

TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED FOR TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: A STUDY OF TEACHER PREPAREDNESS

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Abstract

Accountability for the improvement of educational outcomes for all students has helped close the gap between English Learners (ELLs) and English proficient students. One way classroom teachers address the needs of ELLs is through national and state established standards. In last year's Forum, we shared an analysis of state and national standards for teachers of ELLs. In this article, we used Texas standards in a survey designed to examine teacher perceptions of their preparedness to teach ELLs. Fifty-four teachers within Texas have participated in a mixed-methods survey regarding their preparedness with specific skills needed for working with ELLs. Findings from this study may help teacher educators determine ways to prepare teachers that extend beyond standards required for teacher certification.

Keywords: English language learners, teacher preparation, English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS)

Students face many challenges in today's educational world. One of the major contributors to this academic struggle is a lack of unified language, not only among peers but between the teachers and students. English Language Learners (ELLs) are students whose first language is not English. They are placed in programs to supplement their education through both language and content supports. There are a variety of English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. Some programs pull ELLs out of their regular classes for a period of time while they focus on linguistic development. Others have specialists work with students on their content materials during class times. Schools with a great need for ESL instruction often follow a bilingual or dual language structure in order to teach students language and content. The formatting of the program varies by campus, district, and specific student needs.

When students reach a certain level of English language proficiency, they are exited from their ESL program. Although they have exited, these students usually still require some assistance with less common grammatical structures or vocabulary. Both the second language and content material are addressed in ESL programs. If teachers are not adequately prepared to teach this specialized population, students will not be successful academically or socially due to a lack of communication skills. Teachers must be aware of the differing proficiency levels present within one classroom. Each ELL is a different individual with specific needs. The purpose of this research is to analyze teacher perceptions of their preparedness to teach ELLs.

The Need for ESL Programs

From 1995 to 2005, “the ELL population doubled in 23 states” (National Education Association, n.d., p. 1). Within the last decade “this population has increased by approximately 57 percent” (McGraner & Saenz, 2009, p. 1). The increase in this population places more ELLs in a general education classroom instructed by a teacher who may not be prepared to address the specific needs of a second language learner. These percentages do not include the population of students who have exited the ESL programs after meeting a sufficient proficiency or students who did not meet the requirements to be placed into an ESL program. Although they have exited the program, these students still struggle with academic and content vocabulary.

According to federal law, “ELLs must be provided appropriate English language development support services” (Samson & Collins, 2012, p. 4) in order to aid them with content and progress them through learning the English language proficiently. The Texas Education Code requires that ESL programs are available “to provide each ELL the opportunity to be enrolled in the required program at his or her grade level” (“Texas Education Code”, n.d., §89.1210 a). These students require supports in speaking, reading, writing, and hearing the English language, not only to socialize and interact with the adults and peers around them, but also to function within the academic courses in which they are enrolled. The strong correlation between language development and academic success implies that “all classroom teachers with ELLs must understand the principles and best practices of supporting their unique needs” (Samson & Collins, 2012, p. 4). When teachers are not effectively prepared to aid their students in their language learning, the students suffer from a lack of help linguistically and a lack of communication regarding academic content.

ELLs are supposed to “meet the same challenging State academic content... and achievement standards” as English-speaking students (McGraner & Saenz, 2009, p. 1). To perform at high levels of achievement, students must understand the academic content material being taught. Understanding the content material requires understanding the language in which instruction is provided. State and local educational agencies and schools are accountable for students increasing in English proficiency as well as increasing in core content knowledge (McGraner & Saenz, 2009, p. 2). Therefore, teacher training related to instruction for ELLs should be a focus.

