

Feature Article

ESOL Teacher Preparation in China: Insights from a US Perspective

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Abstract

This article shares insights developed by two US-based professors as they co-taught an introductory ESOL education course within a teacher education program at a major Chinese university. Namely, the authors discuss how their perspectives on curriculum and instruction for Chinese pre-service teachers were enriched by their experience teaching in an early childhood education program in China. Employing qualitative data analysis methods to reflect on teaching and classroom interactions, the authors identify strengths and challenges of delivering an education course in China and share recommendations for improving teacher education courses for Chinese-speaking students, particularly those who intend to study abroad in US higher education contexts.

Key Words: *English-medium instruction in China, ESOL teacher education, pre-service teachers*

Introduction

In the spring of 2014, Western Oregon University and Tianhua College of Shanghai Normal University entered into a 10-year partnership agreement that allows Tianhua College students to complete a “3+1” bachelor’s degree in early childhood education through dual enrollment in both Western Oregon University’s College of Education and Tianhua College. In this model of teacher preparation, Tianhua students take courses on their home campus in China for the first three years. In the fourth year of their studies, Tianhua students travel to Oregon to complete their degrees through one academic year of coursework (September to June) at Western Oregon University’s campus in Monmouth, Oregon.

All pre-service teachers in Oregon, including those who are dually enrolled students from Tianhua College, must take a course entitled *Introduction to ESOL and Bilingual Education* as part of their teacher preparation program. This course introduces pre-service teachers to the principles and practices of teaching and learning in culturally and linguistically diverse settings with a particular focus on issues impacting Latinx/Hispanic students and their families. For students who are preparing to be teachers in US contexts, focusing on the needs of Latinx students and their families is necessary given that this cultural and linguistic group comprises the largest minority in the US. However, that is not the case in China. While Tianhua College students may teach students who are members of linguistic minority communities (e.g., Cantonese or Gan) they most likely will not teach Latinx/Hispanic students; therefore, the Western Oregon University course required a substantial modification in content focus to meet the needs of Chinese pre-service teachers.

Additionally, the vast majority of pre-service teachers enrolled in Western Oregon University's teacher preparation program are speakers of English as their first language. Designing a course for emergent bilingual students requires special supports and considerations of cultural and linguistic differences to ensure the course outcomes and to make the learning effective.

The purpose of this article is to critically examine how an ESOL/Bilingual Education course can be modified and adapted to meet the needs of emergent bilingual preservice teachers from China and to share the insights gained from our participation as instructors in the program. Both authors are full-time professors at Western Oregon University who have expertise in second language acquisition and ESL teacher preparation and have regularly taught this course to Western Oregon University students. The authors employed their collective expertise in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), to develop the course for the 96 students who were enrolled in the Introduction to ESOL and Bilingual Education course in the summer of 2017. Through a descriptive analysis approach (Loeb et al., 2017), the authors detail the insights they have gained and make visible the opportunities and challenges presented in this course adaptation to inform other teacher educators who may be working in similar contexts. The authors also offer professional recommendations for those in higher education who may be considering delivering teacher education courses to multilingual scholars in China.

Research Question

The central question guiding the research presented in this study was: What insights did we gain from teaching an ESOL teacher education course for pre-service teachers in China?

