

Understanding the role and challenges of ELL Departments at public schools: An inquiry from pre-service teachers' perspectives

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Abstract

Number of English Language Learners (ELLs) at U.S. public schools is increasing each year, and putting more and more mainstream teachers in need of teaching to this student group. ELLs are a vulnerable group with low academic success level and high drop-out rate. Preparing in-service and pre-service teachers to teach these students is crucial since ELLs need special accommodations and scaffolding to be more successful academically. In addition, research on mainstream teachers and ELL students have uncovered that mainstream teachers may have some wrong and unwelcoming perceptions of ELLs. This study investigates how taking a class on ELL education affects the pre-service teachers' perceptions of this student group. In addition, this study reveals some of the most common challenges ELL teachers come across at public schools. The results uncovers that taking even only one class on ELL education changes pre-service teachers' perceptions of ELLs positively. At the end of the paper, some pedagogical implications for preparing pre-service teachers to teach ELLs are given.

Introduction

English Language Learners (ELLs) are the fastest growing student group in the U.S. There were 4,389,325 ELLs at public schools and they composed 9.1% of total school population during 2011-2012 school year (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2013). "Pull-out" programs are the most commonly used ELL services nationwide (Ligget, 2014; Gibbons, 2014). In these programs, ELL students spend most of their school time in mainstream classes and are "pulled-out" for a few hours during the school week for ELL education classes (Reeves, 2006, Gibbons, 2014). Therefore, mainstream teachers have a significant role in academic success of this student group. However, mainstream teachers complete their degrees with an "overwhelming lack of knowledge of second language acquisition (SLA), multicultural education and ESOL pedagogy" (Pettit, 2011, p. 125). The number of teachers who

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have received some training in ELL education is very limited. Even though almost 42% of the mainstream teachers need to teach ELLs, only 26.8 % of the U.S. teachers have had some preparation in ELL education (NCES, 2013).

Preparing mainstream teachers to educate ELLs is not only important; it is a duty. Several studies point out that mainstream teachers do not have a positive perception of the ELL students in their classrooms, and this negative perception causes failure in meeting the needs of ELLs (Walker, Shafer & liams, 2004; Reeves, 2006, Pettit, 2011). More importantly, teachers' negative attitude towards ELLs affects these students' school success and the general classroom environment (Yoon, 2007; 2008).

Studies have revealed that experience in teaching ELLs, speaking another language, and even the geographic location of the teachers influence mainstream teachers' perception of ELL students. However, the most consistent and important factor found to influence mainstream teachers' attitudes towards ELL students is education (Pettit, 2011; Echevarria, Short and Powers, 2006; Reeves, 2006). Walker et al. (2004) claims that "even a little appropriate training can go a long way in preventing and improving negative teacher attitudes" toward ELLs (p. 142).

ELLs in the State of Kansas

Kansas is no exception to this national challenge. There have been 39,231 ELL students in Kansas public schools in 2014-2015 school year (Kansas State Department of Education [KSDE], 2014). The total number of the state's ELLs increased 3.5 % in 2009-2015; this number is higher than the 2.4% increase in state's total public school enrollment between the same years (KSDE, 2014).

Similar to national data on ELL education, ELLs have lower graduation rates than their peers and ELLs dropout rates are increasing in Kansas State (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1:

Cohort graduation rates of all students, school year 2012-2013.

Student Group	Graduation Rate
All Students	85.7
American Indian or Alaska Native	77
Asian or Pacific Islander	89
Asian	89
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	80
Black or African American	76
Hispanic or Latino	79.9

White	88.1
Two or more races	83
Children with disabilities (IDEA)	77.8
Limited English proficient (LEP) students	75
Economically disadvantaged students	76.6

Source: <https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/consolidated/sy12-13part2/ks.pdf>

Table 2:

Dropout rates of ELL students in Kansas, 2010-2014.

Year	Number of students who dropout	Rates of students who dropout
2009-2010	187	1.67
2010-2011	213	1.65
2011-2012	235	1.64
2012-2013	278	2.1
2013-2014	369	2.58

Furthermore, ELLs lag behind academically, compared to their non-ELL peers statewide, in almost all subject matters, even when results are disaggregated to identify other socio-economic risk factors correlated with differences in academic achievement. ELLs learn the English language and academic content at the same time, so they need to be taught by teachers who have some knowledge about language acquisition and ELL education methods to be more successful in mainstream classes (Guler, 2014).

Given these facts, this study aims to understand the role of one on-campus ELL education class on changing the perceptions of pre-service mainstream teachers. Adapting situated- sociocultural perspective, this study aims to answer the following questions.

- a) What is the role of one ELL education course in changing the pre-service teachers' perceptions of ELL students?
- b) What are some of the most common challenges that ELL teachers come across at public schools?

Study

Three pre-service teachers completed an eight-week practicum in one of the school districts in Kansas as a requirement of their ELL Methods course. The course was completed in sixteen weeks, so before they started their practicum experiences, the students studied ELL education theory for eight weeks. Adopting a situated-sociocultural lens, this study provides insights from the ELL teaching observations and experiences of these three pre-service teachers in.

Data Collection

The observation notes, classroom assignments, and informal conversations of these pre-service teachers were collected, and analyzed by using interpretive data analysis method (Litchman, 2010). The authors first read the data thoroughly to get the sense of the big picture. During this initial reading stage, they wrote down their ideas, questions and also observation notes. Then, they re-read the data and focused on research questions and created categories of themes based on the research questions. Having created the categories of themes, they started coding the data.

