

In-service Teachers' Perceptions of Their Preparation to Work with Learners of English

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Abstract: *Increasing numbers of learners of English in mainstream classrooms have precipitated the need to better prepare teachers to instruct in culturally and linguistically responsive ways. This study shares survey results that demonstrate how a graduate program consisting of intentionally designed coursework and coaching led participating educators to report (1) feeling better prepared to work with English Learners in their classrooms; (2) increased knowledge of English Learners, including better understanding of language acquisition; and (3) increased knowledge of best practices for working with English Learners in classrooms.*

Key Words: English Learners, in-service teachers, culturally and linguistically responsive teaching

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Preparation of teachers who can successfully instruct English Learners (ELs) has not kept pace with the number of ELs in classrooms. The changing demographics of K-12 classrooms indicate that, nationwide, students who speak a native language other than English comprise an increasing population. Approximately 10% of students are learning English, as well as content, and that percentage is projected to rise (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Unfortunately, as scholars Gándara and Santibañez (2016) explain, “When it comes to providing all language learners with the highly qualified teachers they need and deserve, we have a long way to go” (p. 32).

Numerous studies have found that teachers in classrooms feel unprepared--or underprepared--to work with learners of English or to partner effectively with this population's parents and families (e.g., Baecher, 2012; Nutta et al., 2012). In a report prepared for the National Center for Education Statistics, researchers described professional development (PD) activities for teachers, and revealed that PD focused on working with ELs was “the least prevalent topic for PD with 27% of the teachers participating” (Rotermund et al., 2017, p. 5). However, more than just PD is needed for working with this population, and many scholars have provided direction for more *culturally responsive* (e.g., Banks, 1974, 2015; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sleeter, 2001) and more *linguistically appropriate* instruction (e.g., Bunch, 2013;

Fillmore & Snow, 2000; Lucas & Villegas, 2010). The purpose of this short paper is to report on one program's efforts to provide coursework and coaching to in-service teachers, ultimately leading to teachers being more knowledgeable about language acquisition and culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices, while also feeling better prepared to work with ELs in the classroom.

BRIEF REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

For decades, scholars have recognized that the preparation of most classroom teachers does not adequately equip them to support students who are learning English as a second language. The complex nature of language acquisition and the challenges of helping learners master both academic language and content may be addressed superficially in some programs, but teachers, by and large, report feeling ill-equipped to meet the needs of ELs (e.g., Santibañez & Gándara, 2018). In their seminal article, de Jong and Harper (2005) debunk the notion that “just good teaching” is all that is needed to be an effective teacher of ELs; they believe teachers need preparation to understand the process of second language acquisition, develop an understanding of EL oral language and literacy development, and build on students' backgrounds and resources to help them be successful.

Lucas and Villegas (2010) add onto this framework by describing both orientations and skills needed for linguistically responsive instruction. They discuss how teachers must examine their own belief systems and biases, while taking into account how teaching is a sociocultural, socio-political, and sociolinguistic undertaking that is critical to providing the education that ELs deserve. In addition, they stress that teachers must advocate for equitable practices--especially since ELs are often marginalized due to being viewed as cultural and linguistic outsiders.

While these scholars and others (e.g., Bunch, 2013; Freeman & Freeman, 2014) make a solid case for preparing teachers from a linguistically responsive stance, little empirical research has been done to examine the impacts of intentionally developed programs and experiences on teachers and their perceptions of preparedness to work with ELs. Exceptions include work on professional development and coaching by Teemant and her colleagues (Teemant et al., 2011; Teemant & Reveles, 2012; Teemant, 2014), Song (2016), and Batt (2010). These studies underscore the importance of sustained PD along with support by a coach for lasting instructional changes. In an effort to contribute to this knowledge base, our study reports on a program consisting of coursework and coaching throughout which teachers develop and hone their skills as culturally and linguistically responsive practitioners. While analysis of several data points (observation data, coaching conversations, and student achievement) is ongoing, here we report on the survey responses and how our program participants reported positive changes in their feelings of preparedness, as well as increased knowledge of English Learners, language acquisition, and best practices for working with ELs.

