

I remember the lump of discouragement that sank heavily in my throat and the warm tears that streamed freely down my face as I looked down at my writing. “Why couldn’t they just understand? Why is it so hard to be understood?” I thought to myself. A rather concerned and willing substitute teacher walked over to me and spoke slowly and patiently. I can’t remember exactly how he put it, but he took the time to expound on why the word for “couldn’t” was indeed “no” in Spanish like my peers had simply stated when I’d asked them. He even helped me to finish the sentence that hung despairingly over my head. As I scribbled the phrasing on my paper, I felt the gears shift in my mind. The once jumbled and unrelated figures seemed to fall into place, and I could feel the comfort of meaning again. It was then in that 2nd grade classroom when I was first able to understand the relevance and power that came with understanding and being understood.

For the past four years I have continued to develop a blossoming curiosity for this notion of understanding and being understood. It began with my childhood as I was educated in a Washington based dual immersion program alongside peers who spoke English or Spanish as their first languages. This would follow me to my college years where I was drawn to TESOL classes and language acquisition. It was in those classes that I learned about the difference between basic interpersonal communication skills, and cognitive academic language proficiency. This was also where I first learned of utilizing sheltered instruction and comprehensible input in the multilingual learner classroom.

This desire to understand and be understood led me from my undergraduate studies to a school in the Czech Republic where I worked as a volunteer English teacher in the fall of 2024. I was able to rub shoulders with students from different corners of the world, who sacrificed, and gave much to learn English and further their opportunities. I learned not only intellectually but experientially of the importance of using different means to communicate meaning, whether it be through slow and clear speech, written words, drawn pictures, and repetition of uttered phrases. I also learned of the importance of treating people as equals, and the weighty need of not stripping their stories away. Instead, I wanted to know if it was possible to teach English while enhancing and celebrating one’s ethnic and cultural background. I’m still developing my beliefs surrounding this and am hungry to learn more.

Once arriving back to Washington, the pursuit to understand and be understood has brought me to Nisqually Middle school where I have been working as an ELA paraeducator for the past several months. I continue to work with students who crave to be understood and to understand at the heart of their learning. I work with many students who are learning English as a second language, and who both are eager to learn more and contribute to their mainstream classes, as well as those who perhaps wonder where their place is in these

spaces. I've seen the light gleam in students' eyes when they receive instruction in their native tongue, or when even the simplest of sheltered instruction is offered. It is also where I've seen their desires to pick up their pencils, and put it to paper, with the renewed hope of trying again. It's amazing what a little bit of understanding can do. With this I hope that this ever-growing desire to foster connection can allow me to continue to learn, develop, and eventually teach with this understanding in mind.