

Pre-Service English Teachers' Attitudes towards Teaching English Language Learners

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***Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to investigate pre-service English teachers' attitudes toward the inclusion of English Language Learners (ELLs) in mainstream classrooms. The main themes addressed in this study included pre-service English teachers' perceptions of their professional training, responsibilities, and overall perceptions of ELLs. The sample in this study included graduate English education majors in a licensure MAT program. Data was collected by allowing participants to respond to an online survey. Overall, participants indicated positive attitudes towards working with ELLs in mainstream classrooms.*

***Key Words:** English Language Learners, English Teachers, Pre-service Teachers*

Introduction

There has been much debate over the ability of our educational system to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. The number of children entering public schools with limited or no experience with English language is rising dramatically. According to the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, during the 2008-2009 school year, more than five million English language learners (ELLs) attended elementary and secondary public schools in the United States. As a result of recent and ongoing population changes, America's schools are serving a new cultural and linguistic mix (Hadaway, 1993). Although the majority of ELLs speak Spanish (Zehler et al, 2003), 56% of schools have students from fifty (50) different language backgrounds, with 48% of schools having fewer than 30 ELLs. Thus, teacher education must address the scope of diversity that teachers will face among their students (Darling-Hammond, Wise & Klein, 1997). One of the main goals of teacher education programs is to prepare pre-service teachers for the challenges of the diverse society reflected in K-12 schools (Genessee, Fred & Nancy, Cloud, 1998). By taking a more in-depth look at pre-service teachers' perceptions and what influences their beliefs, teacher education programs will be better informed of their audience and their needs.

Increasingly, English as second language (ESL) teachers are not the only ones who have the responsibility of teaching ELLs. According to Jones (2002), there is a large possibility of

mainstream teachers having ELLs in their classrooms. This increased number of ELLs in classrooms is mainly due to limited state and federal funds that are inadequate for hiring sufficient numbers of ESL teachers and governmental moves away from bilingual education programs (Jones, 2002; Karabenick & Noda, 2004).

Some studies have investigated teachers' beliefs about diversity (Pohan & Aguilar, 2001; McAllister, 2000; Brown, 2004), in particular the beliefs of pre-service and in-service ESL teachers (Savignon, 1976; Peacock, 2001; Angelova, 2002). However, the increased language diversity in student population has been largely ignored. This neglected topic demands further research regarding what pre-service teachers believe about English language learning and the relationship between pre-service teachers' knowledge and perceptions. This study will serve as a tool in enabling teacher educators to be better equipped as they instruct education classes with insight into potential pre-service teacher beliefs.

Review of Literature

Just as the field of education is interdisciplinary in nature (Schulman 1998), so too is the study of language attitudes and their relationship to sociocultural expressions and ethnic identifications (Fishman, 1998). An example of this is how language attitudes have been the focus of studies in the disciplines of history, political science, and psychology. Thus, perceptions towards ELLs will be examined from three constructs of beliefs. These constructs include: pre-service teachers' preconceptions of ELLs, locus of responsibility regarding ELLs, and professional preparation. In addition, the role of language attitudes of pre-service teachers and their importance to teacher education will also be explored.

Many of today's public schools are comprised of a linguistically diverse ELL population. There is a new "norm" in public school classrooms today where language, culture, and socio-economic diversity has replaced the traditional norm of English-speaking, White, and middle class (Commins & Miramontes, 2006). Demographic transformation has led to drastic increases of ELLs in public schools over the last decade, thereby changing the face of mainstream classrooms and creating a need for *all* teachers to be equipped to teach ELLs (Gersten, 1996; Nieto, 2002). According to Jones (2002),

ELLs include a sizeable and very diverse range of students (Lacelle-Peterson & Rivera, 1994). In addition, they are the fastest growing population in our public schools today (Harper & deJong, 2004). ELLs are students are non-native English speaking students with limited proficiency in English. Some of them are native-born while others are foreign-born (Waggoner, 1993). ELLs often differ from mainstream students as well as other ELLs in both language and background. They speak languages other than English at home and possess a different cultural heritage than mainstream students, and often other ELLs (LaCelle-Peterson & Rivera, 1994).

Many ELLs may be involved in ESL or bilingual education, though with the elimination of many opportunities, they are often mainstreamed (Waxman & Padron, 2002).

