

Mainstream Teacher Education and Linguistically-Responsive Teaching: Critical Perspectives on Teacher-Candidate Learning about Supporting English Learners (EN)

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Symposium Overview

This symposium critically examines how and what mainstream teacher candidates learn in pre-service programs about supporting English Learners. Since 2015, the Canadian province of Ontario has required that all teacher candidates—not just future ESL specialists—be prepared to support ELs. Responding to this policy context, the research we present here comprises three parts: (1) a conceptual paper theorizing mainstream teacher-candidate learning about linguistic diversity; (2) a mixed-methods case study of teacher-candidate learning in one Ontario teacher-education program; and (3) a comparative analysis of how Ontario's other teacher-education programs prepare teacher candidates to support ELs. The symposium's significance lies in its scope, namely theorizing from a three-year mixed-methods study of one teacher-education program coupled with a comparative analysis of Ontario's 16 other programs.

Part 1: Theorizing Teacher-Candidate Learning for Supporting English Learners in Linguistically Diverse Settings

The objective of this conceptual paper is to outline a critical framework for mainstream teacher-candidate learning about supporting English Learners. This paper draws on three scholarly reference points. The first is a set of theoretical frameworks for teacher education generally (e.g., Feiman–Nemser, 2001). Whatever merits these frameworks have, they conceptualize teacher-candidate learning in ways that are context-free. That is, they are not designed to consider the specifics of how linguistic diversity and English-language learning interface with content-area instruction. Sleeter (2016) has argued that context-free frameworks like these reinforce the White interests that dominate teacher education.

A second set of frameworks conceptualizes mainstream teacher-candidate learning about supporting English Learners. Perhaps the most widely known (in the US at least) is Lucas and Villegas' (2013) notion of linguistically-responsive teaching. Their framework extends Feiman–Nemser's central tasks by reframing them in relation to the knowledge, skills and dispositions that mainstream teachers need to support ELs. While their work is more context-specific, it lacks a critical perspective on the racialized dimensions of language learning at school.

A third set of frameworks is intentionally more critical and anti-racist in orientation (e.g., Sleeter, 2016), yet in its own way is context-free. This work theorizes teacher education in general terms of changing teacher-candidates' beliefs and attitudes about the racialized dimensions of schooling. However, emphasizing the ideological leaves little room for the specific, practical knowledge and skills that teachers need—even and especially from critical stances!—to support language-minoritized speakers at school.

This paper draws its inspiration from Viesca et al. (2018) and their robust theorizing of mainstream teacher learning about supporting ELs. Their work relies on post-modern theorizing about complexity theory; our argument is more explicitly anti-racist in attempting to integrate concrete, practical knowledge and teaching strategies with critical, anti-racist perspectives.

Part 2: Mixed-Methods Case Study of Mainstream Teacher-Candidate Learning for Supporting English Learners

This mixed-methods case study provides multiple perspectives on mainstream teacher-candidate learning about supporting English Learners. Our analysis is based on three approaches to examining teacher-candidate learning: (A) at the program level, measured by a pedagogical content-knowledge test; (B) within a required course on supporting ELs; and (C) engaging with an innovative curricular item, multimodal Me Mapping profiles of ELs. We describe each approach below.

A. PCK Test

To measure teacher-candidate learning, we administered a PCK test on supporting ELs. Test items included demographic questions about our candidates, and content items about the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to support ELs as framed by Köker et al. (2015). A cohort of ~400 teacher candidates took this test at the start of their program (2018) and again near the end (2020). Content items were coded with a 4-point rubric; demographic questions allowed for correlational analysis. For example, our results indicate that over 50% of our candidates are plurilingual, reporting 50+ different home languages. However, correlational analysis of responses to the content items did not yield significant differences between plurilingual and monolingual candidates' responses. Thus, as we strive to diversify the teacher-candidate pool, these findings suggest that candidates' own linguistic diversity does not necessarily ensure uptake of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to support ELs.

