



Teacher Preparation for Educating English Language Learners

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Abstract

This investigation reports on the effects of a university Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) program on general teacher readiness, attitudes, beliefs, and planning for instruction. The program consisted of 18 credit hours of university coursework delivered onsite at the participating school. The participants were a group of 16 regular elementary teachers and two administrators at a school in the Midwestern part of the United States. This school had been recently designated as a school district site that would deliver instruction to a mixed-population of native English speaking children and an influx of English Language Learners (ELLs). The participants had no prior professional teaching experience with ELLs. It should be noted that the participants had on average 15 years of prior teaching experience and half of them had at least some form of prior TESOL in-service instruction before the program was implemented. In addition, most of the participants already had a master's degree in education and had studied a foreign language at some point in their lives in advance of the training. The data collection included four elements: a questionnaire administered to the participants before and after the conclusion of the TESOL program, teacher comments on course evaluations, written course assignments, and formal observations of the instruction after the training had ended. Statistically significant results were recorded on the paired pre- and post-administered questionnaire for teacher readiness, attitudes, and planning for instruction. Only teacher beliefs about how children acquire a second language did not grow positively to a statistically significant extent. However, based on the pre-test results, their beliefs in this area were somewhat well informed prior to the training. Based on the course evaluations, course assignments, and observations of their post-program teaching performance, the qualitative findings paralleled the quantitatively established outcomes that well constructed university TESOL programs can positively effect teacher readiness, attitudes, and their ability to plan for instruction.

With a record setting number of new immigrants in the U.S. (approximately 14 million) during the first decade of the 21st Century, there is certainly reason to believe that national demand for teacher preparation courses for Educating English Language Learners (ELL) should continue to increase. Currently, there are approximately 40 million foreign-born inhabitants in the U.S. [1]. The State of Kansas has also recorded impressive growth during the past decade. According to the Immigration Policy Center, Kansas had 134,735 foreign-born inhabitants in 2000 and that number grew to 186,942 in 2010 for an increase from 5% of the total State of Kansas population in 2000 to 6.5% in 2010 [2]. As a result of this growth, school districts have increased their expectations that more of their teachers should become ESOL endorsed.

The participating school district also had experienced substantial growth over the past decade and needed to expand the number of elementary schools serving ELLs from one to two schools. The district employed a center concept for elementary schools in which ELLs living within the school district boundaries were assigned to one special school in which all teachers were required to hold an ESOL endorsement in the State of Kansas. This study involved in-service elementary teachers from the second participating school, which shall be called "Wheatland Elementary" for the purposes of this paper. As requested by the school district, TESOL faculty members from the University of Kansas delivered one course per semester at Wheatland Elementary over three years. The five class-based courses included, in order of occurrence: (1) TESOL methods focusing on content based instruction and sheltered immersion; (2) developing intercultural awareness for the education of culturally and linguistically diverse students; (3) second language acquisition theory and practice; (4) diagnosis and remediation of English language learners' linguistic and academic progress; and (5) introductory linguistics and language analysis.



Method

Given a long-term affiliation with Wheatland teachers, multiple data sources were collected employing both quantitative and qualitative data analysis procedures. Such a mixed-method approach offered the advantage of situating and corroborating data analyses from multiple vantage points, including those of the teacher participants. A reliable gauge of program impact on teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and practices was the pre- and post-program administration of a questionnaire, but data from course evaluations, teacher assignments, and formal classroom observations provide additional context for a more holistic understanding of the implications of professional development for this particular group of teachers.

Participants

Sixteen teachers and two administrators ($n=18$) participated in the 18 credit-hour sequence of courses. The Wheatland Elementary teachers had an average of 15 years of teaching experience. Approximately half of the teachers had received no prior training in working with ELLs and the remainder of the teachers had received their information on working with ELLs primarily through conference workshops. Once Wheatland Elementary received its ESOL designation, it had one year of preparation before new ELLs would be assigned to the school. To ease the transition, the district started the first year enrolling only Kindergarteners and then added ELLs at one additional level with each subsequent year up to and including the sixth grade.

