

A COMPARISON OF STANDARDS FOR TEACHERS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Abstract

Accountability for the improvement of educational outcomes for all students has helped close the gap between English Language Learners (ELLs) and English proficient students. One way classroom teachers address the needs of ELLs is through national and state established standards. An English as a Second Language (ESL) certificate or endorsement, based on an established set of standards, enables preservice and inservice teachers to obtain credentials to work with ELLs. The purpose of this article is to compare the Texas standards for teachers of ELLs to the national standards for teachers of ELLs, as one way of helping Educator Preparation Programs structure their coursework and content when addressing this population.

Keywords: English language learners, standards, teacher certification

English Language Learners (ELLs) are among the fastest growing population of students within the United States (Samson & Collins, 2012). They represent one of the minority groups of students who require special attention in order to meet their academic needs. With an increasing population of ELLs, teachers must continually be prepared to teach them and accommodate their English proficiency. Classroom instruction for ELLs varies, often depending on state laws and the proportion of ELLs in an area. Support for ELLs ranges from classrooms where all students receive bilingual/dual-language instruction to structured/sheltered English immersion classrooms to general education classrooms, where content instruction from the classroom teacher is supported by an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher working with individual students (Samson & Collins, 2012). However, ELLs often lack proper identification, or they transition out of services prematurely, resulting in placement in a mainstream classroom, which does not provide appropriate language support (Samson & Collins, 2012). “Given the importance of language development for academic success, all classroom teachers with ELLs must understand the principles and best practices of supporting their unique needs” (p. 4). This statement is an important message for Educator Preparation Programs, since novice and preservice teachers require an understanding of best practices in working with ELLs from their first day in the classroom.

In order to teach these students effectively and meet their language needs, most states offer special certification for teachers. An ESL certificate or endorsement, based on an established set of standards, enables teachers to obtain credentials to work with ELLs. Most Educator Preparation Programs in Texas provide at least some foundational coursework for preservice teacher. These novice educators may receive certification through the Texas Examinations of Educator Standards (TEXES) program through the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Most states other than Texas use the PRAXIS English to Speakers of Other Languages certification through the Educational Testing Service (ETS). The purpose of this article is to compare the Texas standards for teachers of ELLs to the national standards for teachers of ELLs, as one way of helping Educator Preparation Programs structure their coursework and content when addressing this population.

English Learners and Teacher Certification

According to The National Center for Education Statistics, 9.3% of students in public schools have been classified as ELL, or as students “who are learning English as a second or additional language” (Kena, et al., 2016, p. 327) with varying proficiency levels. Texas alone has 765,952 students classified as ELL, making up 15.5% of the public school population (Kena, et al., 2016, p. 327). These numbers reflect the students placed in assistive language programs, not the students who passed their proficiency exams but still struggle with academic language (Echevarria, 2017). The needs of ELLs vary and reflect multiple proficiency levels. In Texas, these proficiency levels are defined by the English Language Proficiency Standards, also known as the ELPS (Texas Education Agency, 2015). The push for differentiated instruction among all students should not fall short of those placed in language programs. To reach these students and be able to meet their language needs, teachers need preparation for all aspects of teaching ESL.

In Texas, many schools/districts require ESL certification for all teachers, regardless of the teaching assignment. The rationale for this practice reflects the abundance of ELLs in Texas and the need for preservice educators to understand pedagogy necessary to meet the needs of all learners. Texas teachers take an exam for certification purposes, as do many other state teacher preparation programs. In considering teacher preparation for teachers of ELLs, we wondered, “*How do Texas standards for teachers of ELLs compare to national standards for teachers of ELLs?*”

TESOL, or Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, is a national organization which promotes knowledge and skills related to the education of ELLs. TESOL is also the acronym that refers to the profession and the field itself. TESOL is not a school or a teacher-education program, and it is not an accrediting body for the evaluation of teachers or teacher education programs (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, n.d). However, the organization promotes appropriate pedagogy related to certification for teaching ESL in U.S. public schools. Appropriate pedagogy reflects instruction for teaching students from any number of different backgrounds who live in an English-speaking country, but who learned a language other than English at birth (ETS, 2016). Students need to learn conversational English and literacy skills to fully integrate into public schools, to function socially, and to be competitive in the job market. Texas teachers seeking ESL certification take a test called the TExES English as a second language supplemental test, which assesses the “requisite knowledge and skills that an entry-level educator in this field in Texas public schools must possess” (TEA, 2015, p. 3). The TExES does not explicitly align with the TESOL, but the TExES manual cites TESOL journals and guidelines for further study. The state’s online manual includes the assessed standards as well as practice questions.

In other states across the nation, teachers receive ESL certification (and teacher certification) through the Praxis exam, called the PRAXIS English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). The Educational Testing Service (ETS) designed the ESOL to measure basic linguistic and pedagogical knowledge within the context of teaching ESOL in the elementary or secondary setting. ETS aligned questions on the praxis with the TESOL/NCATE standards for the recognition of initial TESOL programs in p-12 ESL teacher education as developed by TESOL, Inc. (ETS, 2016).

