

# Impact of an English Language Learner Course on Preservice Teachers

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This article presents results of a field-based course for sophomore preservice teachers to prepare them to work effectively with English language learners (ELs). Qualitative and quantitative measures were taken to gain insight into the degree of course participants' increase of awareness about ELs' characteristics, their social and academic instructional needs, and legal background information on working with ELs in public school settings in the southeastern region of the U.S. Overall, results indicate a distinct increase of awareness in all assessed aspects for the majority of participants. Suggestions for other teacher education programs are provided to explore similar field-based training modules.

Currently, close to ten percent or more than five million children in U.S. public schools are non-native speakers of English or English language learners (ELs) (Batalova & McHugh, 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). By 2030, this figure will have risen to approximately 40 percent (Roseberry-McKibbin & Brice, 2013). In preparation for this significant increase of English Language Learners (heretofore ELs) in U.S. public schools, individual states have implemented different EL-specific training components into initial teacher preparation and inservice teacher training programs to better prepare educators for the specific challenges with this highly diverse population of students. Some, like the state of Florida, require every graduating novice teacher to have an EL endorsement (Florida Department of Education, 2017). Other states such as California or New York offer ESOL Masters degree and/or add on certification programs for teachers to receive ESOL certifications (California Department of Education, 2017; New York Department of Education, 2017).

According to 2015 U.S. Migration Policy Institute data, the southeastern state in which the to be described pilot study was conducted belongs to the top five states reporting most rapid increase of ELs. With a 827.8 percent increase of ELs between 1997-2008, this state experienced nationwide the highest increase in public schools (Ruiz Soto, Hooker, & Batalova, 2015a). Like in other states, Spanish is the most commonly spoken first language of ELs (81%) in this southeastern state followed by Russian, Vietnamese, Chinese and Arabic (Ruiz Soto, Hooker, & Batalova, 2015b). Additionally, as in many U.S. states, for decades this state has experienced a chronic shortage of certified ESOL teachers and a very low retention rate of ELs in public schools (Kindler, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This situation has made it paramount that preservice teachers in this southeastern state and other states with similar issues adequately be prepared to address the needs of ELs.

To address the described educational challenge with ELs, the College of Education of a mid-size southeastern U.S. college integrated a mandatory field-based

course into their undergraduate teacher education program that introduces all sophomore education majors to research-evidenced practices with ELs. In this paper, the author first describes the nature and content of the EL-focused course. Then, results of two different impact measures from two sections of this course will be shared and future implications discussed.

### **EL Course characteristics**

All sophomore teacher education majors at this university, Physical Education, Music, Art and Dance majors included, are required to pass a two-credit foundations course on understanding and meeting the needs of ELs in general education classrooms before they can be admitted to advanced studies in their major. This course is one of two STAR (Study, Teach, Assess, and Reflect) rotation courses and consists of an introductory lecture part and a 5-morning field component (R.W. Riley, 2017).

The first eight background-providing on-campus classes (total of 490 minutes) introduced sophomores in to the realities and needs of ELs in public schools. Through class discussions of readings, video reflections, and simulations, students tested and revised their preconceived notions about ELs and realized challenges of ELs and their parents with school routines and academic or social requirements. They also learned about legal protection of ELs and how teachers can utilize this knowledge for advocacy of ELs. In small and large group discussions and written reflections, students critically processed any personal experiences with ELs in schools, foreign exchange students, personal travel or living abroad experiences as well as foreign language learning experiences. In addition, students were made aware of specific cultural and linguistic challenges of English that present major stumbling blocks for ELs

in their attempts to become culturally and linguistically adjusted and successful. Further, students engaged in interactive language practices that highlighted the many confusing components of English such as homonyms, homophones, homographs, idioms, gerunds, or phrasal verbs. They practiced identifying verbal and non-verbal cultural and linguistic challenges of content-specific grade level texts and discussed and practiced research-supported teaching and assessment strategies in simulations.

The overall goal of the first course component was to challenge and raise preservice teachers' awareness of the specific needs and gifts ELs bring to general education classrooms. This was necessary because the majority of students enrolled in this university's teacher education program have rarely or never been outside the U.S. or in other U.S. states further away from home. Thus they generally have not experienced themselves outside their own cultural and/or linguistic comfort zones. Most also have not had personal memorable encounters with ELs (personal conversations with students enrolled in the course).