Standards for ELL Instruction

The standards used for ELL instruction vary by state, yet ultimately, they have the same goal: to advance the student’s proficiency of the English language and success with core academic content. While specific states may have unified standards for teachers to implement as they teach these students, the standards might not be enforced, required, or properly taught. In the state of Texas, there is no required level of training or expertise to have ELLs in a general education classroom. To be considered as an ESL instructional specialist, a teacher in Texas must be state certified in ESL instruction. For Texas teachers not seeking ESL endorsement, the only opportunities to learn about “educating diverse student populations” (Education Commission of the States, 2014) is during professional development trainings. This requirement refers to various types of diversity, not just linguistic diversity. Such a broad requirement for certification may make the preparation of teachers somewhat difficult. Undergraduate preservice education programs often offer courses in understanding ESL instructional strategies and techniques, yet such courses are not always required, and some may be taught by instructors lacking knowledge in beneficial approaches, materials, or developmentally appropriate concept development of ELLs to effectively prepare novice teachers.

Within the state of Texas, the ESL certification test is taken through the Texas Examinations of Educator Standards (TExES) program as part of the Texas Education Agency (TEA). The three domains of this exam emphasize language concepts and acquisition, ESL instruction and assessment, and foundations of ESL education, cultural awareness, and family and community involvement. The largest portion of the exam focuses on ESL instruction and assessment, including “pedagogical skills required for teachers to effectively teach students” (Vasquez & Pilgrim, 2017, p. 41), differentiated instruction, and appropriate assessments.

The seven standards for the TExES ESL certification exam include the teacher's understanding of the structure and conventions of the English language, the foundations of ESL education, the processes of first- and second-language acquisition, the methods for implementing effective, developmentally appropriate ESL instruction, factors that affect ESL students' learning, the use of assessments and adapting instruction, and how to serve as an advocate for ESL students. The first standard, structure and conventions of the English language, includes grammar, syntax, and morphology, all necessary for ELLs to understand as they learn to read and write English. Foundations of ESL education refers to education law as well as the basic background knowledge of ESL programs, how they work, why ESL programs are needed, and which populations they serve. The processes of language acquisition emphasize how both the first and second languages are learned and how the two are related. Methods for implementing effective, developmentally appropriate instruction regards the process of differentiation for ESL students. Teachers are advised to know the environmental, developmental, and physical factors that hinder or contribute to a students' learning, specifically those that affect students learning another language. Understanding assessments includes how students are assessed, modifications for diverse student populations, and how results are used to adapt and modify instruction. The role of the ESL teacher is explained through the seventh standard which emphasizes how teachers advocate for their students' education, specialized programs, and progress.

A majority of the other states utilize the PRAXIS English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) exam to certify their teachers through the Educational Testing Services (ETS). The PRAXIS divides the test in four content categories: foundations of linguistics and language learning, planning, implementing and managing instruction, assessment, and cultural and professional aspects of the job. The largest category in this exam is the foundations of linguistics and language learning, which emphasizes the framework of a language and understanding it.

Both of these major certification exams include understanding the structure and basic components of language in general, as well as the language acquisition process. With a thorough understanding of what constitutes a language and how people learn it, teachers can use developmentally appropriate strategies to help students acquire the language in both a social and academic setting. Such understanding also emphasizes how the first language can affect the second language that is being learned. Vivian Cook (2016), a professor of applied linguistics at Newcastle University, has analyzed a study regarding second language acquisition of grammatical morphemes and found universal truths. "All L2 (second language) learners have much the same order" (p. 35) of acquiring the grammatical morphemes, regardless of their educational background, age, or first language. This information is important to understand, so that teachers are aware of the order of which they must teach. Despite the ELL's grade level, if they are unable to master the lowest grammatical morpheme, they will be unsuccessful at demonstrating more challenging ones. This grammatical application can be reflected upon all contents. The building blocks of a language must be present before students are able to use the language correctly and effectively.

