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## When Words Do Not Work: Exploring Preservice Teachers' Confidence in Teaching Reading to English Learners

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## **When Words Do Not Work: Exploring Preservice Teachers' Confidence in Teaching Reading to English Learners**

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### **Abstract**

This practitioner research study explores what happens when students in a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program are engaged in a clinical experience at an urban pre-K-8th-grade school with a majority English Learner (EL) population. Specifically examined is preservice teachers' confidence in implementing strategies to meet the needs of ELs in beginning reading. Data sources included: a survey, a written reflection, weekly lessons plans, blog entries, and informal observations of small group instruction and class participation. Qualitative analysis (Charmaz, 2000, 2003, 2005) was used. Results from this study point to the need for teacher preparation programs to support teacher candidates in working with ELs in clinical settings. This research has also informed the authors' teaching of this clinical course in addition to the design and implementation of a new course aimed at preparing teacher candidates to work with ELs in mainstream classrooms.

**Keywords:** English learners, literacy, teacher research, teacher education

### **Introduction**

The number of students in US schools who are English learners (ELs) is growing exponentially (Lucas & Grinberg, 2008; Lucas, Villegas, Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008; Nieto & Bode, 2011). In fact, according to the 2010 Census, 20% of the US population over the age of five has a home language other than English (Nieto & Bode, 2011). Similarly, in the state where this research was conducted close to 35,000 public school children (K-12) live in homes where English is not primary language and over half of these are in kindergarten-fourth grade (CSDE, 2017; Mejia & Canny, 2007).

Despite these demographic trends, a majority of students who enter the teaching profession are white, middle-class European American females with limited experience with diverse student populations (Zeichner, 2003). At a School of Education in the northeast United

States where this research was conducted students are primarily white and upper or middle-class from suburban neighborhoods. Their experience with culturally and linguistically diverse students is limited. Considering these disparities, it is imperative that we, as teacher educators, prepare teacher candidates to work effectively with ELs, even if they aspire to be mainstream classroom teachers.

When asked to comment on the education program at the university, a number of recent graduates stated that they did not feel well prepared to teach ELs and some noted that their limited experience with ELs influenced their willingness to be assigned to a school with a diverse student population. Using this feedback, we, the authors who are full-time faculty in a Master of Arts in Teaching program, integrated instructional strategies for teaching ELs into a clinical reading course which we teach at an urban elementary school in which 71% of the students are ELs from over 20 countries. As part of this clinical course, seniors in the Master of Arts in teaching program plan and implement literacy lessons for an intervention group of 3-5 students weekly, many of whom are ELs. As we outline below, this school site was an optimal environment in which to allow our teacher candidates the opportunity to interact with, and learn from, ELs and their teachers.

The purpose of this study was to explore what happens, over the course of a semester, to students' preparedness in implementing strategies to meet the needs of English learners in early reading. We investigated the experiences of 27 seniors working with ELs at FHS, an urban pre K to 8<sup>th</sup> grade school, over the course of a semester using a survey, a written reflection, weekly blog entries, lesson plans, observations, and participation in seminars. As we will use the results of this study to inform our teaching, this project represents practitioner research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

## **Theoretical Background**

We work from the lens that teacher education programs can play an important role in preparing teacher candidates to work with diverse populations, particularly ELs. Teacher education coursework is key to preparing preservice teachers to effectively work with ELs (Lucas, Villegas, Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). At the same time, however, simply adding a course on diversity or English learners is not sufficient to transform the beliefs of preservice teachers about their ability to work with ELs (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). To best prepare for work in diverse classrooms, pre-service teachers need experience in such classrooms (Haberman, 1995).

Additionally, students taught by teachers with high efficacy in working with ELs have higher achievement rates and improved attitude toward teaching and learning (Jimenez-Silva, Olson, & Hernandez, 2012). As such, we believe it is important to place teacher candidates with experienced K-2 teachers at FHS. Pairing our teacher candidates with confident and effective teachers may impact their confidence in working with ELs. Below we examine the bodies of literature related to confidence and efficacy in working with ELs, which are a part of teacher preparedness.

