English Language Learners, Teacher Preparation for Diversity

In the United States, K–12 classrooms are becoming more diverse as the population of English language learners (ELLs) continues to grow exponentially and spread to new regions across the country. Students classified as ELLs speak languages other than English at home and are still working to gain the English language proficiency needed to successfully access instructional content at school. If the current demographic shifts continue, all teachers across the United States will likely encounter ELLs at some point in their careers. Recognizing the increasing linguistic diversity in U.S. schools, most states require that all certified classroom teachers have specific preparation to teach ELLs. In the wake of these new state accreditation policies, many teacher education programs (which had previously focused on preparing teachers to teach English-proficient students) face the challenge of how to effectively prepare qualified teachers to work with ELLs. Teacher education can be informed by educational research, which has shed light on the knowledge, competencies, and dispositions that are considered most essential in preparing teachers for instructing ELLs.

Overview

This entry provides a general overview of the kinds of knowledge, pedagogical skills, insights, and awareness that research has found are crucial for effective teachers of ELLs. The entry synthesizes lessons learned from educational research, which indicates that teachers of ELLs need to develop (a) a breadth of knowledge about linguistically diverse students in a sociocultural context, (b) an understanding of social and cognitive aspects of language learning, and (c) an understanding of pedagogical practices grounded in second-language learning theories. These areas of teacher knowledge are discussed, followed by recommendations for teacher education programs preparing teachers to work with ELLs.

Understanding Learners Within a Sociocultural Context

Researchers such as Jim Cummins and Carlos Ovando assert that successful teachers of ELLs are aware of the power relationships and inequities that exist in interactions between teachers and students, schools and language-minority communities, and intergroup relations outside of schools. Inequities in language status and societal attitudes regarding language-minority populations play a role in mediating ELLs' opportunities for academic achievement. Teachers can empower students by valuing students' home languages and mobilizing students' linguistic knowledge as a bridge to English language development and by encouraging language-minority communities to participate in the school.

Work by Sonia Nieto suggests that teachers who are prepared to critically examine sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts of education for language-minority students create classroom cultures that work against the marginalization of these students and their families. One way of addressing this marginalization is to design teacher education courses that involve teacher-learners in an examination of patterns of discrimination within the United States and the ways that language policies are driven by ideologies that replicate societal inequities in schools.

Additionally, teacher education programs can develop critical teachers by including experiences for teacher-learners to develop inquiry skills to learn more about the history and experiences of specific culturally diverse
communities of practice, such as indigenous populations and what John Ogbu calls voluntary and involuntary immigrant groups. Teacher preparation that educates teacher-learners about the historical and social experiences of ELLs has implications for classroom practices, because teachers learn that ELLs cannot be treated as a homogeneous group, when in fact, these students come from many different cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds and come to school with a wide range of language proficiency levels, socio-economic status, and immigration status.

Research by Cummins and Nieto indicates that teachers who are aware of the processes of acculturation are better able to support the successful transition from home to school. They have found that teachers' attitudes about their students' communities and their understanding of the transitions students experience across distinct cultural practices can open opportunities for students to develop strong multicultural and multilingual identities. Both Cummins and Nieto argue for the power of positive attitudes and beliefs toward students that consciously or unconsciously play out during instruction.

Drawing from research on school–family connections, Luis Moll, Norma González, and other scholars point to the importance of preparing teachers to develop instructional approaches that recognize students' funds of knowledge. Community-based experiences in teacher education can guide teachers to develop relationships and understand ways to communicate with families of diverse backgrounds so that teachers can construct classroom contexts founded on asset-based rather than deficit approaches. Given the linguistic diversity of ELLs and their families, effective teachers of ELLs are prepared to find and create strategies to communicate with families with whom they may not share a common language. Teacher education models that include field experiences that give pre-service teachers opportunities to work with ELLs, make discoveries about their students' experiences and backgrounds, and find ways to explicitly connect background knowledge to new learning have been successful in helping teachers to think creatively about meeting the needs of ELLs while contesting deficit-model assumptions.

Research by Jim Cummins and Laurie Olsen also indicates that identity plays a crucial role in students' linguistic and academic development and participation in school life. Cummins notes that because ELLs in U.S. schools cross cultural and linguistic borders when they enter the classroom, it is important for teachers to be prepared to support students in constructing positive academic, cultural, and social identities. According to Cummins, language-minority students' academic engagement is influenced by how teachers and students negotiate identity. Teachers can positively support students' identity development through affirming students' language(s) and cultures in the classroom as well as promoting multilingual practices beyond the classroom. Identity has been shown to be inextricably tied to language acquisition processes, which are discussed in the next section of this entry.