Teacher Preparation

The content being taught in preparation for how to teach "diverse student populations shows few changes over the last 25 years" (McGraner & Saenz, 2009, p. 2). With a "fast-growing population of ELL students" (p. 13), teachers should be kept up to date in modern and effective strategies and methods for teaching this specific group of students. "Qualified ESL teachers are in great demand in public schools in the United States" (TESOL International Association, 2018, para. 1). During the 2017 school year, 15.5% of Texas students participated in ESL programs (NCES, 2017). Since there is such high demand for ESL education, research, trainings, and coursework should adequately prepare teachers for this classroom experience. Unfortunately, mainstream teachers feel like they are unprepared to handle the specific needs of teaching ELLs within their classroom for a variety of different reasons (Durgunoglu & Hughes, 2010, p. 32).

One reason teachers feel unprepared to teach ELLs is lack of professional development on the subject at hand. According to the Education Commission of the States, "over 30 states do not require ELL training for general classroom teachers beyond the federal requirements" (2014). Federal law mandates that districts must provide professional development that is research-based to anyone within the schools who work with ELLs. Trainings should include effective methods for aiding ELLs' learning and must also have a positive and lasting impact on those working with the ELLs. Out of

the fifty states, 34 had no ELL training. Some states required that teachers have their ESL certification or endorsements, while others require some attendance to trainings. Additionally, teacher preparation programs are offering courses that allow preservice teachers to experience pedagogical strategies and ESL classroom environments. In Texas, teachers are required only to have the ESL certification if they are the ESL teacher in a content-based program or pull-out program with ELLs. The teachers in a content-based program provide supplements in all content areas while teachers in a pull-out program provide instruction exclusively in English language arts (“Texas Education Code”, n.d., §29.061 c). A generalist teacher is responsible for providing all other instruction in a mainstream classroom. Since generalist teachers are able to have ELLs in their classrooms, the state requires them to attend trainings during their license renewal period that specify in “instruction about education diverse student populations” (“Education Commission of the States”, 2014).

Another struggle within an ESL program is a lack of clear communication with the parents of ELLs. If teachers are unable to communicate with parents regarding classroom expectations, student goals, and academic progress, there is a gap between the family and the classroom. There could also be additional problems due to a lack of comprehension of the expectations. Some districts or schools are unable to find teachers or translators who are familiar with the “many linguistic backgrounds” (Durgunoglu & Hughes, 2010, p. 32) of the ELLs. This results in incoherent communication between the teacher and student, teacher and parents, and the school and parents.

A 2010 study by Durgunoglu and Hughes emphasized the preparedness of teachers to teach ELLs at a high school level, as well as their self-efficacy. This study took place at a Midwestern university in the United States. A survey was distributed to 62 preservice teachers who had completed their teaching education and diversity training, yet “did not feel well-prepared to address the needs of ELL students” (35). The result of their survey yielded that the preservice teachers felt neutrally about their preparedness to teach second language learners. “The confidence...about their teaching methodology and skills” was the primary contributor to the preservice teachers’ self-efficacy, which ultimately decreased during their student teaching experience (33). A lack of confidence to teach ELLs by the preservice teachers was met without assistance from their mentoring teachers, demonstrating a lack of preparedness from all.

Due to a lack of training and communication barriers, teachers feel unprepared to work with ELLs in an effective manner. There is limited research to demonstrate ways in which teachers feel prepared or unprepared to teach ELLs. Yet, preparation programs that effectively train teachers for their roles as teachers would increase teachers’ self-efficacy regarding ESL instruction. When teachers feel better prepared, they are “more confident and successful” at teaching their students (Shreve, 2005).

Methods

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to investigate teacher perceptions of their preparedness to teach ELLs. Through the survey process, the research examines the Texas state standards for teacher preparation and whether or not they align with the skills that teachers feel they need to be successful teachers of English Language Learners. The project is significant because many teachers do not feel prepared to teach ELLs, and educators need information to improve teacher preparation in this area. This project will answer the research question “What are teacher perceptions of the preparation they received to be teachers of English Language Learners?”

Data Collection

An instrument was developed to evaluate teacher perceptions of their preparedness to teach ELLs (Appendix A). The eight-question instrument aligned with the standards of language, instruction, differentiation, assessment, and professional duties and how well teachers felt prepared within each standard. The survey instrument, designed using a Google Form, was emailed to teachers across Texas during the fall of 2017. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from teacher participants in order to determine if teachers feel prepared for classroom experiences with ELLs based on what they are required by the state of Texas to know for certification, as well as to determine ways for teachers to feel more prepared entering the classroom.