While ELLs may learn enough English to communicate in a short amount of time, it can take many years to gain a command of English that is normal for their grade level (Collier, 1989). Even after these students learn enough English test out of these programs, the time it takes to develop academic abilities comparable to native speakers takes much longer (Collier & Thomas 1988). Subsequently, once these students are mainstreamed into regular classrooms, they often still require language development assistance in which they must receive from mainstream teachers. Because many ELLs spend the majority of their instructional day in a regular classroom, it is vital that mainstream teachers be prepared to meet the needs and face the augmented demands of teaching diverse students. Mainstream teachers actually make up a critical part of ESL and bilingual education (Evans, Arnot-Hopffer & Jurich, 2005).

There is a divided movement in educational demographics in the United States today. The number of ELLs is increasing (NCELA, 2004). However, the number of educators prepared to teach them is not (Menken & Antunez, 2001). Additionally, there is an increasing gap between students and teachers in terms of socio-economic status, race, and language background (Terrill & Mark, 2000). These differences influence teachers' beliefs about ELLs in mainstream classrooms as well as their role in teaching these ELLs.

Many public school teachers in the United States are White, female, middle class and monolingual. Their beliefs about learning and teaching are greatly influenced by their personal experiences as students in White, middle class environments. Those experiences very well may have never challenged their beliefs about ELLs or prepared them for working with ELLs. However, about 56% currently teach at least one ELL (Waxman, Tellez, & Walberg, 2006). ESL and bilingual teachers are not the only teachers who are teaching ELLs. According to Waxman, et al. (2006), less than 20% of teachers working with ELLs are certified in either area. A considerable number of educators are not qualified, either by certification or in-service training, to meet the needs of ELLs in their classrooms (Menken & Antunez, 2001). In fact, 70% of those teaching ELLs have not had training to do so (Menken and Holmes, 2000).

Beyond beginning bilingual education in the late 1960s, preparing teachers for ELLs was not even considered until the 1980 (Tellez & Waxman, 2006). In 1990, Garcia (1990) drew attention to the poor teacher preparedness for ELLs. His report well as other factors including increasing numbers of ELLs ushered in a number of new policies and programs in the 1990s that provided preparation of ELL instructors. Increasingly, coursework and field experiences are available in teacher education programs to prepare teachers for ELLs, but there is a long way to go.

Unfortunately, those teaching ELLs still feel ill-equipped to meet their needs (Mercado, 2001). Waxman, et al. (2006), have indicated in their study that teachers feel this way mainly

because almost half of teachers with ELLs in their classes have had no education in methods for ELL instruction. Teacher education programs are going to have to change in order to meet the needs of this increasingly diverse demographic (Osterling & Fox, 2004). In order to address this issue, it is imperative that regular classroom teachers as well as ESL teachers be better equipped to address these changing trends. It must not be just pre-service ESL and bilingual teachers who receive high quality teacher preparation to work with ELLs (Jones, 2002).

A crucial element of the preparation of pre-service teachers is to recognize and reflect on their beliefs on their beliefs about linguistic differences. Mainstream teachers' beliefs can impede integration of ELLs in mainstream classrooms, both socially as well as academically (Penfield, 1987). Hence, it is vital that these beliefs be addressed before pre-service teachers begin their careers as educators. This indicates strong implications for teacher preparation programs.

The significance of teacher education programs to today's diverse classroom depends on teacher educators who will create environments beneficial to exploring, challenging, and developing beliefs. It is vital for teacher educators to become familiar with incoming student beliefs in order to effectively inform them about ELLs in mainstream classrooms. Increased relevance also requires the cooperation of the larger teacher education program working in unity to examine their program and make changes in the program as well as individual courses to intentionally better prepare pre-service teachers for teaching ELLs (Costa, et al., 2005). Field experiences and student teaching experiences in diverse contexts is another step for teacher education programs to increase relevance (Waxman & Padron, 2002). In a study conducted by Osterling and Fox (2004), an effort was made to update a multilingual/multicultural education in order to increase its relevance to the increasing linguistic diversity pre-service teachers will face in their teaching careers.

Teacher preparation is valuable in that it improves quality of teachers for ELLs (Tellez & Waxman, 2006). Inadequate teacher preparation is one of the primary reasons for ELL underperformance in educational contexts (Padron, et al., 2002). Research conducted by Gandara, et al., (2005) indicated that teachers who received greater preparation for working with ELLs had more confidence that they were able to work successfully with ELLs. However, many of these teachers had minimal or no teacher education for working with ELLs over the five years previous to the study.

