FOSTERING CULTURAL COMPETENCY IN PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS: INTER-DEPARTMENTAL SYLLABUS CONSTRUCTION

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

English Language Learners (ELLs) are the fastest growing group of students in American public classrooms (Van Roekel, 2011). Van Roekel reported that the number of ELL students in classrooms across the United States doubled in 23 states from 1995 to 2005. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2011), the total number of ELLs in public schools increased by 51% from 1997 – 2009.

The term ELL describes those students who arrive to schools with minimal or partial proficiency in English due to having first learned a different language in the home (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005). These children can be categorized as being limited in the national language, bilingual or essentially monolingual. August (2008) used “language minority” (p. 2) to depict these students. Garcia, Arias, Murri, and Serna (2010) suggested this term implied negativity. They preferred the term ELL. August (2008) reported that because of having proficiency in a language other than the national language, English language proficiency may not yet be developed to a point where they would benefit from having English-only instruction on content areas, which research suggests might take a minimum of five years to attain (Cummins, 2008).

Calderon, Slavin and Sanchez (2011) described ELLs as including those that are newly arrived as well as second-generation ELLs who are termed as “long-term English learners” (p. 104). ELL is a term these authors rejected in that it combines varying groups of language learners into one entity that appears bounded. Estimates of ELLs who were born in the United States place the percentage at 84% (Batalova, J. & McHugh, M., 2010).

THE CONTEXT FOR THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER

The cultural gap between a growing ELL population and the predominately white teaching force is a reality (Walker-Dalhouse, Sanders, & Dalhouse, 2009). Based on a survey done with 2500 randomly selected public school teachers, an analysis of demographics revealed that 84% of the teacher profession is still “overwhelmingly female” and “strikingly” white (Feistritzer, 2011, p. 11). Teacher attitudes are well intended, but often limited in the understanding of second language acquisition theories and the ability to connect students’ cultural backgrounds to content areas (Walker-Dalhouse, Sanders, & Dalhouse, 2009, p. 337). Often a misunderstanding of the time needed to be proficient in English impacts teacher attitudes of ELL performance and motivation in the classroom (Garcia et al.,
These authors described the critical shortage of teachers prepared to respond to ELL-specific academic and classroom needs (p. 133).

The realities of ELL performance in classrooms contribute to growing concerns over the persistent achievement and cultural gaps between ELLs and native-English speaking students as well as with their classroom teachers (Payan & Nettles, 2008, p. 3). Kindler (2002) reported that often these students fail to achieve state educational accountability testing requirements for reading. Ruiz-de-Velasco and Fix (2000) reported that ELLs experience higher drop-out rates and are more often placed in lower ability groupings.

**TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

The knowledge and skills that differentiate successful ELL teaching are built upon the best practices of effective teaching but are further extended to include the ability to communicate with the student and family in meaningful ways, knowledge of first and second language theory, and cultural awareness (Gandara et al., 2005). Nieto (2006) described specific practices as including knowledge of and appreciation for the languages, cultures and experiences that children bring to the classroom. Wong-Fillmore and Snow (2002) suggested that teachers would benefit from basic preparation in educational linguistics. Wong-Fillmore and Snow further characterized successful teachers of ELLs with five major descriptors, communicators being first on the list (p. 10). They emphasized that teachers must structure their own language output for maximum clarity for students of diversity. These authors described that teachers must understand and apply those strategies that facilitate understanding what ELL students are saying and meaning. This would involve an understanding of the differences between the teacher’s primary language and that of the ELL.

Lucas and Villegas (2011) asserted that without a foundation of linguistic resources, classroom teachers are limited in their ability to teach responsively (p. 56). Nieto (2006) typified the necessary skills as having a sense of mission and passion for their students with a developed strength of improvisation to think on their feet and find the cultural bridges to connect students with knowledge.

**PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS**

Recent studies show that often pre-service teachers graduating from educational programs lack the specific strategies for teaching ELLs and are ill-equipped to support both the academic content development simultaneously with the English-language development (Webster & Valeo, 2011). Many teachers are taught to celebrate holidays and appreciate cultural differences of ELLs instead of systematic training on directed instructional strategies on language acquisition theory, cultural understandings, explicit ELL strategies and open discussion of challenges (pp. 105 – 106).

By placing pre-service teachers into ELL contexts and requiring reflection, comfort with difference can be fostered (Garcia et al, 2010). These authors advocated situating pre-service teachers in ELL contexts where they are given multiple opportunities to explore and reflect about their own cultural and personal values. Hands-on experience with diversity is paramount to decrease the mismatch between teachers and ELLs (Terrill, M. & Mark, D., 2000). These authors found that when surveyed about degree of comfort about future placements in schools, 67% of pre-service teachers indicated they were more comfortable in schools with children who looked like them.

In a study by Pappamihiel (2007) where pre-service teachers were placed into authentic situations and asked to critically examine their attitudes and beliefs, they often came away with new epiphanies and changes in attitudes about working with ELLs. He referred to this framework as having “a situated
Vaughn (2005) examined the effect of short cross-cultural experiences on pre-service teachers and found from the reflections that it helped them to be more culturally aware and to seriously reflect on their thinking.

The challenge for Schools of Education is to provide experiences and curriculum that facilitate exposure and experiences with ELLs and encourage reflection of attitudes about diversity (Leonard & Leonard, 2006; Terrill, M. & Mark, D., 2000). Many SOE programs have responded to diversity challenges as they have addressed requirements from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) Standard 4 (diversity). Peacock (2001) recommended initiating ELL instruction and assignments early in a teaching program to address attitudes and beliefs through reflection and to grow the awareness of pre-service teachers of their own levels of comfort and beliefs about ELL students and classrooms. By providing cross-cultural experiences and focused curricula with reflection and space for processing, pre-service teachers are given multiple opportunities to examine attitudes about diversity (Walker-Dalhouse et al., 2009).

In a report to the Washington State legislature, ELLs increased to 8.3% of the student population in the years of 2009-2010, representing a 2.2% increase from the previous school year (Malagon, McCold, & Hernandez, Educating ELLs in Washington State 2009-2010: Report to Legislature, 2011, p. v). Washington was 10th in the nation for ELL enrollment and the median time spent in services for ELLs was 2.8 years. On state academic assessment standards, ELLs remained behind their English-speaking counterparts (p. v). In a report the following year, results had not improved and concern was expressed about the growing achievement gap of those ELLs who had transitioned into English-only classrooms where test results indicated that 55% were behind their English counterparts (Malagon, McCold, & Hernandez, December, 2011).

In response to these realities, the Washington State Board of Education and Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB) formed a cultural competency work group to create recommendations which later became requirements regarding effective ELL coursework for pre-service teachers (Strengthening the Continuum of Teacher Development: Professional Educator Standards Board Response to the Charges in ESHB 2261, 2010). This was documented as WAC 181-78A-27.

The cultural competency standards encompass the knowledge and skills needed for classrooms and are organized into essential competencies which include: a) theory and stages of second language acquisition, b) sheltered instruction, c) student cultural identity, d) cultural relevance and competence. These areas represent strategies necessary for support of ELLs while providing instruction on academic content development (Webster & Valeo, 2011).

PURPOSE

The focus of this study explored the experiences of fifty-five first-year pre-service teachers working with and relating to ELL students on a university campus. It was hoped that this research would result in an original contribution to pre-service teacher training by integrating units on ELL cultural competency at university Schools of Education. Additionally, it was hoped that participants would better understand their own place within the ELL classroom and take steps to further their own preparation for that context (Peacock, 2001).

The genesis of this study came from a collaborative partnership originating from participation in the university Professional Educators Advisory Board (PEAB) meetings on campus between the professor from the Master of Arts/Teaching English as a Second Language program and the professor from the Department of Teacher Education. This board acts as the local extension of PESB. Familiarity with the
PESB cultural competency standard five as well as the NCATE standard four diversity requirements on the parts of both instructors guided the level and depth of instruction. The professor within the MA/TESL program provided the specialized instruction of the theory and practice of working with ELLs. The EDTE instructor and the MA/TESL instructor collaborated in constructing the syllabus to integrate the ELL unit. They discussed pedagogical differences of graduate and undergraduate students.

