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Language Policy and the Preparedness of Mainstream Teachers for Serving ELs in K-12 Classrooms

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Abstract

English language learners (ELs) numbers are increasing steadily in classrooms across the United States. Some southeastern states have seen more than a 200% EL student increase in recent years (Migration Policy Institute, 2010). Since the inception of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and especially since Title I “flexibility” revisions, responsibility for educating ELs has shifted from ESOL and bilingual teachers to primarily mainstream teachers. States that have opted out of NCLB under flexibility revisions are no longer as accountable to the U. S. Department of Education for the education of ELs. States and school districts are no longer required to include some EL test scores in accountability measures. Mainstream classroom teachers may no longer receive quality support from ESOL professionals in educating mainstreamed ELs. Are mainstream teachers prepared to educate ELs? This study examines the perceptions that mainstream classroom teachers have regarding their preparedness in serving the ELs in their classrooms. Findings indicated four emergent categories of mainstream teachers: 1) teachers who knew virtually nothing about serving ELs, 2) teachers who presumed they would send ELs out of their classroom for instruction and assessment, 3) teachers who sought instructional and assessment assistance, and 4) teachers who were familiar with best practices for teaching ELs. Mainstream teachers in this study who were being held accountable for EL student achievement overall lacked knowledge or had misconceptions about the strategies used to teach and assess ELs. Current policy shaping the education of ELs is unlikely to assure they receive an adequate education.

Keywords: Teaching English language learners, Second Language acquisition, mainstream classroom teachers, Teacher Preparedness, K-12 education

Introduction

The population of ELs in the United States has increased exponentially between 2000 and 2010 (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2012). The Migration Policy Institute in 2010 reported that between 1998 and 2008 the EL population grew 56% while the general school population grew less than 10%. The EL population in some southeastern states, including Alabama where our study is based, grew 200% (Migration Policy Institute, 2010) in that time period and continues to grow. The English language learner (EL) student population in the U.S. comprised 10% of all students in 2005 (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL), 2005; National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition 2005) and by 2026 ELs will comprise 25% of K-12 students (Garcia, 2002). Hurricanes Katrina in 2005 and Ivan in 2004 brought increased EL populations to the Gulf Coast of the United States as immigrants arrived to help with rebuilding and many of these people remained (Mobile County Public School System (MCPSS), 2006, MCPSS 2007, Baldwin County Board of Education (BCBE), 2007, BCBE, 2008). Alabama House Bill 56 (Alabama's 2011 anti-immigration legislation) caused a temporary reduction of Hispanic immigrants to Alabama, though immigration to other southeast states continued to escalate. ELs have returned to Alabama since much of HB 56 was overturned. There is a need for mainstream teachers to be prepared to work with these increasing and diverse populations of ELs coming into their classrooms. There are shortages of trained and qualified teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) across the nation (National Education Association (NEA), 2008; State of Iowa, 2008) leaving mainstream classroom teachers responsible for the education of ELs sometimes with limited assistance from ESOL professionals (Abdelrahim, Schneider, D'Emilio, & Ryan, 2007). In related ongoing research we have found that some states, ours included, have never required ESOL teachers to have ESOL credentials. Recent developments include reducing the teaching roles of ESOL teachers and elimination of appropriate accommodations for ELs. Meanwhile, ELs are required to reach high standards in the acquisition of English for social and academic purposes. Under NCLB, schools were required to demonstrate that ELs make continuous progress – meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goals for both language and in age-appropriate content areas, especially mathematics, through standardized testing (after thirty months in U.S. schools – with some exceptions) (Morrison, 2006, Diaz-Rico, 2008). Exceptions have been increased since 2006 under NCLB flexibility through revised Title I regulations. Under these revised regulations

States and Local Education Agencies [LEAs] remain responsible for providing appropriate and adequate instruction to recently arrived LEP students so they will gain English language skills and be able to master content knowledge in reading/language arts and other subjects (U.S. Department of Education (USDOE), 2006).

However, states are exempt from accountability for educating recently arrived ELs since there is no longer any requirement to include them in testing or AYP.

According to Kathleen Leos of the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA), The role of every teacher in every classroom in the nation has never been more important than today. The teacher, who is the key component within the standards reform model, must link core academic instruction to the content standards set by the state. In classrooms with language diverse populations, teachers must also ensure that the

curriculum and teaching strategies reflect an alignment with English Language Proficiency Standards (NWRL, 2005).