## **Literature Review**

### **Preservice teachers' Confidence in Working with ELs**

Few studies have addressed preservice teachers' confidence in working with ELs (see Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly & Driscoll, 2005; Jimenez-Silva, Olson & Jimenez Hernandez, 2012), which is related to preparedness. Nonetheless, their findings highlight the need to consider the most effective ways to positively impact preservice teachers' confidence in working with ELs (Jimenez-Silva, et al., 2012). One way is to engage them in experiential methods in the

classroom and model pedagogical techniques that have been proven to work well with those learning a second language (Jimenez-Silva, et al., 2012). In their surveys of 197 undergraduate education majors in a state mandated endorsement course, they found:

to build confidence, curricula cannot solely be delivered to teachers in pre-packaged lectures or texts covering content that focuses solely on diversity. This type of prescriptive formula does not engage the preservice teachers in understanding how particular methods of instruction are integral to ELL student learning (p. 23).

Lectures and textbooks are not enough: to prepare preservice teachers to work with ELs, they need experience research-based methods of instruction.

Further, by engaging students actively in the curriculum, Jimenez-Silva, et al. (2012) discovered the power to transform students' thinking that teaching ELs was simply about learning new methods: "the required coursework changed teachers' reported thinking and confidence so that they did not assume that teaching ELLs was merely a series of new strategies that they must remember to implement along with all the others" (p. 24). While confidence can be enhanced through learning instructional techniques, it is also beneficial to help pre-service teachers understand that successful teaching of ELs entails more than just good instructional tools. The role of coursework on pre-service teachers' confidence in working with ELs is an emerging field (Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly & Driscoll, 2005; Jimenez-Silva, Olson & Jimenez Hernandez, 2012) to which we hope to add.

### **Field Experiences**

As our clinical reading course was experienced on-site at a pre K-8 school, it is useful to briefly address the body of literature that examines the importance of field experiences on preparing teacher candidates to work with ELs with a sense of efficacy (Daniel, 2014; Gomez,

Strage, Knutson-Miller, & Garcia-Nevarez, 2009; Jimenez-Silva, et al., 2012; Nasir & Heineke, 2014; Olson & Jimenez-Silva, 2009). Field experiences are essential for allowing preservice teachers the opportunity to reflect on what has been learned in courses about ELs and support an increased efficacy in the teaching of early literacy (Olson & Jimenez-Silva, 2009). Furthermore, field-based experiences with ELs in urban settings that begin early in the teacher education process, when coupled with multiple ongoing opportunities for reflection, can benefit teacher candidates and support confidence building (Nasir & Heineke, 2014). Reflection on practices in such settings can take the form of individual meetings with course instructors, written reflections, and group discussion with peers all of which allow teacher candidates to connect theory with practice (Nasir & Heineke, 2014). Providing field experiences is an effective way to prepare teacher candidates to work with ELs.

### **Linguistically Responsive Teacher Education**

One way to effectively prepare teacher candidates to work with ELs is to help them be “linguistically responsive” (Lucas, et al., 2008). Drawing on a comprehensive body of literature, Lucas et al. (2008) have outlined what they term six “essential understandings of second language learning for linguistically responsive teachers” (p. 363). These include ideas about academic and social language proficiency (Cummins, 2000), comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982), the importance of social interaction in boosting language proficiency (Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 2005), the impact of home language proficiency on second language acquisition (Cummins, 2000), the need to create a safe, classroom environment where risk taking in learning is possible (Krashen, 2003; Verplaetse & Migliacci, 2008), and attention to “the language of schooling” (Schleppegrell, 2004; Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008).

### **Project Description**

## **Pre-K-8 Setting and Participants**

We conducted our research at FHS, a pre K to 8th grade community school in an urban center in New England with over 800 students. Its mission is, “to support the development of responsible, lifelong learners by providing a comprehensive educational community dedicated to nurturing individual strengths, differentiating instruction, integrating technology, honoring diversity and encouraging citizenship.” (school website). At the time of the study, of the 832 students, 71% were English learners (speaking 16 languages including Swahili, Arabic, Farsi, Chinese, Dutch, and Spanish) from over twenty countries. One hundred percent of students received free/reduced price lunch.

