

PK-12 Teacher Candidates' Beliefs and Knowledge about English Learners

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Abstract

This study examines the beliefs and perceived preparedness of pre-service PK-12 teacher candidates regarding English learners (EL) in regular classroom settings because of an ESOL content-infusion simulation experience during an early general methods class. Teacher candidates' beliefs toward English learners and perceived pedagogical preparation to teach English learners were examined for differences between those receiving the content-infusion simulation and those receiving traditional instruction. Those receiving the content-infusion simulation perceived that they were significantly more prepared on a number of survey items. The results reveal salient benefits of this experience on the teacher candidates' beliefs about English learners and their beliefs about their pedagogical preparation to teach English learners in a regular classroom setting.

Keywords

ESOL, teacher candidates' beliefs, English learners, content infusion, pedagogical preparation

Introduction

Many pre-service teacher candidates report that they feel unprepared to work with culturally and linguistically diverse learners (Mergler & Tangen, 2009). While they are busy learning content and how to teach that content, they may feel overwhelmed when asked to add the responsibility of making the content comprehensible to English learners (ELs). Yet increasingly, beginning PK-12 teachers enter classrooms filled with diverse learners, many of whom are not yet fully proficient in English, their second language (L2). Universities preparing teachers for the diverse student body of the 21st century are striving to help their teacher candidates teach English learners various subjects in ways they can understand even if their English skills are still developing (Nutta, Mokhtar, & Strebel, 2012).

The setting for this study was an undergraduate general methods class at an institution of higher education in the United States. All teacher candidates in state-approved teacher preparation programs in this state are required to receive instruction in teaching English learners. Depending on the area of certification, that instruction ranges from 75 hours for majors that do not specifically teach literacy skills to 300 hours for majors that do (elementary education, exceptional student education, early childhood education and English language arts education). One or two stand-alone courses focusing specifically on the theory and practice of teaching

English learners comprise 60-120 hours of instruction and the remaining 15-180 hours are infused into other education classes; the general methods class is one such class.

This study identifies important elements of teacher candidates' beliefs about English learners and beliefs about their pedagogical preparation to teach English learners in a regular classroom after participating in an ESOL content-infusion simulation.

Theoretical Perspectives and Related Research

Teacher Attitudes and Beliefs

Little is known about how English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) pre-service teachers' beliefs and prior experiences shape their learning process in teacher preparation programs, particularly in the area of second language reading instruction (Aoulou, 2011). Preliminary research on teacher candidate attitudes toward English learners has shown that stand-alone courses focusing on English learners can change candidates' perceptions of their own knowledge and skills regarding teaching English learners (Smith, 2011), and can improve attitudes about diversity (Weisman & Garza, 2010). Weisman and Garza (2012) recommend including an emphasis on linguistic diversity throughout the teacher preparation curriculum so that pre-service teacher candidates will have repeated and varied exposure to this crucial issue. However, the effects of activities and assignments that are infused into general teacher preparation courses are not well established. The potential for connecting pre-service teacher candidates' developing knowledge, skills, and dispositions for teaching with a focus on English learners holds promise for preparing teacher candidates to address these students' needs as a natural part of their planning, carrying out, and evaluating instruction in their content areas.

Second Language Experiences

Second language educators have used what has been termed "shock language" activities for some time, both in pre-service and in-service teacher education and in PK-12 instruction (Kubota, Gardner, Patten, Thatcher-Fettig, & Yoshida, 2000; Meskill, 2005). Shock language activities typically involve presentation of content in a language unknown to the candidates, followed by a discussion of what it felt like to not be able to understand or communicate during the experience. For many candidates who have never spent time in an environment where English is not spoken, such an experience can be a very eye opening experience. However, just knowing how difficult it can be to try to do something in an unknown language does not prepare a pre-service teacher candidate to present concepts and topics to English learners in a way they can comprehend. For this reason, Nutta (2003) developed a simulation activity in Italian to immerse pre-service teacher candidates in comprehensible instruction, including presentation of content and participant tasks and assessment, each of which can be incorporated into PK-12 instruction of various content areas.