Methodology

The purpose of this research is to compare the Texas standards for teachers of ELLs to the national standards for teachers of ELLs. The research question is *How do Texas standards for teachers of ELLs compare to national standards for teachers of ELLs?* Data sources included standards and sample test questions from the PRAXIS exam and the Texas Examinations of Educator Standards (TExES). Since the actual exams are not available to outside sources, online study manuals, published by the tests’ creator, ETS, were examined. Qualitative analysis of these materials resulted in four major findings, which are described in the next section.

Findings

Both the PRAXIS English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and TExES ESL certification exams prepare teachers to address different aspects of language learners, including language concepts, pedagogy, assessment, culture and professionalism. The exam questions are created based on the standards. The breakdown of these aspects differs between tests. The PRAXIS ESOL features four content categories: foundations of linguistics and language learning, planning, implementing, and managing instruction, assessment, and cultural and professional aspects of the job. Each of these content categories has been divided into principles with specific standards. The first content category, the foundations of linguistics and language learning, composes 40% of the examination through 48 questions. These 48 questions are divided into two sections of 20 and 28 questions. The first 20 items are answered through a listening section. The planning, implementing, and managing instruction category is 30% of the examination through 36 questions. Assessment and the cultural and professional aspects of the job each make up 15% with 18 questions. Test takers have a total of two hours to complete all 120 questions.

The TExES ESL exam consists of three broad domains, seven standards, and ten competencies. The first domain encompasses language concepts and language acquisition. The second includes ESL instruction and assessment. Foundations of ESL education, cultural awareness, and family and community involvement is the third domain. Domain one is 25% of the exam, with 20 questions. The second domain is 45% and 36 questions. Domain three is 30% with 24 questions. An allotted time of five hours is given to complete the total of 80 questions.

One notable difference between the exams is the presence of a listening section in the PRAXIS ESOL. Audio recordings of nonnative English speakers are played and the test taker is to correct their errors. During this section, a transcript of the speech is provided to the test taker. Within this listening section, there are two parts. Part A focuses on oral grammar and vocabulary. Part B emphasizes pronunciation. The audio in Part A is played only once, while Part B may be repeated a second time. The TExES does not include any form of listening or audio during the test. By having this audio section, the PRAXIS ESOL is asking test takers to be “familiar with the speech of nonnative speakers who are learning English” (Education Testing Service, 2016, p. 6). Since students within ESL programs will not be familiar with English or sound like native English speakers, this section is beneficial to the test takers. Teachers will need to be able to understand all of their students, including those who speak differently. This audio section on the exam is great practice for what will be encountered in a classroom of ELL.

Another contrast between the exams is the percentage allotted to the foundations of language. The PRAXIS contains 40% of the exam focused towards the foundations of linguistics and language learning. Within this content category, there are four subsections: linguistic theory, language and culture, second-language learning, and literacy. Linguistic theory focuses on phonetic transcription, morphology, syntax, grammar, and semantics. All of these things should be recognizable between different languages. Language and culture emphasizes “basic concepts of pragmatics and sociolinguistics” (Education Testing Service, 2016, p. 6) the value of English and its dialects, communication competence, and an ability to interact in social and academic language settings. Second-language learning refers to the research regarding language learning and the acquisition of language. This provides teachers with the knowledge of how students are capable of learning a second language. Finally, literacy encompasses the components of reading and writing, such as pronunciation, spelling, graphemes, morphemes, and oral language skills.

In contrast to PRAXIS, the language concepts and the knowledge of language acquisition necessary for teachers to know is only 25% of the TExES exam. Under this one domain, there are two standards and two competencies that direct the test takers’ knowledge. The first standard and competency emphasizes the nature of language the parts that contribute to language systems. Phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon, semantics, discourse, and pragmatics are covered. Similar concepts of literacy development and the functions of language are also expected for mastery. The second standard and competency highlight the research of language acquisition, making note of theories, cognitive processes, the relationship between the first and second language, and the common difficulties that ELLs face. Although the content of these sections on the exams are similar, the proportion of the assessed material on the exams is not. The PRAXIS places more weight in

test takers needing to know this information. The title of this section on the PRAXIS highlights the importance of teacher knowledge regarding the foundations of the English language. The content reflects the importance of knowing about the building blocks of the English language on the part of the teacher.

An analysis of the wording of the standards and competencies indicated differences that reflect varied word choice and varied levels of thinking between the two exams. For example, some wording indicates knowledge-based questioning while other questions reflect higher level, application-based questions. The PRAXIS simply lists the specifications of what is needed to know while the TExES directs the language toward the ELL or the ESL classroom. For example, while the PRAXIS recognizes the “range of social and academic functions” (Education Testing Service, 2016, p. 6) required for proficiency, the TExES “uses this knowledge...to deliver instruction and promote ESL student’s English-language proficiency” (Texas Education Agency, 2015, p. 6). The TExES ensures that future teachers know how to apply the knowledge needed for this exam into a classroom of ELL. The PRAXIS does not mention anything regarding proficiency testing or the four domains in which they should be proficient: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Competency 001 under Domain 1 of the TExES “understands the interrelatedness” of the skills required of students and “uses this understanding to develop...proficiency” (Texas Education Agency, 2015, p. 6).