Questionnaire

A 31-item questionnaire was administered to 16 teachers at the onset of the endorsement program and then upon completion of all required 18-credit hours, including their practicum. After examining prior studies of teachers' attitudes, including Youngs and Youngs' survey [3] and measures used by Byrnes et al. [4], the development of our questionnaire centered on three aspects of teacher perceptions: (1) their attitudes toward ELLs in the regular classroom and the district's decision to make their school a new ESOL site; (2) their beliefs related to second language acquisition processes; and (3) the effectiveness of their own instructional practices for promoting language development within a culturally and linguistically respectful environment. Teachers rated their opinion of each statement on a 5-point Likert scale; statements posed in the negative were reverse-coded in the analysis stage. Reliability analyses identified items within each of the three original categories (*attitude*, *beliefs* and *planning for instruction*) that could be summed into subscales with good internal consistency. In addition, a total scale using all items was identified and labeled *total readiness*. This process resulted in four scales with adequate to very good reliability as measured by coefficient alpha (Total Readiness = .76, 12 items; Attitude = .81, 2 items; Expectations = .78, 4 items; Planning for Instruction = .62, 9 items).

Results

Pre- /Post-Program Questionnaire

An alpha level of .05 was applied for all analyses. Paired samples t tests found significant and positive changes for many attitudes, beliefs and instructional practices items. In addition, there were broad significant changes in the *total readiness*, *attitude* and *planning for instruction* scales. Scores on the *beliefs* scale were unchanged, though one item did show improvement.

Scores on the broadly defined scale of Total Readiness increased dramatically, $t(15) = 3.33$, $p = .005$, $d = .84$. The effect size d is the standardized difference between pretest and posttest means and is typically interpreted as .2 = small, .5 = medium and .8 = large. The growth in scores on the Attitude scale, $t(15) = 3.44$, $p = .004$, $d = 1.04$, and the Planning for Instruction scale, $t(15) = 2.56$, $p = .022$, $d = .54$, was large and medium, respectively.

Each individual item (attitude, belief, or instructional practice) was also analyzed for improvement. In terms of attitude, teacher participants were substantially more pleased that their elementary school was selected as a new ESOL site after the endorsement coursework, $t(15) = 3.48$, $p = .003$, $d = 1.06$, and they were significantly more likely to look forward to having ELLs in the classroom after the training, $t(15) = 2.78$, $p = .014$, $d = .84$. They were also clearly more positively disposed toward allowing ELLs to use their first language in the classroom after completing the coursework, $t(15) = 3.16$, $p = .006$, $d = .76$.



Regarding beliefs about second language acquisition processes, participants perceived a greater need for connecting with their students' cultures in order to achieve better academic results in the classroom $t(15) = 3.00$, $p = .009$, $d = .88$. Also, the outcome for the item—"Once students can speak English, they are ready to undertake the academic tasks of the regular classroom"—demonstrated a positive, though non-significant improvement, $t(15) = 1.58$, $p = .14$, $d = .41$, indicating that the participants in this sample were less likely to feel that English speaking ability was a sufficient indicator of academic readiness.

Regarding instructional practices, there were also some significant changes in the self-reported views of the participants. Importantly, the teachers indicated that they had a much better sense of what language objectives are and how to meet them through sheltered instruction $t(15) = 5.58$, $p \leq .001$, $d = 1.57$. Moreover, teachers reported that they were using scaffolding to enhance the learning experiences for all students to a greater extent after the endorsement coursework, $t(15) = 2.78$, $p = .014$, $d = .74$. Another noteworthy change was that teachers were more likely to use formal lesson plans when planning instruction after the training, $t(15) = 2.41$, $p = .029$, $d = .43$. A positive, though non-significant, increase was found in the use of more formal and informal assessment techniques before and after completing endorsement coursework $t(15) = 1.82$, $p = .089$, $d = .59$.