Pedagogy and Principles: Using and Understanding Language and Language Acquisition

ELLs are in the process of simultaneously learning both language and content in school; in other words, language is both a topic of teaching and a tool through which teachers and students learn. Scholarship by Jana Echevarria, Mary Ellen Vogt, and Deborah Short indicates that effective preparation for teachers of ELLs includes development of their content area knowledge as well as a strong foundation in applied knowledge of language, language acquisition processes, and pedagogical strategies that address language learner needs. (Pedagogical content knowledge specific to disciplines is not discussed in this entry, which focuses on the ELL-specific issues related to the knowledge base of teachers.) Teacher education for ELLs is informed not only by research on culturally relevant pedagogy but also linguistically relevant pedagogy, as articulated by Ana Maria Villegas and Tamara Lucas.

Linguistically relevant pedagogy is informed by research on second language acquisition (SLA), which draws from the disciplines of linguistics, linguistic anthropology, social and cognitive psychology, neurolinguistics, sociology, and sociolinguistics and examines the nature of language, acquisition processes, and learner characteristics. SLA research has found that comprehensible input, opportunities for interaction, and opportunities to produce the target language are key components of instruction in a second language. In their
work, Villegas and Lucas demonstrate that teacher education courses on the processes of acquiring a second language are most effective when they incorporate and make explicit the linguistic, social, and psychological dimensions of language and language acquisition.

Teachers who have been well prepared to work with ELLs have a coherent understanding of second language acquisition, especially regarding the instruction and learning of academic English. They also understand the positive role that students' home language and varying degrees of home language literacy may play in English language development. Finally, research by Guadalupe Valdés, George Bunch, and colleagues indicates that effective teachers of ELLs are aware of their own use of language, are able to identify the language demands of academic tasks, and can implement those tasks in ways that provide comprehensible input and scaffolding without watering down or constraining students' access to grade-level content.

**Linguistic Knowledge**

Lily Wong Fillmore and Catherine Snow have suggested that teachers of ELLs need to know more about language than most teacher education programs provide, including an understanding of educational linguistics and the stages of language development, as well as the different and specific academic needs of students across a spectrum of oral and literate language proficiencies. The work of Wong Fillmore and Snow demonstrates that successful teacher preparation programs highlight research about second language learning, especially the positive impact that home language development can have on students' academic English language development as well as on their bilingual and bicultural identities. Research by scholars such as Guadalupe Valdés and Melinda Martin-Beltrán indicates the importance of teachers' understanding of bilingualism and awareness of the ways that bilingual students can draw upon their linguistic repertoire differently than monolingual students in school.

In terms of knowledge specific to language, effective teacher preparation programs support the development of an explicit understanding of the functions of oral and written language, rhetorical structures, phonology, syntax, and the lexicon of English, as well as strategies for building on students' prior linguistic knowledge such as through cognates. Additionally, research points to the importance of preparing teachers to teach language forms specific to academic English to facilitate students' success in school while recognizing that no languages or language varieties are inherently more valid than others.

Villegas and Lucas highlight essential understandings about second language learning. For example, their research points to the importance of comprehensible input and opportunities to interact with fluent English speakers and the value of being able to create a classroom context that minimizes anxiety and maximizes students' opportunities to produce language. In addition, effective teachers of ELLs are prepared to understand the distinctions between conversational and academic language proficiency as they assess students and plan instruction to meet both language and content objectives.

**Pedagogical Knowledge**

In addition to familiarity with first and second language acquisition processes, effective teachers of ELLs are able to adapt curriculum and materials for ELLs in ways that balance the content and linguistic demands of the subject matter. Additionally, successful teachers are prepared to analyze those linguistic demands and apply pedagogical approaches that support and differentiate instruction for culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Given the crucial link between instruction and assessment, successful teachers of ELLs are prepared to assess students' English language development and content knowledge in ways that are valid and appropriate.

According to the work of Echevarria, Vogt, and Short, effective teachers of ELLs have developed a repertoire of instructional strategies that create opportunities for students to access grade-level content and develop language while explicitly linking students' prior knowledge with new materials, highlighting new vocabulary, and providing a plethora of scaffolds such as graphic organizers, supportive interactions, and learning strategy support. Effective content area instruction for ELLs also includes explicit attention to language form as
teachers help students use and decode academic English by making clear the language functions, uses, and structures that are content specific. Additionally, effective teachers of ELLs are prepared to facilitate students in developing and refining their vocabulary and content understanding through inquiry-based approaches that involve students in the co-construction of new knowledge.