A minor difference exists within the instruction and assessment concepts. The PRAXIS divides these ideas into two portions of the exam while the TExES combines it into one. The percentages of this information on the tests are equivalent, although there is a division of sections. Despite the small difference in the separation of concepts, the content of these ideas are very similar in both exams. Both highlight pedagogical skills required for teachers to effectively teach students, differentiated instruction that benefits students, and a basic knowledge of assessments and how to use them appropriately.

The final difference between the exams reflects the percentage of the exams emphasizing the professional and cultural aspects of being an ESL teacher. The PRAXIS allots 15% to this portion while the TExES allots 30%. The cultural and professional aspects of the job are defined within the PRAXIS as the cultural understanding, legal and ethical issues, the role of the ESL teacher, and the professional development teacher. Again, a difference in the language/wording exists between the tests. There is an emphasis placed in knowing and understanding the cultural differences of the student on the PRAXIS and an emphasis in knowing how these differences will affect the student and their learning progress on the TExES. Competency 009 highlights the importance of creating an “effective multicultural and multilingual learning environment” (Texas Education Agency, 2015, p. 11) that allows the students to feel safe and to learn in a positive environment. The TExES also places a greater emphasis on the teacher as an advocate for the ELL. While the PRAXIS mentions this in a few of the specifications of the role of the ESL teacher, the TExES directs Competency 010 to show teachers what specifically it means to serve as an advocate (Texas Education Agency, 2015, p. 12). Table 1 presents the major differences found between Texas state standards and national standards.

Table 1

Differences between the PRAXIS and TExES

| | PRAXIS | TExES |
|-------------------|--|---|
| Content | The PRAXIS contains four content categories: foundations of linguistics and language learning, planning, implementing, and managing instruction, assessment, and cultural and professional aspects of the job | The TExES contains three domains: language concepts and language acquisition, ESL instruction and assessment, and foundations of ESL education, cultural awareness, and family and community involvement |
| Percentages | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foundations of Linguistics and Language Learning: 40% • Planning, Implementing, and Managing Instruction: 30% • Assessment: 15% • Cultural and Professional Aspects of the Job: 15% | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language Concepts and Language Acquisition: 25% • ESL Instruction and Assessment: 45% • Foundations of ESL Education, Cultural Awareness, and Family and Community Involvement: 30% |
| Listening Section | The PRAXIS contains a two part, 20 question listening section. | The TExES does not contain a listening section. |
| Language/Wording | The PRAXIS uses language to specify the necessities for the exam. | The TExES uses language to emphasize the application of knowledge in the ESL classroom. |

Conclusions and Implications

According to Samson and Collins (2012), research suggests that preservice and practicing teachers need foundational knowledge in order to work effectively with ELLs. Teacher need to be prepared to attend to oral language development, support academic language, and to be culturally sensitive to the backgrounds of their students. They argue that “these areas of knowledge be purposefully and explicitly integrated into the preparation, certification, evaluation, and development of all teachers in the interest of improving outcomes for English language learners” (p. 2). In the current research, we found that both the Praxis and the TExES addressed standards related to this knowledge.

Overall, the knowledge required to pass both of the ESL certification exams is similar between the two assessments. The greatest differences include the presence of a listening section on the PRAXIS, the percentage breakdown of specific content, and the assessment language of the exam. With the large and continually growing population of ELLs, preservice teachers must be knowledgeable in and remain up-to-date on linguistic and pedagogical research in order to effectively teach their students.

One way that the PRAXIS surpasses the TExES in its requirement for teachers is through their listening section. This portion of the exam enables teachers to listen to different accents of speech. Within the classroom, teachers will have to understand students speaking with various accents. By doing so on the exam, teachers have shown practice and mastery of this skill. The TExES is preparing teachers well through their third domain. This section encompasses the foundations of ESL education, cultural awareness, and family and community involvement. By including all of this content, Texas is making teachers more aware of all aspects of ESL, rather than strictly the classroom implications. The TExES is also preparing teachers well through their use of active language that emphasizes the application of knowledge in the ESL classroom, rather than what needs to be known solely for the test.

“If we wish to see change in teacher preparation programs guidance at the federal level is essential as is the involvement of accrediting bodies and state agencies” (Samson & Collins, 2012, p. 21). While standards are available for Teachers of English Language Learners, most states do not require that teachers are certified to work with ELLs, even though most teachers are likely to have ELLs in their classrooms. Teacher preparation programs should consider providing knowledge and skills related to standards for all teachers.

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