The hands-on experiences of the ELL context was provided by interaction with international students studying English on campus who attend an Intensive English Language (IEL) program in preparation for entrance into the university. These students were considered ELLs in that English is not their dominant language, although most often the term ELL is used to describe students in the K-12 system. For the purposes of this study, the focus on cross-cultural exposure and varying levels of English proficiency met the intended focus.

Inherent within this IEL is an accompanying student life unit which conducts ongoing student activities for the international students enrolled in the IEL. It includes a guided conversation circle program designed to match undergraduate students and university staff and faculty with international students in structured conversation groups for English speaking practice.

**RESEARCH PROJECT FOCUS**

This research project explored the reflections of participants as ELL experiences were provided which included the following: conversation partners, in-class immersion tasks, and teaching a lesson to an ELL. The focus of the reflections centered on what participants were noticing as they were situated in authentic experiences (Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S., 2001; Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005; Peacock, 2001; Leonard & Leonard, 2006). It examined reflections for insights and epiphanies of participants over time as they experienced the tasks (Hankins, 1998). Specifically the following questions guided the reflections:

What did participants notice about themselves as they participated in the ELL activities?

1. reactions
2. emotions
3. epiphanies

The conceptual framework of this project was built upon the scholarship of “reflection-in-action” (Schon, 1987, p. 26) and situated learning (Lave, J., & Wegner, E., 1991). Deepening this theoretical lens is the work of Keengwe (2010) who extended the situated notion into the ELL context combined with reflection. The pre-service teachers were provided with multiple opportunities for ELL contact under authentic parameters and then asked to reflect on those experiences (Walker-Dalhouse, Sanders, & Dalhouse, 2009). This was supported by work of Pappamihiel (2007) who described the objective of situated learning for helping pre-service teachers to critically examine attitudes and beliefs about teaching ELLs. Data was privileged that was identified as attitudinal, emotional or insightful from reflections.
METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

The fifty-five participants who consented to participate were students enrolled in the three sections of EDTE 201 Learning Theory taught in Spring, 2012. All participants were protected by obtaining permission from the on-campus Internal Review Board. As the tasks and assignments for the research were included in the course syllabus, all students participated in class activities and reflective assignments. Those declining to participate in the study were not included in the analysis of data.

This course was selected after collaboration between the SOE instructor who wanted to strengthen the skills and knowledge of his students about ELLs and the MA/TESL professor who wanted to deepen the relationship between departments on campus around the goal of effective ELL teacher training.

Participants were between the ages of 18 – 23, with 86% between the ages of 18-19. Additionally, 78% of participants were freshmen, 15% were sophomores, and 7% were juniors. When asked to rate their level of cultural competency in an initial information sheet, 15% of participants rated themselves as high in cultural competency and 51% rated themselves as having little or no cultural competency. Moreover, 46% of participants added in the information sheet that they were willing to learn more. Of the 55 participants, 55% described themselves as having very little or no experience in cross-cultural situations. These self-descriptions agreed with current scholarship about most pre-service teachers (Peacock, 2001; Terrill, M. & Mark, D., 2000).

PROCEDURES

Contact with participants in a classroom took place over four class sessions. Three kinds of authentic hands-on activities were provided for participants. An international graduate student from the MA/TESL program taught a thirty-minute lesson entirely in a language foreign to participants. Languages included Arabic, Korean or Spanish. An in-class guided reflection was administered directly after this experience. Secondly, all participants were asked to participate in three conversation circles and respond to a guided reflection after each experience. Thirdly, all participants taught a lesson to an ELL student with an accompanying guided reflection.

