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Infusing EL Content into a Foundations Course

Cynthia J. Hutchinson, University of Central Florida

Introduction

The story of my experience with EL infusion begins with my family's experiences. My parents are first-generation immigrants. Their parents came to the United States from Russia and what is today the Czech Republic. My four grandparents raised thirteen children between the two families in the 1920s and 1930s. They were deceased before I became a teacher but I long to have an opportunity to talk with them about their early experiences in school and in society in Cleveland, Ohio as English learners (ELs) at a time when teachers were not being prepared to work with immigrant populations. As I work with teacher candidates preparing to teach English learners I imagine the struggles of my grandparents and their children, my aunts and uncles. My maternal grandmother never achieved enough English proficiency to become a U.S. citizen, a life-long dream, but my paternal grandparents became very proud U.S. citizens. They are my inspiration to create successful EL-infused courses for the teacher candidates in my College of Education.

I teach the general methods course required of all teacher candidates pursuing initial certification. The university where I teach has a large teacher preparation program and we offer the general methods course at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Each fall and spring semesters we offer ten to twelve sections of the undergraduate and two to four sections of the graduate-level general methods course on one main and seven regional campuses. Additional courses are offered during a six-week or twelve-week summer semester on the main campus or online.

Each of our courses has a faculty member who takes a leadership role of responsibility for the course. As the shepherd for the undergraduate general methods course I have the responsibility to assist the instructors of the course by providing a generic syllabus whose content is common to all sections of the course, answering questions and offering assistance when needed. I invite the faculty who teach the undergraduate general methods course to meet each semester to review state-mandated changes, discuss course improvements, share resources and celebrate our achievements.

Since a general methods course is required of every teacher candidate despite the area of certification, and since it is typically taken early in the program of study, it has become, through the years, a destination for a great many College of Education requirements. We introduce the electronic portfolio, the fitness to teach policy, the teacher work sample requirement, and anything else that is not content specific and needs a "place" in the teacher candidate's program of study. I shudder with fear each time a mandate is delivered from the state Department of

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Education because I imagine that one more requirement will be added to a course that is already filled to capacity.

One such mandate occurred when the state of Florida required all initial teacher certification programs for early childhood, elementary, exceptional, and English language arts teacher candidates to include an ESOL endorsement as a graduation requirement. A newly created TESOL Advisory Committee decided that the college would adopt an infusion model. The general methods course I shepherd was chosen to contain an EL-infused element. This mandate was to be implemented by a college of education faculty generally unprepared for the task.

Professional Learning

As a college, we had and continue to have outstanding faculty. But most of us lacked TESOL preparation, and our experiences with ELs were very limited. The first order of business for the committee was our own professional development. A dedicated English language arts professor created a forty-five-hour professional development TESOL course for the faculty appropriated titled Jericho, because the walls needed to come tumbling down! It was a series of online modules we could master independently, combined with a smattering of whole-group experiences. The whole-group sessions featured knowledgeable guest speakers with many hands-on experiences. All journeys have a beginning and this was ours.

During this time of Project Jericho the TESOL Advisory Committee met regularly to tackle the job of assigning the ESOL standards to the appropriate courses. Once this was completed each course shepherd began the task of embedding the standards.

My K-12 teaching experiences were in Ohio and Florida in the early 1970s. I had never encountered a learner who was not a native English speaker. In terms of TESOL knowledge, skills, and dispositions, I was consciously unskilled. I knew that I didn't know and I was eager to learn. I finished my Jericho modules, passed all of the quizzes, got my certificate, and foolishly believed that I was ready to take on the world. As I began the next phase in the process of infusion—modifying courses—I was slow to understand what my teacher candidates would need to be successful.