Literature

Teacher preparation in China has undergone significant changes over the past 20 years. Motivated by a desire to offer a top-notch education that allows students to excel in a competitive global market, the Chinese government has focused on reforming teacher education. This reform movement has been realized by centralizing teacher education oversight and evaluation under the umbrella of the government and merging previously vocational-oriented teacher preparation programs into larger research universities (Zhou, 2014). As part of this countrywide teacher education reform effort, English-medium instruction (EMI) in the People's Republic of China has increased substantially over the last decade creating opportunities for US-based faculty to join English-speaking Chinese faculty in sharing their disciplinary expertise (Hu & Lei, 2014). The vast majority of EMI in China has occurred within the disciplines of medicine, engineering, computer science, and business (He & Chiang, 2016). Studies focusing on EMI within such disciplines have indicated significant challenges. Hu (2008) cites an "uncomplicated view" of bilingual education held by the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) as contributing to these challenges because this agency promotes the benefits of bilingual education without acknowledging the complexities of making disciplinary academic content comprehensible to large numbers of non-native speakers of the language of instruction. In spite of this rather simplistic view of the benefits of EMI in China, studies have sought to identify ways of strengthening programs by focusing on the linguistic aspects of teaching in EMI settings. Investigations of teaching in EMI settings have identified key characteristics of instructors, such as personality, English proficiency, teaching approach, language proficiency of instructors, and classroom language use, as being the most important factors in effective EMI in China (Zhang, 2017). These studies addressing the language needs of students in EMI settings are interesting and important; however, a gap in the literature exists. Our research adds to this crucial conversation by sharing our perspective that has been enriched by our participation in the cross-cultural exchange. By sharing what we have learned, we hope to help teacher educators involved in similar cross cultural educational endeavors meet the needs of preservice teachers in China.

Methods

Context

The course examined within this study, “Introduction to ESOL Bilingual Education,” is typically delivered in an 11-week format during an entire term. In contrast, the version of this course examined in this study was delivered in an intensive format consisting of eight class meetings of approximately seven hours each over a two-week time period. Each class session lasted for 3.5 hours, and students had two sessions per day. Ninety-six students enrolled in the course and had an approximate 98% attendance rate. The class size represented a much larger enrollment of students than typically found at Western Oregon University; therefore, the group was divided into two equal groups (N=48). This division allowed the instructors to teach collaboratively, not only in delivering instruction but also in planning instruction and assessing student work.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study relied on the qualitative research methods of descriptive analysis to develop a deeper understanding of our perception of teaching within an EMI context. Namely, we constructed a descriptive analysis (Loeb et al., 2017) that examined the conditions and contexts of a phenomenon, in this case, re-contextualizing a teacher education course from a US to China-based teaching context. Both authors served as participant observers who engaged in critical reflective teaching practice (Brookfield, 2017) with the intention of examining and evaluating our practices in relation to the learning needs and professional goals of our Chinese students. Following each class session (morning and afternoon), we debriefed for approximately one hour by sharing observations on content learning, lesson delivery, and student performance. We collected all instructional materials including PowerPoints of lectures, handouts, and student work. Our research was collaborative. We took extensive field notes to aid qualitative data analysis and reviewed, confirmed, and supplemented notes on a daily basis. We used these notes to simultaneously inform our teaching and deepen our understanding of the questions that were guiding our scholarship. Class time restrictions and students’ busy schedules prevented triangulation of the field note observations with students; however, our observations were shared with a colleague who had taught the same students the previous year. Given that she had taught the exact same students who were enrolled in our class before and had previously participated in the exchange between Western Oregon University and Tianhua College six times since the inception of the program, her insights proved invaluable in helping us interpret our interactions and confirm our observations.

Insights on ESOL Teacher Preparation Coursework for Chinese Students

This section addresses some of the insights we gained from delivering an ESOL teacher preparation course in China. Some of the most important insights concerned ways that we modified coursework as well as the varying ways the course assessments were taken up by our Chinese students. Both authors recognize that modifying curriculum to meet the needs of students and interpreting varying outcomes on assignments are routine expectations of practice for effective teachers; nonetheless, we wish to make visible the rationale for our modifications and note the interesting results of certain course assignments to aid instructors who may eventually teach in similar contexts.