Coursework included an overview of cultural considerations and cross-cultural communication, current realities of ELLs in classrooms in the United States and Washington State, first and second language acquisition characteristics, and basic ELL strategies. The intention of the coursework was to introduce students to these topics, not present comprehensive coverage. Discussion was done in each class session connected to conversation circle experiences. Wong-Fillmore and Snow’s (2002) report on What Teachers Need to Know about Language guided in-class instruction. The entire project was 35 hours, including in-class and out-of-class tasks.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were gathered through written reflections done by students after each activity. The first set of data came from three conversation circle guided reflections. This was done to examine inner thoughts and reflections over time. Guided questions included:

- What did you talk about?
- Describe the level of English in the group.
What did you do to communicate with others?
What challenges did you face?
What did you notice about yourself during this experience?
What moments stood out to you? Why?

The second data set was collected in class directly after having been taught by a native speaker of another language. These reflections were used as data privileging those comments that suggested a new awareness, deeper understanding or a change of thinking (Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S., 2001; Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005; Peacock, 2001; Leonard & Leonard, 2006). Reflection questions included:

- Describe your experience today. What were your feelings as the lesson began/ended?
- What did the teacher do that helped/hindered your understanding of the lesson?
- What happened in the room? What were the dynamics of the other students?
- What were some of your reactions to this experience and how do you think this activity connected to the unit objectives of working with ELL?

The final set of data was a reflection done outside of class after having taught a short lesson to an ELL. These reflections explored students’ awareness of and reflection on their abilities to adapt to the ELL situation and find cultural bridges of understanding. Guiding reflection questions included:

- What were the vocabulary/linguistic aspects to the lesson?
- Describe the experience of teaching across a linguistic difference.
- What strategies were more effective?
- What did you notice about yourself during this experience?
- What moments stood out to you? Why?

The purpose of these questions followed Schon’s (1987) notions of reflection. He encouraged the practice of looking back at classroom experiences and analyzing both the logistics of the experience as well as the inner dialogue of the teacher. He called this “reflection-in-action” (p. 26). The questions were designed to have participants focus on viewing their inner dialogue as an investigative site (Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S., 2001). They were crafted to elicit what epiphanies surfaced for participants regarding the ELL context as they were situated in the context (Pappamihiel, 2007).

After themes and analyses were completed to a certain point by the researcher, participants were given a final opportunity to reflect over the proposed findings.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

Following Baptiste’s (2001) process, the conceptual framework of the study guided the analysis process. The combination of being placed into authentic contexts and given multiple opportunities of reflection (Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005; Schon, 1987; Lave, J., & Wegner, E., 1991; Pappamihiel, 2007; Keengwe, 2010) provided the lens for analyses. Data was privileged that suggested new awareness by participants and comments about attitudes and beliefs.

Data gathered from the qualitative sources of reflections were examined following a process of four phases of analysis (Baptiste, 2001). Initially, the researcher read and re-read reflections of participants. Secondly, reflections were read again looking for common and/or recurring themes or categories that surfaced. Third, a color system was constructed to identify visually those themes and grouped accordingly. Fourth, the researcher began to group the themes and begin the initial stages of constructing a framework of findings.
DISCUSSION

Participants’ experiences varied in terms of descriptions used, but through the systematic coding and grouping process described above, three core themes emerged.

CONTACT DECREASED ANXIETY

The first theme suggested that participants experienced attitudinal changes by having repeated exposure in conversations. A majority of participants expressed nervousness and uncertainty about the first conversation. However, most within minutes felt relief and were more at ease. In these initial reflections, participants expressed how much better it was than they expected. As Wong-Fillmore and Snow (2002) asserted, before effective pedagogy can be developed for teaching ELLs, the underlying beliefs and attitudes about diversity must be examined. This was also emphasized by PESB (2010) which stressed the importance of a teacher’s attitude about diversity. Pappamihiel’s (2007) findings supported this notion of initial trepidation (p. 50) but later decrease of that anxiety. Comments included:

— I had no idea what to expect, but after meeting my conversation partners, it was great.
— It wasn’t what I had expected, they were so kind.
— I was very impressed by their English. They were able to hold an intelligent conversation. It got so much better than I thought it was going to be.
— The people were super nice. It wasn’t what I feared.
— I was surprised how friendly they all were.
— I am really ethnocentric. I judge just by what the media says.
— I am so ignorant of other cultures. This was great.
— I had been afraid of being wrong and not being understood, but it wasn’t like that at all.
— When I got more comfortable, I noticed that the conversations got deeper. I liked that.