The participants of this survey are certified teachers within the state of Texas. The survey was anonymous, but the researcher can assume participants range in their age, years of teaching experience, certification specifications, and grade levels in which they have taught. Participants are of different genders, ethnicities, and educational backgrounds. Out of the 54 teachers who participated in the survey, 59.3% are certified to teach ESL. These participants who are ESL certified have successfully passed a certification exam for ESL either through the TExES or another certification exam.

Data Analysis

The focus of this study was to examine teacher perceptions of preparedness to teach ELLs. Quantitative data were analyzed by reporting frequencies of yes/no responses of teachers. Qualitative analysis focused on the content of open-ended teacher responses. Data were analyzed and categorized using a coding system, and themes were developed to reflect ways teachers felt both prepared and unprepared to teach ELLs. Data analysis initially occurred through a process of deductive coding using Texas state standards for teaching ELLs: an understanding between the first and second language, providing explicit instruction, differentiation of instruction, effective assessment, and an understanding of the ESL teacher's role. Other themes emerged during inductive analysis. The researcher identified four major themes and three subthemes that reflect ways teachers felt prepared or unprepared to teach ELLs.

Findings

Quantitative Data

The quantitative responses collected from the survey have been separated into two groups: teachers who are ESL certified and teachers who are not ESL certified (Table 1). The data shows that 53.1% of certified teachers did not feel they were prepared to understand the relationship between the first and second languages. Likewise, 72.7% of non-ESL certified teachers felt unprepared to understand the correspondence between the first and second languages. 53.1% of certified teachers reported they are unable to provide effective and explicit instruction to ELLs, and 72.7% of non-certified teachers do not feel prepared to provide effective, explicit instruction. While 59.4% of certified teachers do feel prepared to differentiate instruction between ELLs and English-speaking students, only 31.8% of non-certified teachers feel prepared. Although 68.2% of non-certified teachers feel that they are unable to assess ELLs effectively, 62.5% of certified teachers feel prepared to assess ELLs. Results show that 65.6% of certified teachers adequately understand their role as an ESL teacher, while only 27.3% of non-certified teachers understand their role.

Table 1
Frequency Data: Percentage of Teachers Who Felt Prepared

Standard	Certified	Non-Certified	Total
Understand relationship between L1 and L2	46.9 %	27.3%	38.9%
Effectively provide explicit instruction to ELLs	46.9%	27.3%	38.9%
Differentiate instruction between ELLs and English Speaking	59.4%	31.8%	48.1%
Effectively assess ELLs	62.5%	31.8%	50%
Understand role as ESL teacher	65.6%	27.3%	50%

Qualitative Data

Through the process of deductive and inductive coding, the Texas standards for teaching ELLs were collapsed into four major themes and three subthemes. Qualitative analysis resulted in four major themes and three subthemes. Themes derived from deductive coding included differentiation, assessment, the relationship of the first and second languages, and

experience. These themes are in alignment with the standards for teachers of ELLs. Further analysis utilizing inductive coding resulted in additional themes: empathy towards students' individual needs, understanding students' native culture, and the application of differentiation strategies.

Differentiation. Many teachers in this study did not feel prepared to provide differentiated instruction through the standards for teachers of ELLs. Teachers were aware that the students differ within their individual needs, such as their native language, educational experiences, proficiency levels, and personal learning preferences. Yet they were unable to provide differentiated instruction to meet each of these specific needs. The standards from the ESL certification exams alone provide examples of strategies and skills for differentiation, yet teachers felt unprepared to utilize them. Teachers claimed that "what really matters is being able to have practical strategies...that you know will be effective" in providing instruction. The surveyed teachers felt as if they had some skills and strategies that would work for their ELLs, but did not know how to apply them in order to match the specific students' needs. For example, one teacher noted that he felt as if he had mastered specific learning skills and strategies for ELLs to use, yet had "next to no training on how to work with them in a classroom setting." Often, ELLs will need multiple differentiations due to their varying proficiency levels in reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