In addition to improving the quality of teachers for ELLs, teacher preparation for diversity is also imperative for program accreditation. The National Council of Accreditation for Teacher Education (NCATE) has emphasized the importance of pre-service teacher preparation for linguistic and cultural diversity by including a Standard for Diversity as one of its six standards required of teacher education programs (2001). In order to meet this requirement, many

universities have offered a multicultural education course. However, some teacher education preparation programs are specifically addressing issues of linguistic diversity (Jones, 2002).

With the rapid increase of diversity in classrooms today, changes are needed on the part of teacher educators and educators. Teacher educators can help pre-service ESL and bilingual teachers learn the value and necessity of collaborating together to serve ELLs more effectively (Sakash & Rodriguez-Brown, 1995). This collaboration has also been encouraged by Meskill and Chen (2002) and Clair (1993) among others. Mainstream teachers could benefit greatly from the resource of ESL and bilingual teachers. Yet without appropriate preparation, illusions of division of responsibility will continue to interfere with such collaboration (Evans, et al., 2005).

One of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards requirements for teacher education programs is diversity. Imbedded this standard is the goal that teacher candidates be equipped to help all children learn (NCATE, 2008). One of NCATE's recommendations for equipping these pre-service teachers calls for field experiences that will allow them to work with diverse populations. Both Marx (2000) and Hadaway (1993) support this proposal.

In 1993, Hadaway concluded that the location of the teacher preparation program in which she taught limited the opportunities her students had for diversity in their field experiences. As a result, she developed a letter exchange experience for her students. Included in Hadaway's study were 30 pre-service teachers in the fall semester and 35 in the spring semester.

The survey administered by Hadaway to pre-service teachers before the experiment began revealed that they had limited experiences with linguistic diversity as it relates working with non-native English speakers, speaking other languages, or traveling or living out of the state or internationally. In her study, pre-service teachers are randomly matched with ELL pen pals in which whom they communicate with throughout a semester. At the conclusion of the semester, Hadaway administered post-survey and allowed teachers to reflect on their learning experience. The results of the two surveys demonstrated an increased understanding of diverse populations as well as a positive change in teachers' attitudes toward working with ELLs.

Marx (2000) also emphasizes field experience in a teacher preparation methods course. In Marx's study, pre-service teachers tutored ESL students over the course of a semester. Fourteen teachers in the course interviewed with Marx in order to discuss their experience. It was concluded that pre-service teachers who were White had considerably lower expectations than did Hispanic pre-service teachers for their tutees. White tutors were not able to relate to Hispanic tutees' academic, social, and language backgrounds and therefore ruled the Hispanic culture as a discrepancy to learning. In contrast to Hadaway's study, Marx takes it a step further

by asserting that field experience must be connected with interaction of a teacher educator who will challenge pre-service teacher beliefs and offer opportunities for discussion and reflection.

Another important study of pre-service teachers' beliefs of ELLs was a study in which Jones (2002) used a mixed methods study of 91 pre-service teachers in an Educational Foundations course. Teachers were given a Likert scale survey that addressed their beliefs on language acquisition. The qualitative component of this study examined pre-service teachers' previous experiences with ELLs. Jones used the qualitative portion in order to examine teachers' reported beliefs in light of their reported experiences. Based on Jones' findings, participants indicated previous experiences in working with ELLs and were familiar with research regarding ESL education concepts. In addition, a pattern specified in this study revealed that those with experiences with working with ELLs had stronger opinions and greater alignment of their beliefs with research than those without such experience. The more one-on-one experiences pre-service teachers had with ELLs, the greater the alignment with other research studies.

Jones' findings imply that field work with ELLs is important and helpful for pre-service teachers. Both Jones and Marx bring attention to the significance of offering pre-service teachers guidance and opportunities for reflection during their field experiences in order to capitalize learning and belief and development. Jones identified these pre-service teachers' beliefs to be foundational to meeting their teacher preparation needs regarding ELLs.

Methodology

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to look beyond previously explored paths of ELLs, bilingual, multicultural, and foreign language education to uncover pre-service English teachers' beliefs about ELLs. By doing this, teacher preparation programs will be better informed and equipped as they instruct education classes with insight into potential pre-service teacher beliefs regarding language diversity. It is essential that teacher education programs be informed about language attitudes of pre-service teachers in order to strengthen the linkage between perceptions and teacher education curriculum planning and practice. In addition, curricular decisions and pre-service teacher experiences could be guided by knowledge of the current pre-service teachers' perceptions about ELL populations. The research questions of the study include:

- 1.) What are pre-service English teachers' beliefs about whose responsibility it is to teach English to English Language Learners?
- 2.) What preconceptions do pre-service English teachers have of English Language Learners in a general education setting?
- 3.) What are pre-service English teachers' overall perceptions toward their professional training?