In the second course phase, students were to gain practical experiences with ELs in a field placement arranged by the College Field Placement Office. Students spent five mornings (approximately 3.5 hours each day) in a host teacher's classroom to observe, reflect, and engage in co-teaching ELs with the host teacher. They supported a specific EL in a grade level setting that matched their major. Each host teacher had received training by educators in the College of Education to mentor these students. At the end of the field experience, host teachers provided an evaluation for the field-component performance of their assigned teacher candidates that were included into the final course grade submitted by the university instructor.

Each visit during this field experience was devoted to a specific task of a case study that each future teacher conducted with one EL. First, preservice teachers collected academic, behavioral and social background information about the EL by gathering personal, behavioral and academic performance information from various sources. These included viewing formal and informal test scores and interviewing the teacher and the designated EL personally. Based on this information, each preservice teacher co-planned and co-taught at least one whole class-based lesson with the host teacher in which the preservice teacher provided specific support to one specific EL. The final written case study assignment required the teacher candidate to a) summarize the EL background information gathered prior to teaching the lesson and relate subsequent appropriate research-evidenced ideas to teach, b) describe what was planned for the co-taught lesson with set objectives, c) summarize and reflect on how the implemented lesson differed from the planned version, d) summarize the EL's performance data, and e) reflect on what the EL's performance suggests for future lessons. Lastly, each teacher candidate reflected on the entire co-teaching experience addressing the planning, co-teaching and assessment aspects of the experience (for details on the case study, see (R.W. Riley, 2017).

### **Method**

To gain basic insight into the impact of this two-credit, field-based class on preservice teachers' perceptions of ELs and resulting awareness of ELs' needs for instruction and assessment, two different types of data were taken and analyzed one month after final course grades had been submitted.

**Data Pool 1: Reflections on Realities of ELs.** The first data pool, collected prior to the field experience, consisted of a qualitative analysis of course participants' written reflections on realities of ELs. In order to identify the theoretical knowledge base teacher candidates had after the first eight background-building classes, preservice teachers were asked to summarize at least three different realizations about realities of ELs against any preconceived notions in a 2-3 page reflection paper. These realizations could be based on a combination of information learned in class such as language acquisition and acculturation phases, legal issues, challenges with parents of ELs and/or administration, language challenges of English, reading, or writing, listening, speaking accommodation needs and personal experiences with ELs (i.e., personal travels, exchange students, work). They were encouraged to integrate newly learned terminologies, laws and resources as appropriate to indicate their broadened perspectives. Reflections were analyzed for eight occurring themes regarding (1) legal facts about ELs, (2) language acquisition and acculturation phases of ELs, (3) ELs' challenges with specific literacy tasks and how to best address them with research-based strategies (oral and written comprehension, and reading, writing, spelling), (4) working with parents of ELs, (5) advocacy approaches for ELs, (6) different types of ELs (i.e., first or second generation immigrants, refugees), (7) ELs and school administration, and (8) aspects of personal bias or preconceived notions.

**Data pool 2: Self-Reflective survey.** The second data pool, collected at the end of term, consisted of students' answers to four Likert scale questions with an option to provide explanations for responses. These questions were to identify key aspects of

impact of the course on teacher candidates' increase of awareness about needs of EL, advocacy for ELs, language challenges, and the helpfulness of the field experience. The following questions were asked:

Question 1:

To what degree do you think your *awareness about the needs of ELs* has improved compared to the beginning of the course (in-class content)?

Question 2:

To what degree do you think you now can *be an advocate for ELs* given what you learnt in this class?

Question 3:

To what degree do you think your *awareness about the ambiguities and challenges of the English language for non-native speakers of English* has improved compared to the beginning of the course?

Question 4:

To what degree do you think *your awareness about the realities of ELs* has improved *through the 5-day field experience* in the classroom with ELs?