The English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS) were created to assess and develop ELLs' proficiencies of the English language. Students may have a different proficiency level for each of their abilities to read, write, listen, and speak. The four proficiency levels are beginner, intermediate, advanced, and advanced high. One teacher stated that "very little was offered in building units catered to each beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels of language." Since students can have different levels of proficiency for each of the four skills, a lot of differentiation is required in order to teach ELLs. A subtheme of this category was demonstrating empathy towards students' individual needs. A majority of the gathered responses emphasized understanding what each student needed to be successful, since all students "[are] individuals and different." This is a major aspect of differentiated instruction. When the teacher is aware of what the students need, he is more likely to be able to help them.

Assessment. Teachers knew how to modify assessments overall to be appropriate for ELLs, yet felt unable to do so specifically for students' individual needs. With varying levels of ELLs, teachers reported difficulty in creating assessments to match the students' differing levels of proficiency. They also felt unprepared to provide assessments to students who were unable to understand the instructions, questions, and answers. Teachers felt as if they did not know "how to accurately assess ELLs" in a developmentally appropriate manner. Assessments must be differentiated regarding a specific student's proficiency levels in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Teachers struggled with "[finding] alternate activities that show content mastery." Therefore, students with a different native language may not effectively demonstrate their knowledge if they are unable to understand the assessment. Teachers would benefit from specialized trainings on how to create differentiated assessments.

Relationship of First and Second Languages. Teachers also reported a need to have some knowledge of the students' native languages to "help break the language barrier". Twelve teachers commented that having some knowledge of the ELLs' native language helped aid communication between the teacher and student. According to gathered responses, the surveyed teachers recognized the difficulty of developing the students' second language while maintaining their first. Students who are learning a second language should also be given a time to strengthen their skills within their first language. Teachers who were unfamiliar with language acquisition or the students' native language were unable to provide these opportunities or "relate the material in both languages" for their students. A subtheme provided by this category was knowledge and an understanding of the students' native culture. By knowing some of the language, they are able to have an insight into the students' culture and background. This information allows for better communication, trust, and relationships between the teachers and students. It also bridges the educational gaps, helps to "deal with the social issues" that arise, and enables students to learn better.

Experience. Six teachers, both certified and non-certified, mentioned either lacking preservice experience with ELLs or appreciating the benefits of preservice experience. They emphasized that "experience is the key" to learning the

strategies, skills, and methods used to teach ELLs. They requested more experiences available to current teachers during professional development trainings and to preservice teachers during their certification preparations. Within this theme of experience, a subtheme of application emerged. For example, one teacher stated that “application is where teachers really hone their skills” and develop a clear understanding of working with these students. Application allows for teachers to demonstrate their understanding of pedagogical skills for ELLs. The teachers mentioned having learning opportunities in a classroom with ELLs better prepared them for having ELLs within their own classroom.

Conclusions and Implications

Overall, both certified and non-certified ESL teachers felt unprepared to teach ELLs in many different aspects. According to Durgunoglu and Hughes’ 2010 study of teachers’ self-efficacy, a teacher’s confidence in their abilities “has a powerful connection to teaching and learning” (p. 32). One of the major concerns with this perception of a lack of preparedness is that all teachers are required to differentiate their instructions for diverse student populations. While this skill of differentiation is required through the Texas Education Code (n.d., §149.1001), of all teachers (not just certified ESL teachers), many feel unprepared to do this. Teachers are required to design developmentally appropriate lessons for students. All students are at different developmental levels, requiring specialized instruction for many students. If teachers feel unprepared to teach, students may not be offered the most beneficial strategies to support their needs.