Respondents

The participants for this study included sixty-six pre-service English teachers who were enrolled in graduate classes in Education seeking secondary licensure, and who had completed responses to the instrument concerning teaching and language diversity. These 66 participants were female 43 (65.2%) and male 23 (34.8%). Participants classified themselves as: White 40 (60.6%), African-American 22 (33.3%), Hispanic 1 (1.5%), Asian 2 (3.0%), and other group 1 (1.5%).

Instrument

While the Savignon (1976) Foreign Language Attitude Survey (FLAS) and the CCCC/NCTE Language Survey proved to be valuable resources in instrument development, the 16 items constituting the questionnaire were derived from a general review of the relevant literature. Aimed at a major theme that emerged from that review, each of the items was associated with one of three broad groups: the first group consisting of five items and centered on responsibilities for teaching ELL students, the second group consisting of seven items and dealing with preconceptions of ELLs in a general education setting, and the third group consisting of four items and concerning pre-service English teachers' perceptions of their professional training. With respect to each of the items within each group, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a four-point, Likert-type scale, where a value of "1" meant "strong disagreement," a value of "2" meant "disagreement," a value of "3" meant agreement and a value of "4" meant "strong agreement"

Data Collection

Along with five questions concerning the respondents' demographic characteristics, the items were mounted in the online survey program Survey Monkey and a link to the questionnaire was shared with instructors in a graduate English methods course and a graduate English language arts course. The instructors of two courses in turn issued the link to their students in order for them to complete the survey online. Students were given three weeks to respond to the instrument and were issued one reminder to increase the participation level.

Findings

Provided in Tables 1, 2, and 3 are the overall results for the sample by the three item clusters based on emergent themes in the literature: specifically, responsibility for teaching ELL students, preconceptions about ELL students, and professional training for teaching ELL students. With respect to the first theme, most participants indicated that the responsibility for teaching ELLs was to a significant extent theirs. As shown in Table 1, with respect to items 1, 2, and 3 respectively, over 75% of the respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statements that "Teaching ELL is the job of the ESL teacher, not the general education teacher" (77.3%), "It is not my responsibility to teach English to students who come to the U.S. and do

not speak English” (75.8%) and “It is important for general education teachers to learn how to teach ELLs” (75.8%).

With respect to preconceptions concerning ELL students, a significant majority of the English education participants seemed not to be negatively biased. When asked whether having ELL students in class would be detrimental to others’ learning, more than 84% of the respondents disagreed and about 15% strongly disagreed. Similarly, when confronted with a statement suggesting that ELL were simply not motivated to learn English, about 92.4% of the respondents disagreed and less than one-fourth strongly disagreed (7.6%).

Finally, as regards to English teachers’ perceptions of how prepared they were to meet the challenges of teaching ELL students, the participants in this study seemed generally to have some apprehension. As indicated in Table 3, about 66% of the participants indicated that they were “prepared to tailor instructional and other services to the needs of ELL students.” A little over half of the participants seemed confident about their knowledge of “teaching practices that are attuned to students’ language levels and cognitive levels” (56.1%). At the same time, somewhat fewer students expressed confidence about “teaching practices that are culturally supportive and relevant for ELL students” as only 56.1% of the respondents agreed, and only 43.9% agreed that they were sufficiently knowledgeable about “teaching strategies and instructional practices for ELL students that are developmentally appropriate.”