Despite this, Moss and Puma (1995) found that ELs received lower grades, scored lower than their non-EL classmates on reading and math standardized tests, and were perceived to have lower academic abilities by their mainstream classroom teachers. The 2012 National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that although there have been some improvements in these areas, the national standardized test scores of Hispanic youth continue to be lower than their Euro-American and African American counterparts (NCES, 2012). Clair (1995) found that mainstream classroom teachers believe that good teachers can teach ELs without any special preparation as long as they are provided with appropriate materials. These teachers indicated that professional development was not needed. Clair suggested that this is because teachers desire “quick fixes” for complex educational problems. Clair indicates that teachers actually need “knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to socially integrate ESL students in the mainstream classroom” (1995: 194-195). Almost two decades later, our research shows that although mainstream teachers need the knowledge, skills and attitudes to teach ELs little has changed in EL-related teacher preparation.

Method

Connected to these issues as former ESOL teachers and now as pre-service and in-service teacher educators, we understand the critical need to examine what mainstream teachers know about working with ELs, their misconceptions, and what they need to learn. This study focuses on three questions asked to mainstream classroom teachers (1) if they felt prepared to work with diverse populations including ELs, (2) what they would do if they had an EL in their classroom, and (3) how they communicate and collaborate with EL parents/guardians.

Sixty-three mainstream K-12 classroom teachers were interviewed from 2000 through 2008 focusing on their teaching experiences, knowledge and practices. A follow-up set of forty-one teachers were interviewed from 2011 through 2013. Answers to three questions specific to working with EL populations were extracted for this study. Participants were interviewed using structured, open-ended interviews (Spradley, 1979). This approach allowed the respondents to disclose their ideas and viewpoints without influence by the interviewer (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) while making the interviews of the different respondents systematic (Patton, 2002).

Respondents were selected using criterion sampling (Patton, 2002). Respondents were all certified K-12 teachers with five or more years of experience. This ensured that respondents had at least some formal teacher training and teachers of varying experience and certification level would be included. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. A grounded theory approach was used to analyze the data, allowing themes to emerge (Strauss, 1987). Transcripts were read and coded by both researchers who identified key emergent themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data was compiled into general preset domains and then reorganized into domains and sub-domains that emerged. Coding was guided by comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and included comparisons of coded elements in terms of the emergent domains and sub-domains. Emergent domains for each author were discussed for agreement and disagreement.

Results

The data revealed that mainstream classroom teachers in the study had many intuitive ideas, some appropriate, but many based in a well-meaning but uninformed desire to help EL students learn. We have presented the data in terms of what participant teachers know that is supported by current ESOL theory and best practice, misconceptions teachers have about working with ELs, and missing information mainstream teachers should know in order to successfully teach ELs.

Two emergent domains and eight subsets were identified. The two emergent domains were that the teacher had or did not have knowledge of best practice for ELS. The subsets are listed under each domain followed by explanations and examples for each.

Teacher does not have knowledge of accommodations for ELs Teacher would use “common-sense/intuitive” accommodations

Teachers came up with ideas on their own they thought would be helpful to teach and assess ELs. These ideas sometimes appeared to be intuitive, while others appeared to be taken from special education modifications. Examples under this domain included “repeating directions over and over again,” using Phonics, “allowing them to speak before the class on topics from their home countries that conflicted with what they were learning [in class], and often discussing these topics,” using “books with different font sizes,” giving them more time on tests, “simplifying tests by breaking some words down,” making sure they could hear you – even having them sit close to be sure they could hear you, and to “get parents involved to help at home.” One teacher said she was “teaching the children words that go with pictures by giving the students pictures with the word printed on a card as a good way to increase the children’s vocabulary and to make them more fluent in speaking the English language.” Teach them “simple words like book” first. One teacher would have ELs “read the test aloud to me to make sure they understand and are saying the words correctly.” Another would “have to give something that is in writing or on tape for the student.” Several would use word walls with common vocabulary EL students could point to when trying to communicate.

In other cases teachers expected to rely on their own knowledge of another language (presuming it would be that of the EL). Some teachers who did not speak languages other than English indicated they would learn the EL’s language to various extents so that “they could learn from each other.” One teacher taught the whole class American Sign Language and used that to communicate with her EL.

Teacher Would Send ELs Out of Their Classroom for Instruction

Teachers who would send students out of their classrooms gave several reasons: their school does not have an ESOL teacher while another school in the system could provide services; they lacked the knowledge to serve the EL and so sent them to a “resource room” to watch movies/videos; that it was unfair to the teacher to have to try teaching that student another language when she had several other students in her classroom; and, that the EL would learn better in a self-contained classroom where the “language learning process was specifically

emphasized.” Teachers would also send ELs out of the classroom with bilingual paraprofessionals to teach the content material at the same time it was to be presented in the mainstream classroom.

