When thinking about my past way of learning language, I think about learning Spanish in high school. This was a challenging and frustrating experience for me and it’s good that I experienced it because now I can relate to how ELL students in my future classes feel. Samway and McKeon state, “ELL students need only one year in which to learn enough English to be able to succeed academically. Therefore, the emphasis should be on transitioning students out of special programs as quickly as possible” (2007, p. 78) as a placement myth. I couldn’t agree more with this statement. I took 4 years of Spanish and I still don’t think I am ready to go to a Spanish speaking country and be fluent in speaking with natives. This means there would be absolutely no way I could succeed in a classroom setting learning in Spanish.

I agree with Trudgill when he says, “The social motivation of domain separation is many, but the introduction of writing is incontrovertibly of crucial importance” (1983, p. 131). From my experience with learning a new language the ability of writing the language and speaking the language take on very different roles. When writing a language you have time to think about it and write down ideas you’re trying to express. When speaking a language in a conversation you do not have the luxury of thinking about it as long as you want to. The importance of what you say declines when you have to think about what it is you’re trying get across. It is also a possibility that you might simply forget what it is you were saying. Speaking a language is much more difficult than writing it and both of these fundamental aspects work together in how a language works.
This brings me to my point of using the language. Another of Samway and McKeon’s placement myths is, “L2 students just need to be placed in an English-speaking environment and they’ll learn the language” (2007, p. 71). The whole point of learning a second language is the ability to apply it to real life. When I was in Spanish class my senior year, on Fridays we weren’t able to speak English at all. I noticed how difficult it was to learn! You have all these questions but in order for them to be answered you have to be able to ask them, learning in a second language feels like a vicious circle working against you in every way possible. Simply by placing someone into a society where they can’t speak the language will not work in a positive way. Yes, it might be possible to learn a language by full inclusion but it would not be efficient.

When faced with these “no English Fridays” my reaction and the reaction of my fellow classmates were of frustration and seclusion. There were a few of my classmates who naturally picked up on learning Spanish quicker and easier than the rest of us. Those of us who struggled with it seemed to step back and let those who were better dominate the classroom conversations. This whole process is a natural one that I believe would be the norm anywhere, including an ELL student in an English classroom. I can relate to how frustrating this situation is. Being frustrated leads to low motivation, and if you have no motivation you stop caring and develop a bad attitude.

Community is everything in learning. If students feel frustrated, secluded, and they lack motivation to learn it’s going to create a community in which teaching and learning is not possible. This is a huge, controversial issue that is prevalent in classrooms today. The lingering question is how do we address this? Going back to my first placement myth of transitioning
students out of ELL programs as soon as possible is the worst potential thing you could do for them. ELL is in many ways their safe place, the environment in which they are relaxed and comfortable. Why would you ever want to take that away from a student who feels secluded in their classroom?

Trudgill notes, “It is the bilingual individuals connecting both groups who create ligatures thus bringing together members of different ethnic and linguistic groups to form a single society.” (1983, p. 143). In my opinion this is an extremely powerful and important quote. Diversity is something people are sometimes afraid of and they can be very closed minded about it. I learned so much in my Spanish class in high school about not only the Spanish language but the culture as well and I think it’s a shame more people aren’t bilingual in America. Learning about the culture of different societies was really neat and came to be my favorite part of the class.

The importance of bilingual people is crucial in the way the world works. If no one was bilingual we would have no way of communicating with people from other countries, communication being the key word. Whether it is communication with other countries on an economic level or communication with students in our classroom, there is no question that this is a huge important piece of the puzzle of cooperation. If our students can’t communicate their problems and concerns there is no way we can educate them. In my opinion, ELL is the most significant part of language and learning because it allows students to have a safe place at school that understands them and helps them bridge differences that get in the way of a normal education that most students take for granted.