PARTICIPANTS’ ROLE IN COMMUNICATION

The awareness of participants’ roles in communication was identified through descriptions of their ability to intentionally move from basics of interaction and facilitate deeper, more academic kinds of conversations that Cummins (2008) described as moving from basic interactive communication skills (BICS) to cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) skills. Participants identified these conversations as more difficult and that they had to use intentional strategies to be understood as well as to understand. Comments suggested choice making and epiphanies about what was needed. These findings were supported by scholarship that suggested effective teaching for ELLs requires more than a cultural approach (Lucas & Mark, 2011; Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 2002). Lucas and Villegas (2011) advocated that a deeper understanding of the linguistic difference would better serve as the base for finding those content connections and strategies of teaching across languages. This was supported by Nieto’s (2006) description of successful ELL teacher who, among other actions, is able to improvise and teach in innovative ways.

Participants in this study were showing evidence of seeing those deeper conversations through a lens of language need and their role as both facilitator and communicator. They were not seeing the ELL student with a deficit lens but were seeing their role in making the communication more effective (Pappamihiel, 2007, p. 44). These comments also supported the notion of situated perspective (Lave, J., & Wegner, E., 1991; Pappamihiel, 2007). Within the context of experience, learning was internalized. The reflection process provided the means to support that internalization. The significance of this theme
cannot be underestimated. Participants moved from initially having anxiety about entering into conversations with ELLs to a place where they viewed the communication process from the perspective of their role in the communication experience to facilitate mutual understandings. Comments included:

— They began to ask deeper questions and I realized I had changed my behavior. It helped them.
— When we had trouble, we just figured it out.
— I learned to listen. I began to ask more questions. I had to adapt my questions, but the conversation deepened because of that I think. That’s weird.
— I began to repeat more when the topics got really interesting. Everyone was trying hard.
— I really relied on body language. It is really hard to show what stereotype is in body language.
— I had to simplify my language, but the topics weren’t simple at all. It was crazy fun.
— I realized I talk really fast. I mean it.
— Teaching ELLs is a lot harder than it looks. Language is a big problem.
— This taught me to look for connections. That really helps.
— I had to be more patient than I usually am.
— I had to stop and think how I was going to say something...sometimes even more than what I was going to say.
— I thought about that lesson (in-class) when I taught my ELL student.
— I tried to smile like Lily did in our class. That was helpful to me. I hoped it was for my student.
— I tried to simplify and repeat like she did. So simple. Repeating really helps. So do pictures.

**EMPATHY FOR THE LANGUAGE LEARNER IN THE CLASSROOM**

The third observation from data was taken from the in-class experience of having been taught in another language. That experience created within participants a visceral response that deeply impacted participants. A clear majority wrote about how it opened their eyes to the realities of being an ELL. Comments reflected new understandings and emotional reactions. They found that the role of language is critically important in the ability to function as a student.

Comments included:

— I totally depended on the nonverbal.
— That experience completely changed my perspective of what it feels like. I tried to remember that in the conversation circles when we had trouble. They were awesome.
— I tried to be patient. I remember how lost and frustrated I felt.
— That experience put me in their shoes...I tried to show compassion and use everything we learned about strategies.
— That experience was the first time in my life. It only lasted a class period. These guys are here for years. So awesome!!! I couldn’t do that. I respect them.
— This was super intimidating. I was unsure of her expectations and was afraid of being wrong.
— I just sat there. I tried to watch the other students to figure out what to do. It was scary to me.
— Class was so different. We couldn’t talk. We’re smart usually. Everyone was afraid.
— This was a life changing experience. I had no idea how much speaking influences what we understand.
— I was surprised how difficult it was. She was just teaching five simple expressions. I was clueless.
— This was very stressful. It opened my eyes. I got bored after five minutes. What about a 6 hour day???
— I was overwhelmed. No idea what was going on. I didn’t want to look stupid.
— Simple language and repetition helped more than I had thought.
— I picked up one major thing SIMPLIFY. Period. I mean it!
— Realized it’s hard to be an ELL. Lost, frustrated.
— I nodded my head when she asked if I understood, but I really didn’t. I get it now.
— Made me sensitive.
— Put me in their shoes.