Process of Embedding Courses

My university offers a tremendous resource of professional development through the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning (FCTL). Its offerings include a variety of workshops, programs, teaching circles, tech camps, and conferences. During summer conferences several units within the university collaborate to provide grants for faculty members who are transforming courses or programs by emphasizing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), assessment of learning outcomes, research, service learning, inter-disciplinarity, student engagement, integration of Information Fluency, diversity or other appropriate issues. The course shepherds for the EL-embedded courses applied and were accepted to work together during the 2002 summer conference on the EL-embedded courses. At this point in time we had

not yet hired an ESOL coordinator nor did it occur to us to invite faculty from other areas of the university to join us. We were a dedicated but ill-equipped team.

The TESOL Advisory Committee had analyzed the ESOL Standards for the best fit into the embedded courses. My general methods course was assigned two standards that were an excellent theoretical fit, since in the course candidates learned how to create lesson plans and they were exposed to various instructional delivery techniques, which they would then carry forward to content specific methods courses.

Standard #13: Evaluate, design, and employ appropriate instructional methods and techniques appropriate to learner's socialization and communication.

Standard #16: Design and implement effective unit plans and daily plans, which meet the needs of ESOL students within the context of the regular classroom.

I saw the obvious match of lesson planning and instructional delivery techniques but completely missed the need to take into consideration the EL's socialization and communication levels. Truthfully I knew very little about levels of language development. I had personally studied two languages in addition to English in high school (back when the earth was cooling, as I like to tell my students) but I had never attempted to learn a content area in a language other than English. I had no idea that each level of language development might require the teacher to implement different strategies to make the content comprehensible to the student and to enable the EL to demonstrate mastery of the lesson.

With my limited preparation I saw too many commonalities between traditional instructional practices in lesson design and instructional techniques and teaching English learners. I believed a list of ESOL strategies would be a perfectly acceptable approach to helping the ELs learn a content area because I saw the list of ESOL modifications as simply best practices, strategies all teachers should be employing. I believed that if we prepared our teacher candidates to be competent in these strategies they would be successful with all English learners, thus I designed and implemented the ESOL module based on this understanding. At that time, I failed to make the necessary connection to the EL's level of language development and how that would impact the success or failure of the modification selected, and was pleased when teacher candidates demonstrated an awareness of the need for modifications for ELs and thrilled when they correctly described specific modifications in the ESOL assignment.

As I reflect on the first ESOL modules created, I cringe with disappointment. We expected the teacher candidates to sort through websites that offered reading strategies for contact area teachers and select instructional strategies that could be incorporated into a lesson for all learners. They were asked to write an explanation of how these instructional strategies could then be modified for an English learner in the class. No mention was made of the ELs level of socialization or language development. I now see how inappropriate, although well-intended, the four assignments were. Our approach could be compared to asking a medical

doctor to randomly select from a list of prescriptions a medication for a patient without taking into consideration the patient's medical history and current symptoms.

Teaching Embedded Courses

The first semester teaching the embedded course can be compared to the blind leading the deaf. Since the general methods class is taken in the first semester of each teacher candidate's program of study I didn't have to worry about knowing less than my students. We were novices together, plodding through a new experience without much of a road map. I was excited about the addition of the ESOL module to the course and eager to work out the kinks, if any were revealed. I piloted the module in two sections during a summer semester, before using it in all sections in the fall. I naively believed that we had created a dynamic learning experience that would prepare teacher candidates for the difficult task they would encounter when planning lessons for English learners during their internships and eventual teaching careers.

I didn't have any concerns about the new content. I had created it and like all inventors I was eager to see it work and be successful. When the assignments were turned in I must admit that I was surprised. They took a long time to grade and the "detailed explanation" requested was not always provided. I have a standard operating procedure in all my classes that students can provide a draft assignment for my review before the due date and I will grade it and give them feedback on how to receive full credit, if necessary. I ended up seeing many versions of the ESOL assignment.

Fortunately the story does not end here. Several years later our college hired an ESOL coordinator who was knowledgeable, gentle and kind. After studying the initial ESOL modules in the infused classes she met with each course shepherd to discuss possible revisions. She offered one-on-one assistance and facilitated sharing opportunities between faculty in the College of Arts and Humanities who teach one of the stand-alone ESOL courses and faculty in the College of Education who teach the infused courses. During the 2007 FCTL summer conference we collaborated to create new modules.

