

Chapter 5

Learning to Teach English Language Learners as “a Side Note”: TESOL Pre–Service Teachers’ Perspectives of Their Professional Preparation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines nine TESOL minor preservice teachers’ (PSTs’) perspectives of their preparation to teach ELLs in the US, including their perceptions regarding learning in formal teacher education courses and their experiences outside the program. Findings revealed that their formal ELL learning in the program courses was limited in scope and depth due to the program’s “just good teaching ideology” that treated teaching ELLs the same as other student groups, and its knowledge-transmission model that provided few opportunities to apply the knowledge acquired in the courses. The PSTs actively sought ELL learning opportunities outside the teacher education program. Despite these efforts, the PSTs felt unprepared to teach ELLs. The findings suggest that to fully prepare PSTs for ELLs, teacher education programs must shift ELL education from “a side note” to systematic and explicit integration in the core content and spaces of teacher development.

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INTRODUCTION

American schools have witnessed a rapid growth in the number of English language learners (ELLs) in recent years, posing tremendous challenges for teachers to address the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in the classrooms (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). However, ELLs' schooling experiences have been problematic due to the persistent achievement gaps between students classified as ELLs and students who are non-ELLs and the high dropout rates among the ELLs (Howard, 2015; McCrocklin & Link, 2016). ELLs' underachievement in American schools calls for urgent interventions, especially the measures to better train teachers who are often underprepared to teach in diverse classrooms (Kayi-Aydar, 2015; de Jong, & Harper, 2008).

However, a growing body of research has revealed many teacher education programs are failing in readying pre-service teachers (PSTs) to teach English learners. For example, in a survey study of 62 pre-service teachers who were doing student teaching at a Midwestern university in the U. S., Durgunoğlu and Hughes (2010) revealed that these teachers felt unprepared to address the needs of ELLs; and the pre-service teachers who had less knowledge and felt less prepared had more negative attitudes toward teaching ELLs. Similarly, findings on PSTs' shared feeling of needing more ELL training are reported among pre-service teachers across the United States (e.g., Alford, 2013; Fry, 2016; Song, 2016; Torres & Tackett, 2016). Indeed, as Durgunoğlu and Hughes (2010) pointed out, teacher education courses neither sensitize PSTs to cultural and linguistic differences they can expect to encounter in their future classrooms nor provide them with actual tools and strategies to address these differences. It is, therefore, not surprising that over 76% of the teacher education programs in the United States are not meeting the expectation in preparing teachers to teach ELLs (Maxwell, 2014).

Among the widespread unpreparedness, however, it has been found that PSTs who had received some types of ELL, English as a second language (ESL), teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL), or bilingual certification/endorsement reported significantly higher levels of self-efficacy regarding ELLs than those who did not have those experiences, but they still felt their preparation was inadequate (Smith, 2011; Wong, Fehr, Agnello, & Crooks, 2012). In a comparative study of the perceptions between bilingual and general education majors teacher candidates, Lo and Inoue (2011) found that bilingual education teacher candidates felt more prepared than general education majors. Lo and Inoue attributed such a difference to the number of ELL/ESL courses taken by the two groups of students as bilingual students took five ELL/ESL courses while general education students only took one such course. However, despite feeling having somewhat more prepared, all of them indicated they still needed more training in ELLs. Similar findings are also validated by other studies on in-service teachers who reported that teachers who had more courses and training had higher sense of self-efficacy in teaching ELLs (Correll, 2016; Kolano & Childers-McKee, 2014; Moukita, 2016).

Indeed, current studies on PSTs pursuing a TESOL certification or endorsement programs have shown that more coursework (e.g., Smith, 2011; Uzum, Petró, & Berg, 2014) or innovative technological tools such as mobile phones, blogs, and wiki (Kim & Jang, 2014) can help PSTs gain positive attitudes, practice particular teaching strategies such as scaffolded instruction (Many et al., 2009), and develop teacher identities (Jackson, 2015). Some teacher education programs have been reported to address these barriers by specifying the knowledge and attitudes necessary to teach ELLs and including practices to develop such knowledge and attitudes (e.g., Bunch, 2013; Lucas & Villegas, 2013; Turkan, de Oliveira, Lee, & Phelps, 2014; Zhang & Stephens, 2013). While many of these studies have set forth greatly needed guiding principles regarding how to orchestrate learning experiences in the course work

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