**Participants.** The presented data is based on voluntary feedback from 62 percent of two sections of course participants (35 out of 56 students) taught by the same instructor. All voluntary participants were female sophomore Elementary education majors and native speakers of English with the exception of two ELs born and raised in the U.S. Each participant had gained field experiences with ELs in a local, rural Elementary school setting, in which the majority of ELs were of Latino descent. After completion of the final exam, following university Institutional Review Board guidelines, all participants of both classes were invited to volunteer their written reflections and four survey questions anonymously for the study.

**Analysis.** To guarantee unbiased, anonymous data analysis, a trained research assistant who was unfamiliar with any of the participants and their course performance, pulled realizations about ELs from participant's reflection papers and typed them up for the researcher to analyze and theme-code. The assistant also entered numerical and qualitative final survey responses into an Excel spread sheet before the author who had also been the course instructor for both sections, analyzed the findings.

## Results

Details regarding the results of a) the EL realities reflection paper analysis and b) the end-of semester, self-reflective survey are provided next.

**Results of the EL realities reflection paper.** Overall, teacher candidates reflected on four major topics: (a) appropriate educational practices, (b) collaboration with parents, (c) legal foundations of working with ELs, and (d) school administration and ELs. Additionally, they identified preconceived notions and how they changed. Most frequent realizations centered around appropriate instructional practices. For instance, 51 percent (N= 18/35) of survey responders stressed the importance of knowing about the *acculturation and language acquisition phases* ELs and their parents encounter and what impact those have on successful learning and social integration. Related to these phases, 31 percent (N= 11/35) specified that it is important for educators to know that social language or personal "playground talk," called *BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication skills)* (Cummins, 2015), is more easily acquired than academic language referred to as *CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency)* (Cummins, 2015). This allows them to set appropriate expectations for ELs. Further,

42 percent (N= 15/35) of participants stressed the need for specific *research-supported teaching strategies* with EL-specific appropriate *accommodations* for oral and written communication tasks that considered ELs language and acculturation stages and engaged ELs actively. Among those most frequently mentioned specific research-supported strategies were the use for multiple means of representation of content (N= 14/35 or 40 percent) with non-verbal cues such as visuals (N =13/35 or 37 percent) and gestures (N= 9/35 or 26 percent). 29 percent of responders (N= 10/35) indicated the need to allow ELs to use their native language along with English in oral and written school tasks. Further, 29 percent (N= 10/35) of the responders discussed the need to provide a bullying-free, welcoming community of learners by “preparing the native speakers for the ELs” and “requiring respectful and kind behavior, “by “inviting parents and ELs to share cultural and language practices” and for the teacher to “take an active interest’ in the ELs’ lives.”

Further, 42 percent (N= 15/35) highlighted the need for effective *collaboration with ELs’ parents*. 29 percent (N=10/35) specifically stressed the necessity of open communication practices in the parents’ first language as needed, and active integration of parents in an EL’s learning progress. In this context, 29 percent (N=10/35) stressed that unsatisfactory homework completion might be the result of language barriers and not necessarily a lack of willingness to learn or lack of parental support.

Moreover, regarding their *legal background knowledge on working with ELs*, 31 percent of responders (N= 11/35) stressed the importance of knowing that according to the law, ELs had to be served like any other student regardless of their legal status. Another 20 percent (N= 7/35)

of responders reflected on the fact that teachers are required to provide appropriate accommodations to ELs. Additionally, 17 percent (N= 6/35) addressed how IDEA 2004, a special education law, protects ELs with special needs. With regard to *school administrative support*, 17 percent (N = 6/35) of responses expressed concern with not being able to assume that school administrators had the knowledge to accommodate ELs’ needs properly.

Lastly, the two most commonly identified personal *preconceived notions* that students challenged and changed throughout the course as they expanded their awareness of the realities of ELs included the following: (1) 31 percent (N= 11/35) assumed that ELs did not need specific language and acculturation accommodations. They attributed this notion to having been totally unaware of how overwhelming it can be to learn academic and social skills in two languages and how difficult it can be for ELs to become and feel culturally accepted; (2) 17 percent (N = 6/35) initially thought that ELs’ poor academic performance was most likely due to laziness or lack of motivation. Responders related this false notion to initially having been completely unaware of the language and acculturation phases ELs naturally go through.