Teacher Would Seek Assistance

Teachers who would seek advice from non-ESOL professionals suggested several possible sources of assistance: “teachers that know languages spoken by ELs could be utilized to assist with instruction”— Spanish teachers were typically identified as potentially helpful; English Language Arts teachers were also seen as potential advisors; and, the counselor and principal were perceived possible sources of assistance, counselors specifically as the liaison (go between) to the ESOL teacher.

A few teachers indicated they would directly ask the ESOL teacher what to do: floating ESOL teachers are resources and can be directly asked what to do; finding and working with an ESOL teacher who speaks the EL’s language; or, collaborating with the ESOL teachers on writing appropriate lessons.

Teachers reported they would seek out training in accommodation approaches through several means: by “taking the courses necessary to help the EL,” through online resources, and, by attending workshops on ESOL approaches such as the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) approach (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2007). One teacher she would use the ESL suggestions in her teacher’s guide. Several would use a locally created online teacher resource site which gives suggestions for teaching ELs by grade level, content area and state standard.

Frequently teachers indicated that interpreters would be a preferred means of accommodation: the most mentioned interpreter would be another student who speaks the EL’s language; however, community or “outside” volunteers, family members, and school system bilingual paraprofessionals were also indicated. Several teachers indicated they would only use an interpreter to communicate with the EL’s non-English-speaking parents. The 2011-2013 data included a number of teachers who would use online translation programs (mostly Google Translate) to communicate with parents and to translate lessons.

A few teachers associated ESOL with Special Education. They reported that they would “work with the special education department and see what would need to be done to accommodate that child.” They would then use the various accommodations recommended by a Special Education teacher. These included pointing to picture cards she would carry around with her and refer to, sitting the EL close to the teacher so the EL could hear her, giving the child lessons on tape or in writing, and providing large print materials.

Some teachers expected to rely on volunteers to assist them with ELs. Volunteers included “parent volunteers that traveled with them [ELs] throughout the day,” and a variety of community volunteers who would read with the EL in his/her language; and provide bilingual tutoring. Most of these teachers did not know where these volunteers originated, just that they would have to be located somehow. Other assistance came from people in their resource center

who dealt specifically with ELs, the counselor, and other students from the same language or culture.

Teacher Had No Idea What to Do

Teachers in this last subset indicated they did not know how to teach an EL because they had never had an EL in their class before or believed that the EL did not need accommodations due to the nature of the content material (music, PE, math) being “languageless.” Several teachers who were frustrated with unsuccessful attempts at communication gave the ELs “separate” work (euphemism for had them draw pictures and color).

Teacher Does Have Knowledge of Accommodations for ELs Teacher Uses Appropriate Teaching Strategies

Very few teachers who participated in this study had formal training in working with ELs. Those that did had attended SIOP (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2007) training workshops and knew “you have a language objective as well as your content objective,” and to use visuals “like pictures and charts and graphic organizers and things that aren’t just full of words to help them understand the things you’re telling them.” One teacher had taken an ESOL graduate class at the university and kept her books as references. One teacher indicated that if she had an EL she would “take the classes necessary to help the ESOL Teachers.” Several teachers had learned from the ESOL teacher how to work with ELs. They learned to “read test questions aloud to allow for better comprehension,” to “use anything from hand signals to other forms of suggestive communication,” to “speak slowly and clearly,” to use visuals, to mime instructions, to “read assignments to them, [and] limit their choices,” to “have a print rich environment in English and in their language,” and to “give her choices for answers and select questions to ask or not ask.” An ESOL teacher taught one teacher to use “picture cards velcroed on an apron so I could just point to the picture and they would understand from the pictures if I wanted them to sit down or be quiet.” Another teacher would give “ELs a page of words, they write down the words that they don’t understand, and then go over the words with them.” One teacher knew that the district ESOL department had a website where one could find ESOL suggestions for curriculum standards. Several teachers indicated they collaborated with the ESOL teachers on lesson plans. Learning or using the native language of the EL is an accommodation various teachers indicated. Some know “a little Spanish” while most indicated they would “learn a few Spanish words to accommodate those children.” Some teachers used bilingual dictionaries to communicate. One teacher “got together [with the EL] and shared some words from each language so that we could communicate with each other.” Still other teachers relied on electronic translation systems for communication with the EL or the EL’s parents. Teachers also used print media for translation such as dictionaries and “books that translate with pictures” (picture dictionaries).