Our research was situated in kindergarten through second grade classrooms. We worked with three teachers per grade level (three kindergarten, three first grade, and three second grade) and teacher candidates collaborated with these teachers to plan reading lessons for a small group of students. One of those classes, a first grade, was a bilingual class where instruction was delivered in English and Spanish.

## **University Setting and Participants**

The School of Education has a focus on social justice and preparing teacher candidates to work with a diverse student population. While the population of FHS is diverse, the teacher candidate population at the School of Education is largely White and female with the overwhelming majority of students coming from suburban settings in Northeastern states. Twenty-seven students participated in the study, 25 females and 2 males, all seniors in the Master of Arts in Teaching program. One hundred percent of the participants were from English speaking homes, and none of the students consider themselves bilingual, though 2% noted having taken Spanish classes in high school and college.

**Clinical course structure.** During a weekly clinical experience at FHS teacher candidates plan lessons for a small group of K-2 students struggling in reading. There is also a one hour weekly seminar to unpack experiences and discuss effective strategies for working with ELs. Teacher candidates also collaborate with a small group of peers that work with the same K-2 students through a weekly blog posting which includes goals of the lesson, how lessons connect to previous lessons, assessments, materials used and student progress. The collaboration is designed to mirror the communication necessary between professionals that support ELs in a K-12 setting. Over the course of the semester students spend approximately 20 hours with ELs and their teachers.

### Methodology

Our data collection and analysis at FHS drew from qualitative research methods and represented action research. The questions we asked required interpretations and subjective assessment, hence lending themselves to qualitative data collection and analysis. Data was collected over the course of a semester. Data sources included: a survey (see Appendix A), a written reflection about instruction for ELs, weekly lesson plans, weekly blog entries, and weekly observations of small group instruction and class participation.

Table 1 *Comprehensive Overview of Research Methods*

Data Source	Participants	Frequency	Data Totals
Survey	27	1	27 surveys
Blog entries	27	10	270 entries
Written Reflection	27	1	27 reflections



Weekly lesson plans	27	7	189
Participation in weekly seminars	27	10	~270
Informal observations	27	Weekly	~270 (one/week/student)

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### Data Analysis

**Qualitative Analysis.** To make sense of our data, we used qualitative analysis (Charmaz, 2000, 2003, 2005). Furthermore, we employed the process described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as constant comparison of data. When discussing this approach, Strauss (1987) wrote: “The focus is on *“organizing many ideas which have emerged from analysis of the data”* [emphasis original] (p. 23). During analysis, themes emerged from various data sources that we compared within and across sources.

**Coding.** Codes were developed from the data (Charmaz, 2000; Charmaz, 2003; Strauss, 1987). Initial readings of survey data and written reflections revealed codes that each author compared across notes and transcripts. We selected an open coding process to categorize and facilitate review of the data collected due to the fact that the data was text based. Using this process, we looked for distinct concepts to label as categories in the data review. After putting the codes together, we individually sought trends or themes in the data. Drawing on the process of consensual qualitative research (See Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997), we met to uncover trends in our coding processes. We decided on common codes to use in subsequent analysis. This iterative process of reviewing literature, data collection, and coding (Charmaz, 2003; Strauss,

1987) allowed us to pay attention to the nuances of the students' experiences at FHS and link their experiences to the broader context of preparing teacher candidates to work with ELs.

## **Results**

Two themes emerged from data analysis: clinical experience in the selected setting as a rich context for working with ELs and developing an assets based approach to working with ELs. As we will outline below, these findings also impacted our future practice as teacher educators.