**Results of self-reflective survey.** Information on the end-of-term self-reflective survey is provided in sequence from Question 1-4. For each question, quantitative and selective, representative qualitative participant responses are provided.

Question 1 asked survey participants to indicate the degree of increase of awareness of EL-specific needs at the end of the course. 69 percent of all survey responders (N= 24/35) recognized a significant increase in their awareness about EL-specific learner needs. In one class, 100

percent (N = 12/12) of the responders considered themselves significantly more aware of ELs' needs. Overall, a total of 22 percent (N= 8/35) felt appropriately aware of the social and academic needs of ELs. In the comment section for Question 1, 37 percent (N= 11/29) of them indicated explicitly how completely unaware of EL-specific needs participants had been initially. One sophomore stated: "I came in without even thinking about having to accommodate the needs of such diverse students" and another confessed that she "knew nothing about ELs [and] didn't really even know that they had much trouble in school."

Question 2 aimed at indicating the degree of preparedness to advocate for ELs. 49 percent (N = 17/35) of the survey completers considered themselves significantly prepared to be advocates for ELs after this course; 40 percent (N= 14/35) felt appropriately prepared. Eleven percent (N = 4/35) were very self-critical and felt that despite their newly gained awareness they needed to learn a lot more about ELs to be truly effective advocates. 60 percent (N = 21/35) of the comments stated that knowing about the laws that protect ELs and about the language acquisition and acculturation phases would serve them as a solid base for effective advocacy skills. It is also interesting to note that the same class that indicated 100 percent significant improvement of awareness of EL-specific needs for Question 1, also expressed 100 percent significant increase of advocacy skills for Question 2 (N= 12/12).

Question 3 addressed preservice teachers' awareness of the many language challenges ELs face in their academic learning and in social settings. 71 percent (N= 25/35) of the responders found themselves significantly more aware of such ambiguities. 20 percent (N= 7/35) felt appropriately aware of and prepared to address ambiguities, and nine percent (N=

3/35) felt moderately aware of and prepared to address language ambiguities. 71 percent of the responders (N =20/28) commented how unaware they had been initially about the tricky ambiguities of English such as homonyms, homophones, homographs, phrasal verbs or idioms; but that they learned valuable strategies to help ELs learn effectively. Two teacher candidates, non-native speakers themselves, expressed how they remembered their own struggles and were grateful for having learned strategies to help ELs effectively as a result of this course.

In response to Question 4 that aimed at identifying the degree to which the field component of the course had improved course participants' awareness of the realities of ELs, 51 percent (N = 18/35) of the survey responders indicated that the field experience significantly improved their awareness of EL realities and needs. 37 percent (N= 13/35) experienced a moderate improvement, and 6 percent (N= 2/35) found the field experience barely beneficial because of issues in their individual placements with ELs that did not display classic language and acculturation struggles that we had discussed in class. 72 percent (N= 21/29) of comments highlighted how the field experience allowed sophomore education majors early on to "experience and practice first hand the terms that [they] had talked about in class." Three commentators (10 percent or 3/29) would have preferred more time with their EL.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Overall, both data pools provide consistent encouraging evidence of the distinctly positive impact even a brief introduction to working with ELs can have on inexperienced education majors at the beginning of their studies. Specifically, the realities of ELs reflections prior to the field experience revealed that after only eight

sessions with brief theoretical introductions to language acquisition and acculturation characteristics, legal, administrative, teaching and assessment issues with ELs, all participating sophomores (N= 35/35) were able to not only effectively identify and reflect upon two or three relevant and well-supported realities of ELs but were also able to identify at least one preconceived notion for which they described how it had shifted as a result of the content learned in the initial portion of the course. Furthermore, in 42 percent of additional comments to the end-of semester survey questions 1 and 3 (N= 24/57), participants stated in different ways that initially they had had “not the slightest clue about what ELs went through” and that they also had “had no idea how difficult it would be to learn and speak English.” Thus, the presented student responses clearly support the relevance of introducing education majors early on in their studies to the needs of ELs in a separate field-based course.