Research Question

Teacher candidates are exposed to a wide variety of experiences to help prepare them for their future classroom experiences. Some of these experiences are directly related to changing their beliefs and some are related to increasing their knowledge. The present study examines the impact of an ESOL content-infused simulation on several elements of teacher candidates' beliefs about English learners and their perceived preparedness to assist these students in their teaching. Given the need for teacher preparation programs to prepare teacher candidates to meet the specialized needs of

ELs, determining the effects of a simulation that had a lasting effect would be valuable. Thus the study was guided by the following research question: *What are the effects of an ESOL content-infusion simulation on teacher candidates' beliefs and perceived pedagogical preparation to teach English learners in a regular classroom setting?*

Research Method

Teacher candidates are exposed to a wide variety of experiences to help prepare them for their future classroom experiences. Some of these experiences are directly related to changing their beliefs and some are related to increasing their knowledge. The present study examines the impact of an ESOL content-infused simulation on several elements of teacher candidates' beliefs about English learners and their perceived preparedness to assist these students in their teaching. Given the need for teacher preparation programs to prepare teacher candidates to meet the specialized needs of

Participants and Setting

This study involved teacher candidates at a large, urban university in the southeastern United States. The participants were enrolled in different sections of a junior-level general methods class during fall (2011) semester. Sixty-nine teacher candidates (n=69) completed a survey. Forty-nine of the teacher candidates participated in the simulation activity; nineteen of the respondents did not participate in the simulation. One participant did not answer the question to indicate if he/she participated in the simulation. Fifteen percent of the participants were male; 85% were female. Six percent of the participants were African American; 1% was Asian; 74% were Caucasian/White; 10% were Hispanic/Latino; 9% were Multiracial. English was the first or native language of 91% of the participants; 9% had a first or native language other than English. Nine percent of the non-native English speakers had been considered ESOL students during their PK-12 schooling.

The twenty-minute simulation was delivered by a team of faculty and doctoral students in various sections of the general methods class. The simulation was highly interactive and involved teaching how to make orange juice in a language other than English; these languages included Italian, Swiss German, and Korean. The goal of the interactive experience was to give the teacher candidates an opportunity to learn content in a language other than their native language, simulating the experience of an English learner during a unit of instruction in a regular classroom setting. The activity began by stating in the second language (L2) that only the L2 would be used. The presenter then identified a number of objects used in making orange juice by naming each while holding it for all to see. The presenter then began the four-step process of

making orange juice, narrating each step in the L2 as she performed it. This process was repeated, and then the presenter asked for a volunteer from the class to come and perform the steps alongside the presenter's commands.

At first, the steps were kept consistent with the original modeling that the presenter provided, but during subsequent volunteer performances, the sequence of the steps was reordered, different colors of the cups were referenced to differentiate the command the student performed, and other changes were made to show how true comprehension, rather than mere mimicking, was taking place.

After several rounds of volunteers making orange juice, the presenter showed four poster-size photos of the steps, asking the class to indicate a thumbs up if the phrase she uttered matched it or a thumbs down if not. She then passed out the photos to teacher candidates and asked them to raise the photo when she stated the corresponding phrase. Then, she asked each participant, in words and with gestures, to come to the front of the classroom and hold the photos in sequence. Once they were lined up properly with the photos, she gave each participant a large sentence strip with the phrase in the L2 and repeated the phrase while pointing to each word.

The students returned the photos and sentence strips, and she then mixed them up and randomly distributed them to teacher candidates who had not yet participated in any of the tasks. Through gestures and language she indicated that each photo holder should find his corresponding sentence strip holder, and then all 8 individuals should line up in the correct sequence in front of the class.

After verifying the accuracy of the matching photos and sentence strips, the presenter retrieved them and distributed a fill-in-the blank test of the phrases and photos of each of the four steps. Each phrase lacked one word, and she indicated that students should try to write the missing word from memory. After think time elapsed, she dictated the sentences and asked students to write any missing words as she said them. Finally, she showed the four sentence strips in order to allow students to check their answers.

Following the individual assessment of the activity, the presenter praised the participants in the second language and returned to English for debriefing. The teacher candidates were asked to share how they had felt participating in a lesson whose language they didn't know. They were then asked to identify everything in the simulation lesson that enabled them to comprehend. The strategies list they created then became the basis for them to consider when making accommodations for non-English speakers or beginning English speakers in their lesson plans.

Data Collection and Analysis

The survey instrument consisted of 34 items, 14 on demographics of the teacher candidates, and 20 on their beliefs about English learners and beliefs about their pedagogical preparation to teach ELs in a regular classroom setting using a Likert scale. Several questions were tailored after the teacher sense of efficacy scale (Tschannen-Moran, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001) but were adapted for the focus of teaching English learners, while others had been created during a project with ESOL infusion.

The twenty questions pertaining to the teacher candidates' attitudes, beliefs, and self-efficacy were presented in random order within the survey. Questions focusing on the teacher candidates' attitudes included statements such as: "English should be the only language of instruction for core PK-12 school subjects, such as language arts, math, science, and social studies" and "The PK-12 school system will be strengthened by English learners." Questions focusing on the teacher candidates' beliefs included statements such as: "How much can you do to motivate English learners who show low interest in school work?" and "How much can you do to respond to difficult questions from English learners?" Questions focusing on the teacher candidates' self-efficacy included statements such as: "How familiar do you feel with English learners' levels of English language proficiency: beginning; intermediate; advanced?" and "How familiar do you feel with a variety of teaching strategies to promote age/grade/level-appropriate social and academic English learning?" The questionnaire was distributed through the survey feature of an online electronic portfolio system. The surveys were voluntary and anonymous.

