Chapter 95

Teachers' Experience as Foreign Language Online Learners:
Developing Teachers' Linguistic, Cultural, and Technological Awareness

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ABSTRACT

Due to the continuing linguistic and cultural diversity among K-12 students in the US and across the English-speaking world and the increasing influence of digital technologies on learning, this qualitative study was conducted to explore pre-service teachers' perceptions of learning a foreign language online, and how such experience influences teaching linguistically, culturally, and technologically diverse students. Participants comprised 35 teacher education students, all of whom took a 9-week online Chinese language/culture course. A variety of surveys with closed and open-ended questions were conducted before, during, and after the course. Data were collected online and then coded and analyzed. The participants' responses suggested that: 1) new forms of online learning were engaging to teacher-learners with diverse learning styles, prior technological experience, needs, and goals; 2) the pre-service teachers perceived that online foreign language learning during their teacher education program enhanced their linguistic, cultural, and technological awareness; and 3) the participants felt that they benefited from being prepared to work with linguistic, cultural, and technological diversity in classrooms. This study has implications for similar contexts around the world.

INTRODUCTION

According to the literature, there are a variety of different trends that are currently driving education in the US and around the world such as the government legislation (e.g., the No Child Left Behind Act), standardized testing, technology-assisted learning, and multicultural education (Crawford, 2004; New London Group, 2000; Naiditch, 2013). Two important trends of note for classroom teachers are the continuing increase in the linguistic and cultural diversity of students, particularly English language

learners (ELLs) and the influence of digital technologies on 21st century learners (Coiro, Karchmer & Walpole, 2006; Greenhow, Robelia and Hughes, 2009; New London Group, 2000). These trends lead to a growing need for teachers to gain experience in language and culture as well as exposure to new forms of digital learning. However, pre-service teachers may not have expertise in teaching linguistically and culturally diverse students or with the use of digital technologies in classrooms (Zeichner, 1992). Many monolingual English teachers, particularly in the US, may lack linguistic and cultural awareness that helps them to understand the obstacles that English language learners can experience in mainstream classrooms. Not having grown up in the digital age or with technology in their classrooms, some teachers may also lack the technological awareness to facilitate all students' learning.

Teacher educators might be able to help pre-service teachers better serve linguistically and culturally diverse students in the digital age if more were known about changing pre-service teachers' understandings of linguistically, culturally, and technologically diverse students. By gathering data on how pre-service teachers experience learning a foreign language as well as online learning and how they plan to apply their experiences to their future classrooms, this study begins to fill a gap in the literature. This study uses a qualitative methodology to explore native-English-speaking pre-service teachers' perceptions of learning a foreign language online and whether they perceive this experience enhances their linguistic and cultural awareness as well as technological awareness so that they will be more prepared to teach linguistically and culturally diverse students in a digital age. The study begins with a review of the literature on two important educational trends, focusing on challenges and possibilities for teachers and students. This is followed by a presentation of the methodology and results, and the study concludes with discussion and implications for research and practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Two Trends Among 21 Century Learners

The two trends of a continuing increase in the linguistic and cultural diversity of students in K-12 classrooms and the influence of digital technologies on 21st century learners are having crucial impacts on education, especially in the case of ELLs (Crawford, 2004; Egbert, 2009; New London Group, 2000). Influences of these trends and the resultant teachers' challenges are discussed below.

Linguistic and Cultural Diversity

According to Perez (2004), linguistically diverse refers to "students whose first language or home language is either a language other than English or a language other than the middle-class, mainstream English used in schools" (p.6) while culturally diverse refers to "students who may be distinguished by ethnicity, social class, and/or language" (p.6). Literature from the past several decades shows a large increase in the number of linguistically and culturally diverse students in US classrooms (Crawford, 2004). For example, the U.S. minority population, increased from 86.9 million to 111.9 million between 2000 and 2010, which represented a growth of 29 percent. One influence of the continuing diversity of population is the increasing number of linguistically and culturally diverse students. The English language learners among this population can experience many challenges in mainstream classrooms (Herrell & Jordan, 2008; Perez, 2004). Some students with limited academic preparation and/or confidence may experi-

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