These data were supported by Lucas and Villegas’ (2012) notion of seeing academic challenges in the classroom with ELLs as being both cultural and linguistic. It also supported Vaughan’s (2005) findings that cross-cultural experiences help participants to be more culturally aware and seriously reflect on their own attitudes and feelings. They saw the challenge of trying to find connections between two languages. It brought that reality into their space. Participants identified this assignment as the experience that helped them understand in a new and penetrating way the role that language plays in the emotional and academic needs of ELLs. This experience was identified by participants are eye-opening for the need to accommodate and apply new ways to teach. It moved from a classroom discussion about strategies to a life-changing way of teaching.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER TRAINING**

The impact of this collaborative research project on participants was evidenced by comments mentioned above. Participants wrote comments of eye opening, turned my world upside down, first time in my life, I had never imagined. It suggested internal response and created space for thinking, fostered by being situated into a real experience.

Assigning outside involvement in conversation circles was easily inserted into the course without straining existing course assignments. The reflections contained changes in attitudes about issues of diversity and of the role that language plays in that environment. That awareness is part of current requirements within the cultural competency legislation from PESB in the State of Washington. Further, intentional use of ELL strategies by participants was clearly seen in reflections about what they did to adapt during conversations, their teaching times, and in how they saw the in-class teacher adapt for them while teaching in another language. These skills were born within an experiential learning context, supported by class discussion and reading. These skills helped frame their experience and self-observations of their role in the process of educating ELLs.

**IMPLICATIONS ABOUT INTER-DEPARTMENTAL COLLABORATION**

The implications from the current study suggest that nurturing cultural competence on a campus is possible with willingness to collaborate inter-departmentally to share knowledge and expertise in meaningful ways. The current study enabled fifty-five pre-service teachers to be introduced to ELLs on campus and given the opportunity of teaching and spending time in conversation. This resulted in significant benefits to both departments. The collaborative approach required willingness on the parts of both instructors to adapt and work within two sets of frameworks and find ways to make transitions and bridges of understandings. It created a context where the expertise of the ELL professor could be combined with the context of a SOE classroom. Access to a ready-made ELL environment was also made possible by this collaboration.

A further implication from this inter-departmental collaboration was a later impact on students. The following year after this project was conducted, enrollment in the MA/TESL Principles of Second Language Acquisition course taught by the MA/TESL professor involved in this study increased with ELL
endorsement students. Of the twenty-two students enrolled in the graduate course, ten were seeking an ELL endorsement. The course was cross-listed to meet endorsement needs of undergraduate pre-service teachers. Of these ten students, 80% had been participants in this study. It should be noted that the ELL endorsement represented a second endorsement for students, requiring additional coursework. It could be suggested that the project provided the context for pre-service teachers to grow the awareness for the need of further training and study, as suggested by Peacock (2001).

**FUTURE RESEARCH**

The current study was done with international students on a campus. Future studies could examine pre-service teacher attitudes with K-12 ELLs for a closer context to what one might find in future classrooms. Additionally, further data could be collected from the ELL students to obtain their perspectives on the conversations as well.

In an earlier pilot of the current study, students were asked to construct a cultural profile paper. They were asked to self-describe their cultural lens and how they planned to develop that lens in preparation for ELL students in the future. Due to time constraints, this was not done in the current study. In the pilot, however, students seemed to use that paper as a culminating place to formulate their ideas and thoughts about ELL theory and practice. This cultural profile assignment is recommended for future research.

**WORKS CITED**


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