Results

Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation for each item for both groups of teacher candidates, those who received the orange juice simulation and those who did not.

Table 1. Participant attitudes toward EL issues

	No OJ lesson			OJ lesson		
	n	\bar{x}	SD	n	\bar{x}	SD
English should be the only language of instruction for core PK-12 school subjects, such as language arts, math, science, and social studies.	19	2.47	1.07	49	2.51	1.06
English learners have a right to expect that PK-12 schools will make changes to accommodate them.	19	3.84	1.21	49	4.04	0.71
The PK-12 school system will be strengthened by English learners.	19	3.79	1.08	49	3.90	0.90

While not statistically significant, the teacher candidates who received the orange juice simulation did have more positive attitudes toward EL students when responding to the statements, "English learners have a right to expect that PK-12 schools will make changes to accommodate them (4.04)" and "The PK-12 school system will be strengthened by English learners (3.90)."

Table 2 illustrates that the perceived preparedness was significantly higher for teacher candidates who received the orange juice simulation on seven items: their ability to help English learners think critically (4.27); get English learners to believe they can work well in school (4.41); respond to difficult questions from English learners (4.08); gauge the comprehension of English learners regarding what they have taught (4.14); improve the understanding of an English learner who is failing in school (4.14); use a variety of assessment strategies that take into account English learners (4.39); and provide appropriate challenges for very capable students who may be hampered by the English language (4.20).

Although not statistically significant, the mean scores for the remaining items were all higher than for the teacher candidates who did not receive the orange juice simulation. Participants reported that they could motivate English learners who show low interest in school work (4.25); adjust their delivery of lessons to the proper level for individual English learners (4.39); provide alternative explanations or examples when English learners are confused (4.29) and implement alternative explanations for teaching and learning in their classrooms (4.20).

Discussion and Conclusion

This pilot study painted a positive picture in terms of the use of the orange juice simulation in helping teacher candidates enrolled in a general methods class understand the needs of EL students and develop a sense of self-efficacy. First, the teacher candidates clearly articulated that they feel prepared to educate EL students that they would encounter in their mainstream classrooms. While their self-perceptions were not verified, sensitizing the teacher candidates to the EL students' experience seemed to impact both the teacher candidates' attitude toward EL students and their perceived preparedness.

Table 2. Participant perceived preparedness

	No OJ lesson			OJ lesson		
	n	\bar{x}	SD	n	\bar{x}	SD
Help your English learners think critically	19	3.74	0.65	49	4.27*	0.76
Motivate English learners who show low interest in school work	19	3.48	0.69	48	4.25	0.79
Get English learners to believe they can work well in school	19	3.89	0.74	49	4.41*	0.73
Respond to difficult questions from English learners	17	3.53	0.62	48	4.08*	0.87
Gauge the comprehension of English learners regarding what you have taught	19	3.74	0.87	49	4.22*	0.82
Improve the understanding of an English learner who is failing in school	18	3.67	0.91	49	4.14*	0.84

learner who is failing in school						
Adjust your delivery of lessons to the proper level for individual English learners	18	4.11	0.68	49	4.39	0.81
Use a variety of assessment strategies that take into account English learners	19	4.00	0.58	49	4.39*	0.79
Provide alternative explanations or examples when English learners are confused	19	3.95	0.71	49	4.29	0.84
Implement alternative explanations for teaching and learning in your classroom	18	3.89	0.83	49	4.31	0.77
Provide appropriate challenges for very capable students who may be hampered by the English language	19	3.74	0.87	49	4.20*	0.82

*significant ($p < .05$)

Obviously, there may be other factors that impacted these teacher candidates in addition to the orange juice simulation, including the way the instructor of the general methods course helped them process the orange juice simulation; the exposure during field experience to EL students; or whether the field experience teacher helped the teacher candidates understand any ELs who may have been in the PK-12 classroom. However, the results strongly encourage the continuation of the orange juice simulation.

For EL students in mainstream classrooms, the classroom teacher may be their one and only resource. The classroom teacher's beliefs regarding EL students influence the culture of the classroom and the student outcomes (Durgunoglu & Hughes, 2010). Future research should further investigate the effect of the orange juice simulation and attempt to better control for any teacher and class effects. In addition, qualitative data from teacher candidates may also add to the research on how this shock language activity might help influence their attitudes toward future EL students they may encounter.

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