### **Clinical Experience as a Rich Context for Working with ELs**

Prior to their clinical experience, students had little to no experience working with ELs, which, for many, impacted their confidence levels. On the initial survey, fifteen of the twenty-seven participants remarked that their first experience working with ELs had come the semester before when they were assigned to do their field study hours in third-sixth grade classes at FHS. Seven claimed to have no experience working with ELs, while the remaining five mentioned having done volunteer work in high school or college such as tutoring. Intriguing was the fact that though all of the teacher candidates had worked in classes with ELs in the fall semester, many did not know how to tell if a student was, in fact, learning English as a new language. One explicitly stated, "My barrier was not knowing if certain students were EL." This insight directly impacted our teaching of this clinical course and planning of a new course. In addition to having in-class discussions about what being an EL means, we subsequently created a class website housing resources related to identifying ELs, defining key terms, and showcasing best practices.

Though some students reported having no experience working with ELs prior to this clinical reading course, one student, who went on to intern and student teach at FHS in her graduate year, wrote about her slight amount of confidence in working with ELs: "Because I have only worked with one EL student [in a previous field study experience at FHS], I have a

little bit of confidence but not a great deal. I am excited to see how my teaching will impact the students and I am also excited to see their progress.”

Candidates were immersed, through the clinical course, in a setting with many ELs. Some had anxieties about being successful in reaching language learners. In the survey given at the beginning of the semester seventeen teacher candidates commented on potential communication barriers and how they might impact their ability to teach ELs. One noted, “It is hard to communicate with these children and understand what they are trying to say.” Not knowing the K-2 students’ home languages and the K-2 students not being fluent in English were a concern to teacher candidates.

Despite their limited experiences in working with ELs at the outset of the semester, all but one student reported that they enjoyed working with ELs over the course of the semester at FHS and their responses revealed emerging confidence in working with this population. This was evidenced by one teacher candidate commenting, “Personally, I think it’s difficult but I really do like the adventure that goes with it. Having to make different sentences and find synonyms to help students understand is really fun.” Many other teacher candidates highlighted successes they had in teaching reading to young ELs: “I was successful mostly in independent reading with ELs. We were able to focus more closely on the areas they need help.”

Another wrote about how, despite the language barriers, she was excited about challenging herself to find new ways to reach students: “One of the most fascinating things for me about working with English learners is figuring out how to break the language barrier between us. When words do not work, what other ways can I find to get my point across to a student?” Through immersion in a school with a majority EL population, teacher candidates were challenging their fears about language barriers and building experiences that would potentially

impact their confidence in working with ELs. Teacher candidates, as result of the clinical reading course in a very diverse setting at FHS, gained experience and more confidence in working with young ELs.

### **Developing an Assets-based Approach to Working with ELs**

The second theme to emerge from the data was the development of an assets based approach to working with ELs, which aligns with linguistically responsive education (see Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008). While a number of students initially expressed fear of a language barrier, others adopted an assets based approach to their work with ELs after their time at FHS. One teacher candidate remarked, “I am excited to learn something from students rather than them just learning from me” while another stated, “I have begun to notice the importance of multiple languages and the critical role they can play in the classroom.” Students were, therefore, beginning to view ELs as bilinguals and possessors of unique knowledge rather than just students who do not yet know English.

Similarly, a teacher candidate who had experience working as an intern with an organization committed to providing services (including education) for refugee and immigrant families wrote: “They [ELs] are brilliant children...These students have a lot to offer, and as a teacher I know I can learn so much from them.” Teacher candidates were starting to realize that there was much to learn from the K-2 English learners.

Rather than seeing ELs’ need for language learning as a barrier, teacher candidates began to appreciate the language learning process. Yet another teacher candidate remarked on how much she enjoyed observing early readers’ experiences with English over the course of the semester: “I really enjoyed it because I found it so interesting to see where language starts. It is something I use every day and I almost forget how much goes into learning language, it is nice to

be reminded of that.” Over the course of the semester, as teacher candidates worked with ELs at FHS, this assets based approach became even more apparent. Many expressed a deepening respect for language learning.