Course evaluations

Written comments on end-of-the-semester evaluations reveal that Wheatland teachers reacted most—positively and negatively—to the degree to which their course instructors were accommodating. On the positive side, they were happy when their instructor was "so willing to work with us and our schedules regarding assignments and timing," but less satisfied when the "amount of reading and expectations did not fit our needs as full time teachers." Beyond being accommodated, teachers' next most cited concern was the extent to which the courses provided "practical" solutions to working successfully with ELLs. On the positive side, teachers remarked that their instructors' "covered a vast array of materials," including "real life experiences and sharing of examples [that] were very helpful to the understanding." On the other hand, comments such as, "It would be advantageous to learn more about the cultures that will be predominant at Wheatland;" "Get to know the group a little more at the beginning so you can tailor your instruction;" and "It was difficult to listen to ideas as new information when in reality we had been using them for years" demonstrate that not all students were entirely satisfied with the attempts to factor in the Wheatland context.

Course assignments

Data extracted from teachers' written work corroborate the survey results and indicate that the endorsement program did effect positive change in spite of the critical course evaluations. Particularly with respect to the use of students' first language to facilitate comprehension of content and promote bilingualism, being appreciative of the role of culture in the classroom, and the realization of the importance of establishing clear language objectives, teachers' reflections indicated readiness for Wheatland's transition as an ESOL school site.

By their second year in the program, teachers were making strong connections between culture and school success. "Our society makes it difficult for these children," one teacher wrote. "They are often looked down upon and lumped together into groups that are expected to fail. Context-free explanations are often attributed to immigrant groups and their failures." Another teacher conveyed a message that she would like for all teachers to heed: "Recognize that every individual and every family has their own interpretation and lives within 'their culture' in different ways." These connections helped them to develop greater empathy for their students and embrace the arrival of their ELLs. "I am very interested in learning more about other cultures and other languages," wrote a teacher. "I'm even more interested now in meeting the new people who come to our school. I look forward to opportunities to expand my knowledge and experiences through the interaction with our new Wheatland families." There were also signs of concern in the area of intercultural communication, as aptly expressed by this teacher: "Though it is fascinating to learn more about the languages and cultures, it is also, at times, overwhelming to try to understand so many different dimensions. ...The range and depth of influential factors of which a teacher must be cognizant, and the complexity of each of her/his students, sets up quite a remarkable inter-relationship for the educational process."



Classroom observations

A strength observed in the case of nearly all teachers was the ability to use techniques and curricula that enhance and expand students' language ability. As remarked by one supervisor, "[This teacher] develops lesson plans based on the district curriculum but with an amazing awareness of her students' language acquisition needs." In particular, teachers were conscientiously focusing on language learners' reading, speaking, listening and writing skills through a variety of instructional techniques, and all were observed to post language objectives for each of these skills prior to the lesson.

Also notable were supervisors' portrayal of a caring and welcoming staff. "I observed that she is sensitive to a child's need for competence and honor," wrote one supervisor, "and gave him support in a non-threatening way." And a supervisor commented of another teacher, "She consistently conveys a sense of patience and empathy that lowers her students' affective filters and allows them to make progress in both the academic and language acquisition domains." There were also suggestions that teachers were applying what they learned in their classes: "As we talked I could see that she is now aware of the extra layer of thought that goes into planning effective instruction for them [ELLs]."

Discussion and Conclusions

Given the expressed initial reluctance of several of the teachers at Wheatland Elementary to complete the ESOL endorsement during the initial phases of the project and their expectations of flexibility and practicality, the reported outcomes during and following the program were encouraging. As the pre- and post-questionnaire showed statistically and other data sources corroborated, a number of attitudes, beliefs, and practices were significantly changed by the end of the program. This is due, in part, to a curriculum that merged theory and practice and that took into account—to as great a degree as practically possible—the nature of Wheatland Elementary and its teaching staff. If, as Byrnes et al. [4], Clair [5], and others suggest, teachers benefit most from long-term, well-structured professional development opportunities, then a university-based endorsement program that is modified for staff at individual schools would seem an ideal model for affecting changes in teachers' perceptions vis-à-vis linguistic minority students. The findings support this conclusion. To conclude, in light of the characteristics of the Wheatland teachers—relatively veteran in teaching years and with a vast collection of multicultural experiences and post-baccalaureate coursework—their progress is of noteworthy instructional importance.

References

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