As previously mentioned, the course, “Introduction to ESOL and Bilingual Education,” serves as required course for new teachers seeking licensure in Oregon. Western Oregon ESOL program faculty have designed specific assignments to meet course objectives and measure student performance towards those objectives. In our course, two assignments comprise the primary assessments. These two assignments are considered key performances in the course and are assigned each time we teach the course, whether in Oregon or in China. The first assessment is a “Language Learning Autobiography.” The purpose of this assignment is for students to compose a paper in which they reflect on their own experience as a language learner. Specifically, they discuss the instructional activities that supported their language learning, describe the atmosphere for learning created by the teacher, informally assess their performance in the four language domains (Speaking, Reading, Writing, and Listening), and reflect upon the potential impact of this experience on their own future teaching. For the English-dominant students at Western Oregon University, this assignment usually proves very enlightening. Typically, Western Oregon University students report that their language learning experiences were ultimately unsuccessful, but they often point to a variety of teaching and learning strategies employed in the classroom that they wish to replicate in their own English as Second Language (ESL) classrooms. While some students indicate the poor performance of foreign language teachers as accounting for their lack of linguistic progress, most Western Oregon University students attribute their lack of significant linguistic development in a new language to their limited opportunities to practice the language in contexts beyond the classroom or difficulties in maintaining and continuing their language learning beyond formal school contexts.

For the pre-service teachers in China, this assignment was not significantly modified but did result in some interesting insights that informed our perspective. Given that the Tianhua students have earned TOEFL scores high enough to enroll in Tianhua College’s EMI teacher education program, it is assumed their language learning experience was at

least moderately successful. Therefore, the project allowed students to focus critically on the language learning strategies and techniques that have contributed to their current linguistic proficiency. The most enlightening finding students discovered from their reflections was the relative uniformity of their classroom experience. As they shared their language learning autobiographies with fellow students, they recognized that their experiences reflected a strong behaviorist orientation to learning. Namely, they noted that a large amount of their language learning had been comprised of teacher-centered instruction that afforded limited opportunity for interaction or independent language practice. They noted that the dominant instructional practices they had experienced had consisted of primarily choral responses, repetition, and dictation, which are the characteristics of the audio-lingual method (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011).

In spite of having achieved an English language proficiency level that allowed them to enroll in an EMI teacher education program such as this one, many students took a critical stance towards the behaviorist approach. They frequently cited their challenges in engaging in prolonged exchanges with primary speakers of English, such as their English-speaking professors. Based on their reflections, students often expressed their intention to construct a classroom climate that would promote interaction and more productive and authentic language use. That is to say, most students wished to create communicative language lessons in their future classrooms. This desire to embrace a new and potentially more effective approach to teaching was most evident when students were asked to sketch their “ideal classrooms.” The majority drew pictures of tables with students engaged in collaborative and interactive linguistic exchanges such as “turn and talk.” The different conclusions drawn from the activity by the US and Chinese students reflect the differences in language learning experiences and informed our prospective teacher educators by demonstrating how a similar teacher education activity can lead to vastly different findings among participants from different cultures.

The second assessment in the course is entitled the “Community Linguistic Landscape Project.” The goal of this project for all students is to investigate the climate of a school setting through the eyes of an emergent bilingual (EB) learner (Garcia, 2009). Students are not expected to evaluate the school but rather are asked to explore how a language learner would navigate the school setting, with particular attention paid to the semiotic supports that contribute to the learner making meaning. The authors noticed significant differences in the way students at Tianhua College approached this assignment compared to our traditional Western Oregon University students. Typically, Western Oregon University students investigate a local school, and more often than not, discover varying levels of semiotic support such as signs, website material, and bilingual school personnel who speak the home language of the emergent bilingual student.

In contrast, our Tianhua students took a different approach to the assignment. The Chinese students did not have access to a bilingual school setting to investigate within reasonable proximity to the campus. Therefore, students located settings frequented by non-Chinese speaking tourists and made a photo documentation of the bilingual semiotic resources present in the setting. Examples of their findings included advertisements for products in English, Korean, and Vietnamese, directions on signs at the international airport, and movie posters. From the assignment, students realized that they were surrounded by other languages and this linguistic richness gave them opportunities to create instructional activities that incorporated “realia” in their own teaching. For instance, they could collect movie posters or informative travel pamphlets to use in lessons supporting functional English (e.g., finding out movie times) or within lessons designed to support informational literacy.