Teacher Uses Appropriate Curricular Materials

Popular among this subset of teachers is accommodation using bilingual materials or approaches and materials in the student’s native language in the classroom. This often took place as bilingual labeling of items around the classroom. Some teachers would “display vocabulary words around the room” in Spanish and English or “have a board that has the English words on

one side and on the other side has the Spanish words.” One teacher used a version of the textbook in Spanish and the “Spanish CD that comes with the [English version of the] textbook” having the student “play it while reading [the textbook in] English.” Another teacher realized the “in computer there’s a lot of things you can do that are Spanish or that convert” lessons into Spanish. Still another “uses Spanish/English tapes to help the child learn English during the reading block time.” Some teachers had Spanish language workbooks and tests, an ancillary book to give questions in Spanish according to the material, trade books in Spanish and “literature from their language,” or just “something in his language in the subject.” One teacher mentioned allowing ELs to write in English and also in Spanish.” Finally, two teachers would use audio-visuals that are multicultural and multilingual, including books on tapes. With only two exceptions, teachers only mentioned materials in Spanish. One of these two teachers bought a Thai dictionary and had her student teacher “look online and found some Thai words online” that were then used these to make bilingual flashcards. Teachers also sent home correspondence in Spanish though no teacher mentioned sending home correspondence in other languages. None of the teachers questioned that the student or parent would be literate in the home language.

Teacher Uses Peer Tutoring Assistance for the EL

Many teachers would pair their EL with another student, who spoke the same language no matter the level, an EL more advanced in English, or an English-speaking student who was advanced in the content area. In some cases teachers would try to “group them together if there were more than one” or “put them with a student who speaks their language;” while others would “put them with my best student;” or simply “put them with other students who would help them” through a lot of peer teaching because “students learn from their peers – it just comes more natural.” In some cases peer tutoring would be only for limited content area. One teacher indicated she would only use peer tutoring if it did not interfere with the peer tutor’s learning. Students who were not in the EL’s classes were also brought in to tutor the EL.

Teacher Uses Appropriate Assessment Strategies

Some teachers used appropriate modifications on tests and in grading assessments. One teacher expressed, “I sometimes shorten responses and definitely don’t grade grammar for them, and try to limit choices” and “don’t take off points for grammar or spelling and sometimes I may not expect an explanation for things if they can just list it.” Teachers were generally “much more lenient on [language related grading]” and created “special tests... to accommodate their needs.”

Comparison of 2000-2008 and 2010-2013 Data Sets

Approximately 25% of teachers in the 2010-2013 data set had some informed ideas concerning how to accommodate ELs compared to less than 10% in the 2000-2008 data set. Many of the teachers who knew appropriate accommodations indicated they had learned them from an ESOL teacher.

Teachers in the later data set continued to expect help from others (Special Education and ESOL professionals, aides, translators, and parents), use “common sense” approaches, would send students out of the classroom for help, tutor the student, use special ESOL materials and

especially translated materials, and treat all students “the same” as their primary solution to working with ELs. Teachers were less likely to seek training but were more likely to use technology and include the EL student’s culture and language in their lessons. Teachers continued to have misconceptions about ELs, including that they were foreign born.

Discussion

Many teachers indicated that they would use translation as the preferred approach to working with ELs. A frequent strategy was to send the EL to bilingual paraprofessionals, Spanish and other language teachers, peers, or parent and community volunteers that spoke the EL’s first language (L1). These individuals would use instructional materials that were of the EL’s L1, rather than using appropriate teaching strategies to teach the content in English. Some teachers indicated they would give some assessments in the EL’s L1; however, most teachers assumed that if the EL was presented the information in L1, then the EL would learn the information and then translate it into English for the assessments that were to be given with the mainstream class. Few teachers understood the importance of or expressed knowledge about collaborating with ESOL professionals (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2010).

In cases where the mainstream teacher used a translation approach to teaching ELs but did not speak the EL’s language, the teacher might have had little understanding of what the EL was actually learning, what problems the EL was encountering in comprehending the content, or what content vocabulary the EL was developing in English. Intuitively these teachers concluded it was best and easiest to teach ELs content in their L1. Although we agree that good bilingual education conducted by a qualified teacher is the most effective approach to teaching ELs (Morrison, 2006), the individuals doing the L1 teaching via translation cases may *not* be qualified to teach the specific content. Bilingual paraprofessionals, language teachers, peers, and parent and community volunteers may simply be translating the text rather than understanding and explaining the content they are attempting to teach the EL (Nero, 2005).