METHODS

CLD PROGRAM AND PARTICIPANTS

Participants were supported with National Professional Development grant funds to enroll in eight university classes. One of these courses was a field-based Practicum. In addition, in line with research on sustained coaching support (e.g., Teemant & Reveles, 2012; Teemant, 2014), we provided coaching that took place once per quarter for two years. This study used a pre-post-test control group design, with an experimental group composed of 23 in-service teachers (19 females

and 4 males) in the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse endorsement program and a control group composed of 14 in-service teachers (10 females and 4 males) not currently enrolled in the program. Responses to pre-post surveys were used to determine the effectiveness of the program and coaching. See Appendix A for sample survey questions and Appendix B for the courses and their alignment to our survey.

SURVEY

The pre-program survey was designed to establish baseline beliefs and perceptions of knowledge about ELs, as well as knowledge of culturally and linguistically responsive practices. The same survey was administered at the beginning and end of the program--approximately two years later. The survey addressed four broad categories: (1) Beliefs regarding ELs; (2) Feelings of preparedness to teach a diverse student population, specifically ELs; (3) Knowledge of ELs; and (4) Knowledge of best practices for teaching ELs. Participants selected their responses based on a Likert scale 0-5. The responses for the questions related to each category were run through a series of Cronbach’s Alpha tests to determine the degree of internal validity of each section (see Table 1). With high levels of internal validity observed in each section, four new aggregate variables were created, consisting of each section’s average score for both the pre-and post-program survey results.

Table 1
Results of Cronbach's Alpha Tests for Each Section

Survey Section	Chronbach’s Alpha
Beliefs Regarding English Learners (ELs)	.673
Classroom Preparation for Teaching Diverse Students and ELs, Specifically	.863
Knowledge of English Learners (ELs)	.919
Best Practices for Teaching English Learners (ELs)	.928

ANALYSES

Because this study contained both a within-subjects factor—with both a pre-program survey and a post-program survey to measure change over time—and a between-subjects factor—with an experimental group and a control group—a series of two-way mixed ANOVA tests was run to determine whether a statistically significant interaction exists between control and experimental groups over time.

RESULTS

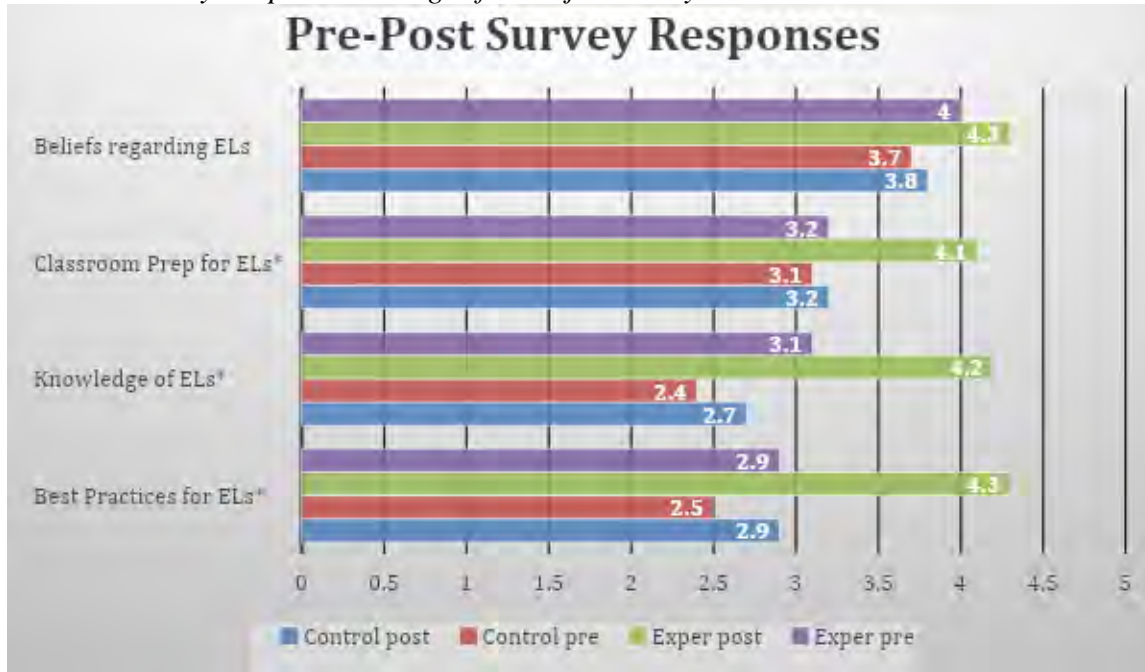
BELIEFS REGARDING ENGLISH LEARNERS

The first section of the survey addressed beliefs about English learners. Means for the pre-post questions reported here as an aggregate showed that the experimental group began with agreement to the items, indicating they already felt strongly about being multilingual, the