Also, the positive impact of the course model with its tightly linked theory and practicum component and the case study assignment is evidenced in the end-of course survey feedback. 50 percent (N= 58/115) of all comments to all four questions indicated that the effective combination of theoretical knowledge and practical field experiences had provided these sophomore education majors according to their own words with confidence to “correctly and appropriately help ELs in school and help them feel more comfortable.” They realized in their “eye-opening experiences” during the field component of the course that “GenEd teachers should work to improve and support ELs in class as well as during one-on one time” and that their “awareness of the needs of ELs was no longer basic and stereotypical [as was the case] before taking this course. It is now more developed ... with a deeper understanding.” Three

participants commented self-critically that what they had learned in the course had opened their eyes to how much more there was to learn about serving ELs effectively given the diverse needs of ELs.

Overall, the end-of term survey results reinforced the awareness gains sophomores had initially reflected upon in their papers prior to their field experiences. 91 percent of all survey responders (N = 32/35) reported an appropriate or significant increase in awareness of EL-specific needs (Question 1) and skills to address the challenges of language ambiguities for ELs (Question 3). 89 percent of all responders (N = 31/35) reported appropriate or significant increase in advocacy skills for ELs (Question 2). Furthermore, 84 percent (N= 27/32) of the responders stressed the significance of field experience with ELs (Question 4) in comments such as: “Being able to apply what we learned to real life situations, made it all come to life.”

Given that the majority of students in both classes had no background experience with or awareness about ELs prior to taking this class, these positive results serve as a strong incentive for other institutions of higher education to infuse explicit, practical exposure to the diverse needs of ELs early on in a preservice teacher training program. EL-specific content such as described in this module may be delivered in a separate course similar to the one described here and/or be explicitly infused in several existing courses ranging from pedagogical foundations courses to major-specific theoretical and methods-based courses.

Even though the described field experience model proved to be successful overall, the following realizations may be helpful for other institutions of higher education who are seeking ways to improve undergraduate teacher candidates’ confidence in working with ELs: (1) In order to properly prepare preservice teachers

in properly helping not only novice ELs who display early signs of acculturation and language acquisition but also those who are socially well integrated and are in need of advanced academic language support such as text composition, grammar or content-specific vocabulary enhancement, background-building instruction needs to address clearly that and how ELs can benefit from differentiated language learning support at more advanced stages of integration. (2) Placing candidates with mentors who skillfully model best practices with ELs is crucial at an early stage of field-experience because candidates, as indicated in many student comments, cannot rely on a repertoire of personal experiences with ELs. Should finding such mentors be difficult, placing several candidates with a positive mentor model in the same room together with different ELs appears better than having to help beginning teachers process experienced lack of best practice. Another way to ensure high quality mentoring may involve the ESOL- teacher and/or a trained university faculty member as mentors with candidates providing language learning support in an elective class period or after-school tutoring program. According to the author's experiences such models are also provide effective, intense experiences and place less pressure on mentor teachers during regular class time. (3) While not an issue with participants in this study, ensuring that preservice teachers who major in disciplines such as physical education, music or art experience their EL at least for part of their field experiences in discipline-specific settings is also essential to demonstrate the relevance of the EL-related background information learned in the first part of the course for each of the disciplines. (4) A detailed case study in collaboration with the mentor teacher that includes (a) a thorough background data analysis, (b) teaching and assessing learning outcomes,

and (c) reflections on candidates' experiences as assessors, teachers and collaborators with school personnel is highly beneficial because the intense one-on-one contact with the mentor, EL and preservice teacher creates a strong intercultural connection that influences future encounters with ELs for teacher candidates. (5) Should a longer EL-specific field experience tied to one course not be a viable option, then candidates may benefit from multiple assignments with direct EL-contact in different courses to be able to compare and contrast native and non-native speaker student responses to specific assessment and teaching practices.

## Conclusion

While the findings of this pilot study need to be replicated and verified on a larger scale, the overall consistently positive participant feedback at the beginning and the end of term provide encouragement for other institutions of higher education to find creative ways to embed field components with ELs in their teacher education programs early on. Even public school administrations could become inspired to share essential topics covered in the described course in short professional development sessions for inservice teachers. Given the steady increase of ELs in the U.S., especially in the southeastern regions, it is paramount that preservice and inservice teachers be prepared with research-evidenced educational practices and monitored field-experiences as described in this study.

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