Participants

Three pre-service teachers were served as participant-observers in this study. These participants enrolled an ELL education course at a private university in Kansas State. They took ELL Methods course for eight weeks, and then they observed ELL teachers for the other eight weeks as a part of this ELL education class' practicum requirement. They wrote a journal on their observations during this practicum experience and they also completed several assignments on educating ELLs in mainstream classes.

Context

The study took place at a school district in Kansas. Participants took an ELL class at a private university and then conducted observations. Two of the participants conducted observations at an elementary school and one of them conducted observations at a high school. This diversity has been very beneficial to compare and contrast the challenges of ELL teachers at different grade levels.

Findings

Research Question#1

Data revealed that pre-service teachers changed their perception of ELLs and recognized the needs of these students better after they took a course on ELL education and conduct practicum. At the beginning of the course, participants revealed they did not know much about ELL students; in fact, they even had difficulty in defining who an ELL student was. Pre-service teachers had deficit knowledge of the term "ELL", and they thought that only students who were born outside of the U.S. would

be referred as an ELL. However, at the end of the course these pre-service teachers could use the term “ELL” accurately and recognized the needs and struggles of ELLs better. In addition, participants started to perceive themselves as the advocates of ELLs, could diagnose the reasons for ELLs to be less successful at schools, and could provide some solutions for these problems. Participants recognized that it was both ELL teachers’ and mainstream teachers’ responsibility to teach these students.

Jasmine wrote the following note in her practicum journal about the ELL student she was observing.

I learned a lot about what ELL students go through in school. With the student I observed, I don’t think that is much as a language barrier that she struggled with, but that her social skills aren’t where they should be. I believe that there needs to be a lot more work done to the programs that work with students that English isn’t their primary language. All students in schools should be available to resources that will make their learning experience successful.

In addition, participants noted that ELL services and ELL instructor was not appreciated enough. Participants recognized the essentiality of ELL services and highlighted in their journals that the importance of ELL services were underestimated by the school district. Amy wrote in her journal that “Personally, I do not think she [ELL Teacher] was appreciated enough due to fact that her job is something that may not be needed next year”.

Research Question # 2

The students’ journals included observations of several challenges that ELL teachers had while teaching to ELLs at this school district. The most consistent challenge that students observed was that ELL departments either did not have enough educational materials or those materials were very outdated. While explaining her observations, Jessi stated that “When I went over to the middle school I was able to take a look at all of the resources given to the ELL teachers. I noticed that the majority of the resources were outdated. They even had tapes but didn’t have a tape recorder to play them.” Amy observed the same problem and she stated in her journal the following paragraph: Though the classroom was there, it was not put to use and neither were the resources. It was sad to find out that the majority of the amazing resources in this classroom were out of date. Many of the things in the room were dated back to 2003. I think that it is possible to utilize some of the material, however, I think that using material dated back to 2003 doesn’t necessarily show the care for these students if they cannot get updated material.

Jasmine describes her experiences as “In my opinion, from what I saw, the program was poorly run due to the income of the ___deleted for privacy_____ school district. There should be a lot more resources and help available to those who are ELL in the

schools district and that ELL students should work within their own curriculum that is more revolved around them.”

The second most common challenge that the participants teachers observed was that ELL departments was undervalued by other mainstream teachers and some of the school administrators. While observing, participants noted that the ELL paras did a great job, yet they usually served as a homework helper or speech therapists. Amy describes her observations as

Through my days of observations, I noticed that ----deleted for privacy---- was basically an extra hand in the classroom. Though that was the case, there were selected students that Ferguson would help more than other due to their level of speech. It soon became clear to me that her job title also focuses on students who need help with their speech, not just students who were learning English as their second language.

Even though the participants were recruited at different schools, the challenges they observed were the same. ELL departments at these schools did not have sufficient and up-to-date materials, and mainstream teachers perceived ELL departments as a study hall mostly.

Conclusions

The results of this study is consistent with previous research in that even one course on ELL education is very effective to change the pre-service teachers’ perceptions of ELLs (Guler, 2014; Moore, 2013). So ELL education courses should be part of all education colleges’ curriculums and teachers should be informed on how to best teach to this student group since number of ELLs is increasing each year.

The results of the second research question also aligns with the results of previous research in that ELL departments lack important sources (Walker et al., 2004), most of the ELL teachers are uncertified paras (Batt, 2008), and school administrators and other mainstream teachers may see ELL departments as a study hall than a service that had its own objectives and curriculum (Guler, 2014).

Implications for professional development and teaching

Mainstream teachers have a great impact on the academic success of ELLs. Yet, mainstream teachers’ negative perceptions of this student group affect ELLs’ academic success negatively (O’Brien, 2011; Guler, 2014). The results of this study and previous research agree that it is crucial to educate mainstream teachers in instructing ELLs. At education colleges, mainstream teachers should learn more about second language acquisition and the needs of ELLs. Regardless of the grade level and the subject matter, all education should include ELL education methods in their curriculum (Greenfield, 2013). Each education course should refer to the needs of this student

group. The success of ELL students cannot remain the sole responsibility of ELL departments.

This study also reveals some of the main challenges that ELL teachers come across. ELLs' academic needs are much different than non-ELL students. School administrators and ELL teachers should learn more about the current publications in ELL education and update their sources. Professional development seminars, online courses or online webinars can be used as a way of professional development in ELL education.

In addition, mainstream teachers and school administrators should reexamine their perception and knowledge of this student group and work with other school districts collaboratively. Unfortunately, some of the school districts do not have certified ELL teachers; however, it is crucial to have personnel that are knowledgeable about the academic needs of these students. In addition, the school administrators can start a school-college partnership with one of the colleges and make sure that mainstream teachers receive the extra professional help they may need in ELL education.

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