In addressing this unpreparedness, it is necessary to consider ways in which the standards are presented within teacher preparation programs or in professional development. If teacher preparation programs thoroughly address the standards during instruction but never provide the opportunity to apply the standards in practice, teachers may not feel prepared to teach English Learners. In a 2016 study of teacher perceptions related to preparedness, teachers did not feel prepared by their teacher education programs for teaching ELL students. Participants in the study shared a lack of preparatory coursework on strategies for teaching ELLs, a lack of observational experiences in classrooms with ELL students, and a lack of experiences in working with ELLs during field placements and student teaching (Correll, 2016). Perhaps hands-on experiences where knowledge about ELLs could be applied would benefit teachers.

The state standards for teachers of ELLs may be an inadequate guide for preparation programs training teachers to work with students learning a second language. A stronger emphasis in preparing teachers to differentiate instruction would benefit all teachers. Teachers are required not only to differentiate instruction for their ELLs, but also for other diverse student populations. It is important to know how to differentiate in many different aspects, including assessments. The state standards alone do not ensure teacher preparedness to work with ELLs who require differentiated instruction and accommodations needed for content mastery. Without previous linguistic knowledge, teachers are unable to help students promote their native language. Trainings and certification preparation should allow for teachers to learn a basic understanding of how languages work, how a language is learned, and what they can do to promote the development of both languages. One major aspect of improvement for all teacher preparation programs would be to provide more experience and application for working with ELLs. Without a realistic understanding of the students’ needs, teachers will not be able to help their students. While the standards provide a framework for the knowledge needed to work with ELLs, the state is lacking in the proper preparation for this classroom experience.

To prepare teachers more effectively for their role either as an ESL teacher or working with ELLs, preparatory programs should offer more experience, application of skills, and understanding of languages. More experience in the field of study would allow for preservice teachers to gain a clear understanding of the ESL teacher’s responsibilities. The preservice teachers would have opportunities to apply their skills and see the strategies they have learned in action with the students. Languages could be heard, cultures could be shared, and language experiences could be observed so that the preservice teachers know how to promote the linguistic growth and relationship within their own classroom.

To further this research, the survey could be extended to more teachers within the state of Texas with an additional question regarding the grade level in which that they have taught ELLs. An examination of grade levels would offer useful information of realizing where the greatest lack of preparedness occurs: the elementary or secondary level. Understanding

the needs of each grade level when working with ELLs could allow for trainings to be specialized and focus on the elementary and secondary levels. This research could also be extended by surveying teachers of another state and comparing their perception of preparedness regarding standards for teachers of ELLs. General studies show that most teachers of ELLs in any state feel unprepared, due to a lack of mandated trainings, courses, or certifications.

Ultimately, this research demonstrates a potential problem of unpreparedness amongst Texas teachers towards effectively teaching ELLs. This unpreparedness may stem from a lack of official trainings or preservice courses. Experience and application of skills could be added to preparatory programs so that teachers gain insightful observations within ESL classrooms. Teachers of ELLs and general education could both benefit from better preparations for differentiating instruction and assessment for various diverse student populations. Knowledge and skills for working with ELLs is important for all teachers in Texas.

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Appendix A
Survey Questions

1. Are you certified to teach ESL? (Yes/No)
2. Do you feel the state standards for working with ELLs prepared you to understand the relationship between the student's first language and their second language? (Yes/No)
3. Do you feel the state standards for working with ELLs prepared you to effectively provide explicit instruction to your ELLs? (Yes/No)
4. Do you feel the state standards for working with ELLs prepared you on how to differentiate instruction between your ELLs and English-Speaking students? (Yes/No)
5. Do you feel the state standards for working with ELLs prepared you to effectively assess your ELLs? (Yes/No)
6. Do you feel the state standards for working with ELLs prepared you to understand your role as the ESL teacher? (Yes/No)
7. What knowledge and skills were missing from your ESL teacher certification preparation? In other words, what skills do teachers need to know in order to work with ELLs? (Open-ended)
8. What knowledge and skills had you mastered from your ESL teacher certification preparation? (Open-ended)