Insights from ESOL Teacher Education Course Delivery in China

Our observation and experience illuminated several challenges and opportunities for effective instruction. Many of these challenges are rooted in deep cultural differences between US and Chinese educational contexts, while others are less so. In either case, making these differences visible will prove helpful for non-Chinese instructors designing a course for Chinese students.

Teacher Role

Instruction in China remains teacher-centered (Zhao et al., 2014). Thus, the majority of teaching is lecture-based, with little expectation for student engagement in discussion of course content with the professor. Both authors strive to teach from a constructivist paradigm in which we aim to promote active construction of knowledge rather than passive absorption of knowledge in what Freire would consider a “banking model of education” (Freire, 2018). Given Chinese students familiarity with teacher-centered instruction, promoting engagement in whole group discussions remained a significant instructional challenge. Initially, students would often remain silent for long periods of time, beyond the typical “wait time” expected within effective instructional practice. When students did answer, one student in the group would typically stand up, turn to the teacher, and provide a brief summary of the lecture topics. As classes unfolded, some students took the “risk” and responded in English. Teacher feedback also had to be delivered mindfully. Students appeared ashamed when overtly corrected or offered alternative ways of phrasing their oral or written language. Offering “recasts” of student language (Gibbons, 2015) allowed students to have a model of effective forms without

having their errors highlighted, a practice that constitutes a loss of face in the Confucian-influenced culture of Chinese instructional contexts (Han, 2016).

Resources

One of the main challenges the authors encountered concerned adequate access to instructional resources that we were accustomed to having in the US. While lack of resources is certainly not unique to Chinese teaching contexts, both authors faced difficulty delivering instruction because of these differences in resources. For instance, we did not have access to a course management system, such as Moodle or Canvas, that would have facilitated providing supplementary course materials such as handouts. Furthermore, photocopying is limited even in some private institutions. While we appreciate the economical approach to using resources such as copy paper and printing for environmental and financial reasons, not having these resources readily available made teaching less effective at times. To negotiate this challenge, we would share materials with one student who would disseminate those materials (i.e., PowerPoints, handouts, video clips) via social media, such as WeChat. However, in the Chinese setting, one can count on blackboards and screens for projection of slides and video clips.

Pragmatic Differences

Differences in pragmatics related to acknowledging agreement and understanding often puzzled instructors because we were left unsure of whether or not the learning outcomes of our lectures and class activities were effective. Because our students would ultimately enroll at Western Oregon University and would need to employ these pragmatic strategies to indicate agreement or understanding to be effective students in US instructional contexts, we both provided explicit instruction aimed to acculturate our students to employing gestures of acknowledgement such as nodding and making verbal comments indicating understanding. We also instructed students to construct small signs with messages such as “Finished” or “Question” that they would employ to facilitate pragmatic communication typical of the US classroom. These signs were useful during class activities and group work as students could indicate that they were finished, that they had a question, or that they felt confident in the topic.

How Was Instruction Enhanced to Meet the Needs of Pre-Service Teachers in an EMI Context?

Given that both authors have extensive experience teaching emergent bilingual students both in the US and abroad, we were able to incorporate several strategies to enhance meaning making in our course. First, we assigned a number of the readings to be