importance of including ELs in the classroom, and the like. Their ratings did increase from a mean of 4.0 to 4.3, but the results were not significant. Likewise, the control group's responses went from 3.7 to 3.8, not showing a significant increase, as expected. See Figure 1, the first set of results, for more information.

Figure 1

Pre-Post Survey Response Averages for Major Survey Sections



Note. *Construct significant at $p < .05$.

CLASSROOM PREPARATION FOR DIVERSE STUDENTS AND ELS, SPECIFICALLY

In this section, pre-program survey results were similar for experimental and control groups, in contrast to post-program survey results, where experimental group scores were significantly higher than control group scores. For the specific item in this section of the survey related to **feeling prepared to teach ELs**, a similar pattern was observed. This indicates that participants in the program felt more prepared to work with ELs in their classroom ($F(1, 34)=12.66, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .271$). See Figure 1.

KNOWLEDGE OF ELS

In the section on knowledge of ELs, both pre- and post-program survey results were higher for the experimental group compared with the control group. This pattern was also observed for the items related to the **role of academic language in the classroom** and **intentional and systematic vocabulary instruction**. This suggests that although the participants in the CLD program knew more than their control group cohorts at the start, they also rated their knowledge higher at the conclusion of their participation ($F(1, 34)=18.63, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .354$). See Figure 1 for more information.

BEST PRACTICES FOR TEACHING ELS

In the section on best practices for teaching ELs, both pre and post-program survey results were higher for the experimental group compared with the control group. This pattern was consistent for the items related to **strategies to draw on the cultural background and experience of the EL’s parents, families and communities; strategies to integrate academic language and content teaching; and strategies to utilize intentional and systematic vocabulary instruction in the classroom.** This suggests that although the participants in the CLD program knew more than their control group cohorts prior to the study, they also rated their knowledge of best practices higher at the conclusion of their participation. See Figure 1 for more details.

CONCLUSIONS

Survey results indicate that program participants report feeling more prepared to work with ELs, more knowledgeable about ELs and language development, and more aware of best practices for teaching ELs. While the Beliefs section of the survey did not show a significant difference from pre- to post-survey or between experimental and control participants, it may well be that the participants who opted into this program already were inclined to teach ELs and desired to know more about this population and effective means for working with them. This coincides with the work by Byrnes and Kiger (2019) where they found that graduate students earning a degree had more positive attitudes toward language, but were unsure if that was impacted by graduate study or if there was some “personality or temperament trait” that was in play (p. 641).

These preliminary results show that the program of study and coaching support resulted in increased knowledge about ELs, language development, and best practices for providing culturally and linguistically responsive instruction, much like the work reported by Teemant and colleagues (Teemant et al., 2014; Teemant & Reveles, 2012; Teemant, 2014). Teachers were provided teachers with knowledge and skills they needed to effectively teach ELs in their classrooms (Lucas & Villegas, 2010). Further work is needed to examine not only classroom performance, but also student achievement to see if this preparation translates into higher quality culturally and linguistically responsive instruction—leading to improved achievement—for ELs.

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Appendix A

Sample Survey Questions

Beliefs regarding English Learners (participants rate level of agreement (0=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree))

- I believe that being able to read and write in multiple languages would be beneficial to any student.
- Cross-cultural skills are necessary for the 21st century learner.
- Parents of non- or limited-English-proficient children should be advised to speak English with their children as often as possible. (These responses were reverse coded.)
- Families have a strong knowledge base and are a resource to be tapped into through classroom and assessment activities.