Related to assessment, effective teachers are those who have been prepared to diagnose the language-specific needs of ELLs that are unique to this student population. Contrary to the assumption that effective pedagogy for ELLs is simply “good teaching” in general, research has shown that pedagogical strategies involve explicit language development and support across the content areas. Candice Harper and Ester de Jong express concern that current teacher preparation for diversity often fails to recognize that ELLs have specific learning needs that are different from other diverse learners. The quick attainment of social conversational English by ELLs may lead teachers to assume that students will easily acquire academic English on par with language-majority students without substantial modifications. Although there are many pedagogical strategies that are similar for other groups of diverse learners, effective pedagogy for ELLs is distinct in that it requires teachers to be aware of language acquisition processes, to include explicit and implicit instruction of language form and vocabulary, and to include attention to first language linkages and home literacy practices.

**Recommendations for Teacher Education Models**

Teacher education programs have only recently begun to develop a variety of models to prepare all teachers to work with English language learners. Current preservice program models include providing an extra course on ELL support, requiring candidates to complete a field experience with ELLs, providing a minor or certificate in ELL specialization, or infusing information about the teaching of ELLs into teacher education courses across the curricula. Wong Fillmore and Snow suggest several courses that would cover fundamental issues in the education of ELLs, including Language and Linguistics, Sociolinguistics for Educators in a Linguistically Diverse Society, Language Development, Second Language Learning and Teaching, and the Language of Academic Discourse. Although most mainstream teacher education programs integrate some information on ELL support into courses, only about 20% include a course dedicated entirely to ELLs (according to a report done by the U.S. Government Accountability Office in 2009). Less than a third of programs currently require field experiences related to ELL support. Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Karen Johnson (among others) acknowledge that developing the knowledge base of teachers involves more than the content of course work; it also involves classroom experiences and inquiry that engage teacher-learners actively in the process of reconceptualizing knowledge. In effective teacher preparation programs, teacher-learners are actively engaged in inquiry to understand students’ social and cultural funds of knowledge, the sociopolitical contexts that affect ELLs’ access to education, and the processes of second language and literacy development related to content learning in order to implement instruction to meet the unique needs of ELLs.

Nieto extends the instructional focus of current teacher education models to embrace the critical aspects of sociocultural consciousness that effective teachers bring with them in order to transform schools into places of equity and opportunity. Successful teacher preparation programs emphasize effective instruction as just one component of social justice and equity for ELLs, with other aspects including preparing teachers to be advocates for their students in the areas of language diversity, multilingual education, and linguistic democracy.

A teacher’s effectiveness in instructing ELLs is intricately linked to other factors that extend beyond classroom pedagogy. Successful teacher preparation programs recruit and develop teacher candidates who are multicultural and multilingual themselves, who are able to recognize their own gaps in understanding as they encounter students from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and who will take steps to address those gaps through ongoing reflection, inquiry, and collaborative work with students, parents, and colleagues to transform schools. Finally, teacher education programs are situated in local contexts and are met with the challenge of preparing teachers who will work both in and out of the educational system to confront the structural inequalities that limit opportunities for language-minority students and transform future educational
opportunities.

In sum, effective teacher preparation for ELLs works to develop teacher candidates who have an explicit understanding of language and second language acquisition, who use pedagogical strategies for supporting students' development of academic English and content knowledge, and who are knowledgeable about the impact that the sociopolitical context may have on students' achievement, linguistic growth, and identity development. Because teachers' attitudes toward the language and cultural practices that students bring to school play an important role as their pedagogical choices in supporting students' achievement, teachers who are reflective of their own biases and open to growing as multicultural beings alongside their students are those who will most effectively meet the needs of their students. Language and culture are inextricable, and effective teachers of ELLs understand and examine that relationship as their own understanding of teaching and learning evolves across the course of their careers.

Finally, effective teacher education programs are those that continue to develop and refine ways to prepare all teachers to work with English language learners not only as instructors but as lifelong learners, reflective practitioners, and advocates for issues of educational equity and social justice in the classroom, school, and community-at-large.

—Melinda Martin-Beltrán

—Pamela Hickey

Further Readings


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