The new general methods ESOL module included three case studies created by the college ESOL coordinator. These case studies are used in one of the stand-alone ESOL courses and several of the infused courses. They give teacher candidates descriptions of three specific English learners to plan for, each at a different level of language development. The new ESOL module in this general methods course finally addressed the level of language development of the ELs.

The new module is integrated into the microteaching experience of the teacher candidates. As they design their lesson plans for a direct teach with a poster, they have to create and explain the specific modifications in the lesson for Edith, Edgar, and Tasir, the three case study students. After the teacher candidates have taught the lesson to a group of their classmates, they watch a recording of the lesson to write a professional development plan explaining the success of the strategies used and/or suggestions for how they could improve the lesson for the three case study students. Writing the professional development plan strengthens their skills as reflective practitioners, a habit of performance the college attempts to infuse into

each teacher candidate's program of study. As big as this improvement was, the ESOL module was about to receive a booster shot.

The ESOL coordinator volunteered to provide a simulation for the teacher candidates enrolled in the on-campus sections of this course, most of whom are native English speakers, in which they would experience a content area lesson in Italian or Swiss German. As the native English speakers learned how to make orange juice in either Italian or Swiss German you could literally see the proverbial "light bulb" turning on in their minds. Suddenly they got it. They experienced being a beginning level language learner and could identify with Edith at the same level of language development. The orange juice lesson included a de-briefing and the explicit discussion of the need to diminish the gap between the language demands of the lesson and the ELs' proficiency level through the use of appropriate ESOL strategies. This allowed the teacher candidates to choose the correct strategies and explain their choices. Not only did their ESOL assignments improve following the orange juice lesson, their receptiveness to the embedded EL content increased. They asked more questions. The ESOL module is a completely new and improved experience. Reading the ESOL assignment, the lesson plan and professional development plan, is a totally different experience. Most of the students get it the first time and don't require resubmissions. Other instructors who have incorporated the orange juice lesson into their sections of the general methods class have shared similar positive improvements in the ESOL assignments. The combination of the case study approach combined with the orange juice lesson seems to be a successful methodology.

I believe that the teacher candidates are learning valuable lessons they can use when teaching their present and future English learners. They report changes they make during experiences in their K-12 classroom field experiences. During the course they are required to teach five or six economics education lessons as part of a Junior Achievement placement in an elementary or middle school. As they prepare to teach the Junior Achievement lessons they ask for ideas to include for specific English learners. They share strategies that worked and others that were less successful as we debrief in our class following the field experiences. The orange juice simulation is a pivotal experience, moving our teacher candidates from finishers to learners. They no longer simply finish the assignment; they demonstrate true learning, which I believe, will accompany them into other courses and onward into their future classrooms.

Conclusion

The most important lesson I learned while embedding EL content into my course is to not go it alone. There are resources available at each institution or at other institutions that can and should be utilized. The old adage remains true today, two heads are better than one. A second lesson is to not be afraid to see the experience as a continual process, not a once and done activity. Be willing to grow along with the infusion. Thinking outside of the box can be an over-used expression, but the intent is correct. Don't be afraid to try creative approaches to enrich the teacher candidates' learning. As I follow our teacher candidates into their internship experiences, I believe they will be better prepared to teach effectively their own Ediths, Edgars, and Tasirs. The most appropriate ending to my experience is "to be continued." I am currently doing some Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) research on the impact of ESOL

content infusion on teacher candidates in an early general methods class and I check in with ESOL faculty every now and then in an effort to continue my professional learning. I look forward to the next step in my journey of preparing highly qualified teachers for the diverse learners in their future classrooms.

About the Author

Cynthia J. Hutchinson, EdD, is an associate professor in the School of Teaching, Learning, and Leadership in the College of Education at the University of Central Florida. Her areas of research include best practices in teaching and learning with a recent emphasis on classroom management and bullying prevention in K-12 classrooms.