There were several critical issues that teachers who had received training through ESL teacher workshops or academic courses did not mention. The more obvious omission was the lack of language acquisition theory. Language acquisition stages proposed by Krashen (1981) and applied linguistic knowledge such as transfer errors and overgeneralization as outlined by Brown (2007) did not appear in the responses. Teachers did not mention any understanding or application of the theories of BICS and CALP (Cummins, 1979). Additionally, there was no mention of linguisticism and its effect on the education of ELs or the negative effect on academic progress for those ELs that are viewed as “disabled” and needing Special Education related accommodations (Nieto & Bode, 2012).

Cross-cultural issues and culturally specific learning styles were rarely mentioned by teachers. It was assumed that the EL would assimilate into the school culture as quickly as possible without assistance and students would quickly adapt to class teaching/learning styles that were alien to them. ~~Only one~~ of the participants realized that class participation depended not only on language proficiency, but also on the use of culturally responsive pedagogy (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008). Few of the participants knew the importance of communicating with the parents of ELs though some had made the effort to send home

information in the parents' native language or to find a translator for parent-teacher meetings. (Seungyoun, Butler & Tippens, 2007; Derwing, DeCorby, Ichikawa & Jamieson, 1999).

Teachers did not often mention instructional strategies to be used with ELs such visuals, Realia, graphic organizers, and even gestures to augment comprehension (Reed & Railsback, 2003). Scaffolding that connected content to the culture maximizing prior EL background knowledge. With one exception, teachers did not mention the need to include both language objectives and content objectives in lesson plans for ELs. Finally, what was most troublesome was that the majority of teachers viewed teaching ELs as a problem to be solved rather than a rewarding opportunity. Youngs & Youngs (2001) suggest that positive teacher attitudes towards EL students can be predicted by their exposure to a diversity of cultures and diversity issues through multicultural education courses and exposure to ELs in field experiences.

Limitations of the Study

This study focuses on the example one state in which teachers are not required to have academic background nor training in ESOL to teach ELs. It is a snap-shot of what can happen in a situation where teachers are not required to have training in a content area in which they will teach. Comparisons are made of teacher preparedness within the state. Though it is beyond the scope of this study, further research comparing the results of this study with teacher preparedness in a state or states that require academic preparation to teach ELs would be informative. A more comprehensive study comparing the various levels of required teacher ESOL preparedness across the United States could be conducted, followed by a study comparing how these requirements affect teacher-perceived preparedness.

Conclusions

Mainstream teachers in this study were generally underprepared to adequately serve EL student populations. If ESOL teachers are inadequately prepared or if they are unavailable, mainstream teachers must be ready to appropriately educate to ELs. Despite decreased accountability for recently arrived EL success, schools *will* be accountable for their achievement after this exemption no longer applies. Teachers need to be made aware of how ELs can be an asset to their classroom (Nieto & Bode, 2012). They also need to be made aware of best practices for teaching mainstreamed ELs. Mainstream teachers in this study who had not been educated in best practices for accommodating ELs either resorted to strategies they would implement for their mainstream students, attempt to solve the EL "problem" by sending them out of their classrooms, or would seek advice by colleagues on what to do with the EL. Even though their intuitive ideas were creative in some instances, most were ineffective and were unprepared to work with the EL population (Cline & Necochea, 2003). Teachers who have the knowledge will employ best practices. Mainstream teachers in this study who had knowledge of EL accommodations used appropriate strategies to teach ELs. Teacher education programs need to follow the example of universities such as Miami University of Ohio and Boston College in providing training for pre-service and mainstream classroom teachers so that they can effectively serve ELs (Longview Foundation, 2008).

Teachers and teacher educators need to be made aware of policy and law regarding the education of ELs. They also need to be made aware of cross-cultural issues and theory that will allow them to serve ELs (Youngs & Youngs, 2001, Nieto & Bode, 2012). Many of those teachers and almost all of the mainstream teachers who had limited knowledge of how to accommodate ELs, were also unaware of legal policies that governed servicing ELs, the cross-cultural issues that influenced EL success, first and second language acquisition differences, language learning stages, culturally specific learning styles or authentic assessment strategies for ELs. Such knowledge establishes the foundation for success in educating ELs.

Mainstream teachers can be provided with the knowledge and skills needed to help ELs succeed. NCLB replaced the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 with a mandate that ELs learn English quickly (Morrison, 2006). NCLB also require that all students, including ELs learn state standards. Except in districts where there are sufficient ELs to provide sheltered instruction, mainstream teachers are responsible for teaching content and language standards to ELs. Thus, current education policies mandate that mainstream teachers know appropriate approaches to teaching ELs. The study results clearly indicate that mainstream teachers who do not know appropriate approaches to teaching and assessing ELs, nevertheless, want these students to succeed. Advocates for equitable education of ELs must continue to promote the inclusion of culturally and linguistically responsive teacher education.

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