Table 1

Frequencies and Percentages of Responses to Items Concerning Responsibilities for Teaching ELL: All Respondents

Item	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
1. Teaching ELL is the job of the ESL teacher, not the general education teacher.	10	15.2	41	62.1	14	21.2	1	1.5
2. It is not my responsibility to teach English to students who come to the U.S. and do not speak English.	16	24.2	34	51.5	13	19.7	3	4.5
3. It is important for general education teachers to learn how to teach ELL.	4	6.1	12	18.2	37	56.1	13	19.7

4. Parents of non- or limited-English proficient students should be counseled to speak English with their children.	5	7.7	14	21.5	36	55.4	10	15.4
9. It is unreasonable to expect a regular classroom teacher to teach a child who does not speak English.	8	12.1	36	54.5	19	28.8	3	4.5

Table 2

Frequencies and Percentages of Responses to Items Concerning Preconceptions of ELL Students in a General Education Setting: All Respondents

Item	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
5. To be considered American, one should speak English.	18	27.3	23	34.8	19	28.8	6	9.1
6. The learning of English should be a priority for non-English proficient and limited-English students, even if it means their losing the ability to speak their native language.	7	10.8	33	50.8	20	30.8	5	7.7
7. Most non- and limited- English proficient students are not motivated to learn English.	22	33.3	39	59.1	5	7.6	0	0.0
8. At school, the learning of the English language by non- or limited-English proficient children should take precedence over learning subject matter.	7	10.6	42	63.6	14	21.2	3	4.5

10. Having non- or limited- English proficient students in the classroom is detrimental to the learning of other students.	15	22.7	41	62.1	8	12.1	2	3.0
11. Non- and limited- English proficient students often use questionable claims of discrimination as an excuse for not doing well in school.	11	16.7	36	54.5	18	27.3	1	1.5
12. Students should be proficient in English before being integrated into general education classrooms.	8	12.1	39	59.1	17	25.8	2	3.0

Table 3

Frequencies and Percentages of Responses to Items Concerning Perceptions of Professional Training for Teaching ELL Students: All Respondents

Item	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
13. I am prepared to tailor instructional and other services to the needs of ELL students.	2	3.0	20	30.3	32	48.5	12	18.2
14. I am knowledgeable about teaching strategies and instructional practices for ELL students that are developmentally appropriate.	9	13.6	28	42.4	21	31.8	8	12.1
15. I am knowledgeable about teaching practices that are culturally supportive and relevant for ELL students.	7	10.6	25	37.9	27	40.9	7	10.6

16. I am knowledgeable about teaching practices that are attuned to students' language levels and cognitive levels.	4	6.2	24	36.9	27	41.5	10	15.4
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Discussion

This research examined pre-service English teachers' perceptions of working with ELLs in mainstream classrooms. It involved both the analysis and investigation of pre-service English teachers' overall preconceptions of ELLs, responsibilities, and professional training. An analysis of data gathered suggested that pre-service English teachers readily accepted the responsibility of teaching ELLs. Thus, many felt that it was a part of their responsibility of being a mainstream teacher. With respect to preconceptions, many participants held positive viewpoints toward working with ELLs in mainstream classrooms. An overwhelming number of participants believed that ELLs were motivated to learn, thus positive attitudes held among pre-service teachers will yield higher academic performance among ELLs. Furthermore, although the majority of participants felt some apprehension in their professional preparation to work with ELLs, only a small percentage of students felt assured in their ability to actually implement teaching and instructional strategies.

Conclusion

In general, this study provided an overall view of pre-service English teachers' beliefs toward ELLs. Although the majority of participants' expressed a relatively positive interest in serving ELLs in a mainstream classroom, their responses indicated a lack of confidence in teaching and instructional practices. Thus, there is a need for additional training to equip them with content knowledge and instructional practices to enhance their level of confidence. By incorporating additional cultural awareness and second language theory classes into teacher education programs, a reinforcement of teachers' positive disposition toward ELLs is made as well as an increase of teachers' content and instructional knowledge.

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Appendix
ELL Attitude Survey

Please read each statement then mark an “X” next to only one response for each statement that most closely reflects your attitude.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Teaching ELL (English Language Learners) is the job of the ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher, not the general education teacher				
It is not my responsibility to teach English to students who come to the U.S. and do not speak English				
It is important for general education teachers to learn how to teach ELL				
Parents of non- or limited- English proficient students should be counseled to speak English students with their children				
To be considered American, one should speak English				
The learning of English should be a priority for non-English proficient students and limited-English students, even if it means they lose the ability to speak their native language.				
Most non- and limited- English proficient students are not motivated to learn English				
At school, the learning of the English language by non- or limited-English proficient children should take precedence over learning subject matter				
It is unreasonable to expect a regular classroom teacher to teach a child who does not speak English				
Having non- or limited- English proficient students in the classroom is detrimental to the learning of other students				
Non- and limited- English proficient students often use unjustified claims of discrimination as an excuse for not doing well in school				
Students should be proficient in English before being integrated into general education classrooms				