Furthermore, for many teacher candidates, working with the K-2 students at FHS was their first experience in implementing and differentiating lessons. One even noted “this class definitely gave me a lot of good experience.” Though some students seemed to feel as though “words do not work” when working with ELs and they struggled to communicate, others were beginning to view ELs from a different lens, one in which they appreciated how difficult it is to learn a new language and how they, too, can learn from the ELs in their classes. These experiences helped boost teacher candidates’ confidence in understanding the language learning process and be prepared to meet the needs of ELs in reading. Teacher candidates were beginning to view ELs in a positive light as result of the clinical reading course in a very diverse setting.

## **Discussion**

### **Linguistically Responsive Teacher Education**

The results from our research study point toward the need to prepare teacher candidates to become “linguistically responsive” (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008). And, as we move toward creating a class dedicated to preparing preservice teachers to work with ELs in our Master of Arts in Teaching program, we aim to embed these essential understandings in our coursework. As teacher candidate educators, we reflect on practice and continue to evolve purposeful experiences that support a deepened insight and preparedness of working with ELs. While we realize that our teacher candidates, many of whom have very little experience working with ELs until they begin their experience in the clinical reading course at this school, have only

begun to consider what it means to teach this growing segment of the population, we aim to move our teacher candidates into more nuanced thinking about the needs of ELs.

Some of the teacher candidates' responses indicated a shift toward an asset-based ideology: "I have begun to notice the importance of multiple languages and the critical role they can play in the classroom" and another noted, "it's important that these students get the same quality of education as their native English-speaking classmates." These responses are one step on the path to becoming "linguistically responsive." And, it is our job as teacher educators to push our teacher candidates to transcend perceived barriers and approach their work with ELs from a more culturally and linguistically responsive place.

### **Field Experiences and Working with ELs**

Furthermore, our research adds to the growing body of literature highlighting the importance of field experiences on preparing teacher candidates to work with ELs (See Daniel, 2014; Gomez, Strage, Knutson-Miller, & Garcia-Nevarez, 2009; Jimenez-Silva, et al., 2012; Nasir & Heineke, 2014; Olson & Jimenez-Silva, 2009). Due to the nature of our partnership with FHS, teacher candidates were given the opportunity to interact with ELs in meaningful ways in K-2 classrooms. Candidates planned and implemented instruction for a group of children in need of literacy support. Implementation was followed by reflection in a seminar led by one of the authors. Theory about reading instruction and working with ELs along with research based instructional design guided the unpacking of effective practice and how to move forward the next week. The weekly routine of applying theory to practice in the clinical setting with the same group of children was designed to benefit teacher candidates' understanding of the unique learning needs of ELs (Nasir & Heineke, 2014; Olson & Jimenez-Silva, 2009). Field experiences

in a diverse setting seemed to help prepare our teacher candidates by heightening their confidence in working with ELs.

### **Implications**

Our practitioner research study informed both our teaching of the clinical reading course in the following spring and the creation of a course entitled, “Teaching English Learners in the Mainstream Classroom” to be required of new teacher candidates, both elementary and secondary, entering the MAT program. Embedded in this new course are concepts that teacher candidates struggled with at FHS, such as identifying ELs and developing a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be an EL. The course also includes concepts and practices such as historical, social, and cultural issues that impact the education of ELs, theories of second language acquisition, research-based methods and strategies for integrating language and content instruction, academic language across content areas, writing language objectives, and adapting content area texts/materials to use with ELs of varying proficiency levels. Course assignments, including a case study and a modified lesson plan, were created to help students all see themselves as teachers of ELs even if they were to be teaching in a mainstream classroom and were born out of our work with the clinical course at FHS. Students found value in their hands-on experience with ELs at FHS, and we wanted to embed that interaction in our new EL course. Therefore, as part of the case study, students will be required to interview a school-aged English learner and unpack the learner’s background, examine internal and external factors influencing their second language acquisition, analyze their social and academic language use, research cultural norms, and discuss implications for future teaching. It is our hope that with this assignment students will learn to further appreciate the process of language learning in addition to view students who are ELs from an assets based perspective.