Classroom Preparation to teach Diverse Students and English Learners Specifically (participants rate level of agreement (0=not at all like me to 5=completely like me))

- I have been provided the tools needed to educate culturally diverse students effectively.
- My training has fully prepared me for working effectively with ELs in the classroom
- I struggle to meet the educational needs of ELs. (These responses were reverse coded.)
- I am prepared to build relationships with the parents and families of ELs.

Knowledge of English Learners (participants rate level of knowledge (0=no knowledge to 5=extensive knowledge))

- The local EL population
- Legal requirements for educating ELs
- Linguistics
- How first languages are learned/acquired
- How second languages are learned/acquired
- The CELP and WIDA standards

Best Practices for Teaching English Learners (participants rate level of knowledge (0=no knowledge to 5=extensive knowledge))

- Strategies to help ELs connect their home language to the English language
- Strategies to create opportunities for simultaneous content and language learning for ELs in the classroom
- Strategies to draw on the cultural background and experiences of ELs
- Strategies to draw on the cultural background and experiences of the ELs' parents, families, and communities
- Strategies for implementing culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom

Appendix B

Program Courses and Aligned Survey Questions

CLD Program Course	Related Survey Questions (5 point Likert scale)
Introduction to ESL/Multicultural Education	<p>Beliefs Regarding English Learners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I believe that being able to read and write in multiple languages would be beneficial to any student. ● Cross-cultural skills are necessary for the 21st century learner. ● Parents of non- or limited-English-proficient children should be advised to speak English with their children as often as possible. (These responses were reverse coded.) ● Families have a strong knowledge base and are a resource to be tapped into through classroom and assessment activities. <p>Knowledge of English Learners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The local EL population ● Legal requirements for educating ELs ● Sheltered content instruction and how to implement it
Methods & Materials of ESL/Multicultural Education	<p>Classroom Preparation for Diverse Students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I am fully able to reach ELs in my classroom ● I feel confident in my ability to teach a diverse student body <p>Best Practices for Teaching ELs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strategies to help ELs connect their home language to the English language ● Strategies to draw on the cultural background and experiences of ELs ● Strategies to draw on the cultural background and experiences of the ELs' parents, families, and communities ● Strategies for implementing culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom
Language and Linguistics	<p>Knowledge of English Learners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Linguistics ● CELP and WIDA standards ● The role of academic language in the classroom ● Intentional and systematic vocab instruction <p>Best Practices for Teaching ELs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strategies to support the role of ELs' first language for learning in the second language

<p>Parent / Community Involvement</p>	<p>Classroom Preparation for Diverse Students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I am prepared to build relationships with the parents and families of my students ● I am prepared to build relationships with the communities of my students <p>Best Practices for Teaching ELs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strategies to help ELs connect their home language to the English language ● Strategies to draw on the cultural background and experiences of ELs ● Strategies to draw on the cultural background and experiences of the ELs’ parents, families, and communities
<p>Literacy for All Learners</p>	<p>Knowledge of English Learners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Literacy development ● The role of academic language in the classroom ● Intentional and systematic vocab instruction <p>Best Practices for Teaching ELs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strategies for implementing culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom ● Strategies to support the role of ELs’ first language for learning in the second language
<p>Practicum in ESL/Multicultural Education</p>	<p>Knowledge of English Learners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sheltered content instruction and how to implement it ● The role of academic language in the classroom ● Intentional and systematic vocab instruction <p>Best Practices for Teaching ELs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strategies for implementing culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom ● Strategies to integrate academic language and content teaching ● Strategies to utilize intentional and systematic vocab instruction in the classroom
<p>Assessment for English Learners</p>	<p>Knowledge of English Learners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Legal requirements for educating ELs ● CELP and WIDA standards <p>Best Practices for Teaching ELs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How to analyze assessment data and adjust instruction for ELs
<p>Second Language Acquisition</p>	<p>Beliefs Knowledge of English Learners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How first languages are learned/acquired

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How second language are learned/acquired <p>Best Practices for Teaching ELs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strategies to help ELs connect their home language to the English language• Strategies to support the role of ELs' first language for learning in the second language• Strategies for implementing culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom• Strategies to integrate academic language and content teaching• Strategies to utilize intentional and systematic vocab instruction in the classroom
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