
2. Enrolled as a student of this college during the fall 2010 semester
3. Available to attend one, or both, of the following Spanish 101 classes every week:
   a. Mondays 11:00-1:20 pm
   b. Wednesdays 11:00-1:20 pm

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. All of your responses will remain anonymous and no individual student will be identified by name in this study. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured personal interview. During the interview, you will be asked questions about your experiences with group work, collaborating with peers, and serving as a language facilitator. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions that you will be asked; the important thing is for you to share your experience and opinions.

Your participation in this study and your responses to any of the questions being asked will in no way negatively impact your standing with the college or your employment on campus. You may choose to withdraw your consent to participate at any time and there is no penalty for withdrawing from the study.

I encourage you to consider this opportunity and I believe that you will find it to be a rewarding experience. If you are interested in participating or if you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact me. My email address is: ksheahan@palomar.edu
Kathleen Sheahan
Associate Professor, Spanish
(760) 744-1150 ext. 3268
Appendix C

Interview Protocol A—Spanish Language Learners

Introduction:

First, I would like to thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. Your responses will help to provide insight into the experiences of students who participate in group work and collaborative peer learning activities. I have prepared several questions related to your experiences with group work and working with your peers and native speakers in the Spanish 101 class. There are twelve (12) questions that have been prepared for this interview, but I may ask additional questions for clarification such as, “Can you expand on that issue?” or “Can you provide an example of when you had that experience?”

I want to encourage you to share your views and experiences, and to speak openly and honestly. If you don’t understand a question, please let me know. If you are uncomfortable with any of the questions asked, please let me know immediately. Your participation in this interview is completely voluntarily. Please know that your responses to any of the questions being asked will in no way negatively impact your standing in class or with the college. Your grade in this course or any other course at this college will not be affected by your participation in this study or your responses to the questions. All of your responses will remain anonymous and no individual student will be identified by name in this study.

I will be using a digital recorder to record our discussion because I don’t want to miss any of your comments. No one outside of this room will have access to these recordings and they will be destroyed after my study has been completed. This interview should take approximately 45 minutes. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview protocol for Spanish language learners:

1. Thinking about the experiences you have had working in groups in this class, what do you believe you have learned by participating in collaborative activities with your peers?
2. How has participating in collaborative learning with other students, the Spanish 101 students and the native speakers, influenced your ability to learn the Spanish language?
3. Please describe something that you have learned from your peers who are native speakers.
4. How has participating in collaborative learning activities affected your ability to learn about the cultures of the Spanish-speaking world?
5. Please describe the cultural aspects of the Spanish-speaking world that you have learned by working with peers who are native Spanish speakers.
6. How have your views about language learning changed since participating in collaborative activities in this class?
7. What elements of peer learning and collaborative learning have you found to be helpful?
8. What elements have you found to be difficult or problematic?
9. How has participating in these activities influenced your feelings about attending class?
10. How has participating in these activities influenced your opinions of the college?
11. How has this experience affected your opinion of the way you are treated as a student here?
12. Closing question: Do you have any additional thoughts or comments that you would like to share on this topic?
Appendix D

Interview Protocol B—Native Speakers of Spanish

Introduction:

First, I would like to thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. Your responses will help to provide insight into the experiences of students who participate in group work and collaborative peer learning activities. I have prepared several questions related to your experiences with group work and working with your peers and native speakers in the Spanish 101 class. There are twelve (12) questions that have been prepared for this interview, but I may ask additional questions for clarification such as, “Can you expand on that issue?” or “Can you provide an example of when you had that experience?”

I want to encourage you to share your views and experiences, and to speak openly and honestly. If you don’t understand a question, please let me know. If you are uncomfortable with any of the questions asked, please let me know immediately. Your participation in this interview is completely voluntarily. Please know that your responses to any of the questions being asked will in no way negatively impact your standing in class or with the college. Your grades at this college and your job in the language lab will NOT be affected by your participation in this study or your responses to the questions. All of your responses will remain anonymous and no individual student will be identified by name in this study.

I will be using a digital recorder to record our discussion because I don’t want to miss any of your comments. No one outside of this room will have access to these recordings and they will be destroyed after my study has been completed. This interview should take approximately 45 minutes. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview protocol for native speakers of Spanish:

1. Thinking about the experiences you have had working in groups in this class, what do you believe you have learned by participating in collaborative activities with students studying Spanish?
2. How do you believe you have contributed to the learning experiences of the Spanish language learners?
3. How have you contributed to your peers’ understanding of your culture?
4. What elements of peer learning and collaborative learning have you found to be effective?
5. What elements have you found to be difficult or problematic?
6. How have your views about language learning changed as a result of participating in collaborative peer learning?
7. What have you learned about the Spanish language as a result of participating in these activities?
8. What have you learned about yourselves as language facilitators as a result of participating in this experience?
9. How has this experience influenced your feelings about coming to campus?
10. How has this experience influenced your opinions of the college?
11. How has this experience influenced your feelings about the way you are treated as a student here?
12. Closing question: Do you have any additional thoughts or comments that you would like to share on this topic?