B: The Course

The second approach focuses on a required course for all candidates called Supporting English Learners. We asked: How do teacher candidates understand course content relative to their own linguistic and academic backgrounds, and to the curriculum they are learning to teach? We collected data from 10 course sections over three years. Sources included non-participant observation, interviews (~30 candidates), and artifacts of ~150 candidates' coursework. Data analysis employed deductive coding based on the research question and inductive coding of emergent themes. We discuss two findings: (1) the tension in approaching topics such as assessment and translanguaging from ideological, theoretical, and practical perspectives simultaneously; and (2) the difficulty candidates exhibit in thinking beyond discipline-specific vocabulary when tailoring instruction for ELs.

C: Me-Mapping Portraits

Me-Maps are multimodal artifacts created by English Learners to document their linguistic profile, important milestones in their lives, their multiple identities, their experiences at school, their academic trajectories and aspirations for the future. Using a series of prompts and the Flipgrid application, the research team has collaborated with teachers and NGO staff to support ~110 ELs (ages 5–19) in creating Me-Maps. Starting in 2019–2020, we will integrate these Me-Maps into the Supporting English Learners course as a focus for teacher-candidate learning. Engaging candidates with Me-Maps is based on Keet et al.'s (2009) notion of mutual vulnerability: teacher candidates opening themselves up in the same ways ELs did to create these Me-Maps so as to learn with and from ELs as complete humans, not simply “language learners.”

Part 3: Responding to Policy Reform for English Learners: A Comparative Analysis of Ontario's Teacher-Education Programs

The objective of this paper is to expand our analysis from a single teacher-education program (as described in Part 2) to a province-wide comparison. We examine how the 16 teacher-education programs throughout Ontario have interpreted and enacted the 2015 policy mandate that all teacher candidates learn to support English Learners (ELs) in their pre-service programs.

While the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) oversees the professionalization of teachers and sets guidelines for teacher education, Faculties of Education retain autonomy in designing and conducting their programs (Faez, 2012; Petrarca & Kitchen, 2017). Ontario's move towards enhancing educational outcomes for diverse learners has necessitated that pre-service programs adopt reforms that ensure that teacher candidates receive explicit instruction about supporting English Learners across the curriculum (Ontario College of Teachers, 2014; Petrarca & Kitchen 2017; McDougall et al., 2017). Research has suggested the knowledge, skills and dispositions that pre-service and in-service teachers of ELs should possess (Feiman–Nemser, 2018; Lucas et al., 2018; de Jong et al., 2018). These include positive beliefs about ELs, subject matter knowledge, knowledge of language acquisition and learning, an understanding of learners and the local environment, a repertoire of curricular, instructional and assessment materials, and the tools to study their own teaching. However, there seems to be little consensus among teacher educators about how these skills should be taught.

Using documentary research methods (Bowen, 2009) and interviews, we collected, assessed and compared data from the websites of the 16 accredited teacher-education programs in Ontario's universities, to examine how they are interpreting and implementing the new policy. Document data were systematically organized and categorized according to key contact people at each institution, program resources, degree certification, delivery model and course structures of the programs. We determined whether each Supporting English Learners component was explicitly offered through a stand-alone course, infused throughout teacher candidates' training, or integrated into their curriculum by subject-specific experts. Course syllabi, goals, strategies to support ELs, instructional hours, and credits awarded upon completion were tabulated and compared. The gaps in these analyses served as the starting point for the interviews, which took place between members of our research team and faculty and/or administrators of Ontario's teacher-education programs.

Institutions' diverse ways of responding to the policy (using stand-alone, integrated, or infused models) reflect an array of skills, knowledge, and dispositions about the appropriateness of this provincial requirement and the challenges in fulfilling it. Variety in the availability of information from websites necessitated in-depth interviews, and highlighted the growing but incomplete endeavors to adequately support diverse ELs in the classroom.