Additionally, using the tenets of the research-based Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model (See Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2016) students will be asked to modify an existing lesson plan in any content area to meet the needs of ELs, with specific attention to focus areas such as academic vocabulary, language objectives, and attending to the domains of speaking, reading, writing, and listening. We employed the lessons we learned from our teacher candidates at FHS to construct the goals and assignments in the new EL course.

Additionally, this practitioner research (see Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) informed our teaching of the clinical reading course at FHS the following spring. Fearful that new teacher candidates might also not realize that some of the students were, in fact, ELs we were clear with students about the numbers of ELs in all classes. We also strategically designed a Google site for students to visit that housed a plethora of articles, websites, videos, and more supportive resources about ELs. Teacher candidates had access to this site mid-semester and we devoted part of our weekly seminar to discussing issues of interest to students and importance to working with ELs. Topics included, overall facts about ELs, Reading 101 for ELs, how to modify lessons for ELs (before, during, and after teaching), an EL starter kit for teachers, and differentiation. Each topic had a corresponding online reading that students read before class and discussed in seminar with one of the authors of this paper. The results of this research study, therefore, directly impacted our teaching practice.

### **Concerns and Limitations**

While the results of this study are worthy of consideration, there are inherent limitations that must be considered when assessing the applicability of the findings. The limited sample size and short length of the study restricts the ability to generalize results to the greater education community. A longitudinal study that included interviews with teacher candidates and a closer



examination of the efficacy of practice while student teaching would support the development of the study findings. Furthermore, a longer look at the development of confidence in teaching ELs as well as the increased implementation of instructional strategies would increase the reach of the results. The concern that teacher candidates need much more support in how to teach a student who struggles with the language of instruction is a pressing issue for teacher educators in the twenty-first century.

### **Future Research**

While investigating teacher candidates' confidence in working with ELs at an urban school, we were left with a number of lingering questions. These include the following topics for future research: How can teacher preparation programs support teacher candidates in applying effective instructional strategies in early reading development of English learners? And, how can we move beyond the emphasis on instructional methods to help preservice teacher candidates become more linguistically responsive educators (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008)? Additionally, with the emergence of a bilingual school age population across the US, teacher educators need to find ways to enhance students' early field experiences in working with ELs to help them pursue careers in working with such populations (Gomez, et al. 2009). The need for learning to teach ELs across content areas is also an area of future research (Gibbons, 2015; Jimenez-Silva, 2012; Short & Echevarria, 2005) as is investigating how teacher educators can best enable preservice teachers of all grades to see themselves as teachers of language (Brisk, 2015). We look forward to exploring these questions in future endeavors and to helping students move beyond seeing language as a barrier and words as something that might not work.

### **Conclusions**

Teacher education programs that purposefully couple coursework with field, or clinical, experiences are highly effective in preparing new teachers (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005; NCATE, 2010). This paper points to the need to support teacher candidates in working with ELs in clinical settings and demonstrates how moving beyond a sole emphasis on instructional methods can help preservice teacher candidates become more linguistically responsive educators (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008) and more confident in their ability to work with ELs.

Our research at FHS preparing teacher candidates to work with ELs is extraordinarily important at a time in the nation's history when there are over 5 million ELs in public schools (Nieto & Bode, 2011). Furthermore, this study adds to the currently small field of literature that explores the role of coursework on preservice teachers' confidence in working with this rapidly increasing population of students (see Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly & Driscoll, 2005; Jimenez-Silva, Olson & Jimenez Hernandez, 2012). Results have already informed the authors' teaching of the clinical reading course and the design of a new university course preparing teacher candidates to work with ELs in mainstream classrooms.

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## **Appendix A**

### Survey

Describe any experiences you have had working with English learners before this semester.

How do you feel about working with English learners? For example, what excites you about working with English learners or what do you think is the most challenging aspect of working with English learners?

What would you like to learn about working with English learners in this class?

More specifically, what would you like to learn to help you meet the needs of English learners in beginning reading?