completed prior to the beginning of the course. Doing so allowed students to work in groups and with a tutor to support their understanding of the readings. Despite the fact that we offered a number of bilingual (English/Mandarin) versions of the research articles to program coordinators who were preparing for our arrival in China, the Mandarin versions were politely acknowledged by our Chinese counterparts but were not shared with students. We were informed that all reading materials were to be in English only. We respected our colleagues' decision, but we were disappointed that the Mandarin language articles and course materials were not shared with students because we viewed reading the articles in Mandarin as an opportunity to engage in translanguaging practices (Garcia, 2016). Translanguaging is a concept in which language users employ all languages at their disposal to make meaning. The opportunity to use translanguaging practices was not encouraged as students were not allowed to complete the course readings in their L1; nevertheless, we incorporated translanguaging practices within our instruction. For instance, during small activities, students were encouraged to draw upon their multi-linguistic resources to craft informed responses by first discussing course topics in Mandarin. By promoting translanguaging practices in our teacher education classroom, we sought to promote instructional practices that encouraged students to use the linguistic resources available to them to make meaning, rather than present language learning as a compartmentalized process in which languages do not intersect. Initially, students pushed themselves to only use English even if it took more time to produce a response. However, as we discussed and gave examples of translanguaging (because both authors are multilingual), some understood the concept and started to translanguage. Last, our instruction was enhanced by employing a workshop model of content delivery. Each lesson began with a clear statement of the purpose and objectives, followed by a "mini-lecture" in which discipline related content was shared. We included videos of modeled teaching practices and strategies. We also delivered multimodal instruction with frequent use of gestures, repetition, and written reinforcement of what we were saying. Employing these ESL strategies allowed us to model the teaching practices we wanted our students to first experience and then employ in their own teaching, and also to enhance the delivery of our own course content.

Conclusions

Delivering an introductory ESOL teacher education course in the context of a teacher education program in China provided insights that have enriched our understanding of teaching. The authors learned that to ensure the effectiveness of the course, we needed to modify our instruction and the expectations for assignments as well as be aware of cultural differences that emerge during EMI in China. As the world of higher education becomes increasingly globalized, we hope that our descriptive analysis of our teaching

experience informs teacher educators in both the US and China about ways to construct programs that meet the needs of Chinese learners and US-based faculty so that international exchange programs, particularly in teacher education, are successful. In light of what we have learned from this experience, we recommend that participants in US/Chinese exchange programs in teacher education contexts consider the following principles:

1. Be Mindful of Culturally Embedded Communication and Literacy Practices

Teacher educators may enter unfamiliar territory when they serve as visiting faculty in China. While they likely have a desire to share their knowledge of how to be an exemplary teacher with a new audience of Chinese students, they may hold preconceived notions of the cultural and linguistic practices that may negatively influence their teaching. Without a thorough understanding of the cultural embeddedness of literacy practices (Flint, 2007), they may experience frustration. Teaching strategies that may work in a US classroom may be less familiar and less effective in China. Conversely, observing with an open mind allows participants to learn why certain cultural practices are expected in the Chinese classroom and allows US teacher educators to gain a new perspective and appreciation for why things are the way they are. For instance, the expectation that students stand while responding to a professor's question is rooted in a deeply-held belief that teachers are to be highly respected, something that was much appreciated. Additionally, small group work can also pose a challenge in a culture that favors a collective view of society over individualism and socializes students in such a way by promoting whole group rather than small group work in the classroom (Park & King, 2003).

2. Think Critically about the Cultural Practices of Teaching

As teacher educators prepare new teachers to both learn in the US and potentially teach in a multilingual environment, it is important that they make the rationale for instructional practices visible. Doing so allows students to think critically about practices and prompts robust conversations about how cultural differences emerge in the language learning classroom.

3. Gain Familiarity with Chinese Educational Policy and Standards

Both US and Chinese teacher preparation programs are shaped by the constraints of accrediting bodies. While professional organizations such as CAEP (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation) evaluate US teacher education

programs, the Chinese government provides a centralized governing body which determines the way teacher preparation occurs in China. That being said, as cultural exchanges increase in number, stakeholders on both sides must think critically about how course objectives and learning outcomes can be constructed in ways that mutually satisfy accreditation standards. Knowing what is expected from both Chinese and US programs comes from dialog, discussion, and research. With that knowledge, we can focus on our shared commitment to preparing the next generation of teachers.

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