

## **Unprepared: Are Educator Preparation Programs Effectively Training Pre-Service Teachers to Teach English Learners?**

**Lorie Johnson**

### **Abstract**

---

All students deserve high-quality, strategic instruction, yet pre-service teachers are not always taught best practices for instructing English Learners (ELs), students for whom English is not their native language. Almost 10 percent of the students in American public schools are classified as ELs, yet research indicates most educator preparation programs across the country have not yet integrated best practices for teaching ELs into their pre-service programs in meaningful ways. It is important for educator preparation programs to provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to understand the unique needs of ELs and to learn effective teaching strategies to meet those needs. This article provides an overview of the dearth of critical instruction related to ELs in educator preparation programs, the need to include it, and questions remaining for further research.

---

**Key Words:** Teacher Education, ESOL, English Language Learners.

As the United States becomes increasingly culturally diverse, educators face the tremendous challenge of effectively meeting the instructional needs of students whose native languages are not English. These students, referred to as English Learners (ELs) by the U.S. Department of Education, often arrive in the United States with little or no knowledge of English. The vast majority are born in the U.S., but often do not receive instruction sufficient to bridge the gap between their first language (L1) and English. Whether born in or outside the U.S., when they enter public schools, it is imperative that they receive high-quality instruction designed to meet their unique instructional needs. Unfortunately, though the number of ELs in public schools continues to increase (Genese, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005; Goldenberg, 2008; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007), research studies indicate that undergraduate teaching programs at colleges and universities across the country are still not effectively equipping pre-service teachers to teach them (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007; Nihat, 2010).

Almost a decade ago, Polat Nihat (2010) found that most undergraduate teacher preparation programs did not adequately prepare pre-service teachers to meet the needs of ELs. In fact, results from his study indicate that most universities made little or no efforts to even begin to address the needs of ELs in their elementary and secondary education programs. As a result, pre-

service teachers and in-service teachers felt unprepared to teach ELs and had no confidence in their readiness to meet their instructional needs (Nihat, 2010). More recent studies indicate there is still a tremendous need for educator preparation programs to integrate EL strategies into methods courses (Stoddart, Bravo, Mosqueda & Solis, 2013).

Not only are theory and pedagogy to support EL instruction lacking in teacher preparation programs, modifications and best practices for instructing ELs are ignored in many popular teacher training textbooks. In a study of 25 popular pre-service teacher training texts, researchers found little information that could be implemented by teachers to instruct ELs (Watson et al, 2005). Five raters used a systematic review process to examine both foundational or basic textbooks, as well as content area textbooks, and found that the topic of teaching ELs wasn't even addressed in most of the textbooks. The researchers concluded that pre-service teacher preparation programs must rely on additional training resources to instruct pre-service teachers in methods related to English Language (EL) instruction because textbooks were not an adequate resource (Watson et al, 2005).

Educator preparation programs must address two critical areas in order to effectively prepare pre-service teachers to teach ELs. Preservice-teachers must understand the diverse needs of ELs, and they must learn effective instructional strategies to meet those needs. It is important that strategies and needs related to ELs are addressed in pre-service programs because we know that teacher beliefs impact teaching and student learning. In a recent study, Goff and Eslami found that pre-service teacher beliefs about ELs can be positively influenced and changed when undergraduate coursework provides instruction in language development and language learning processes sufficient to overcome misconceptions about ELs (2016). These new teacher beliefs can positively impact classroom instruction (Goff & Eslami, 2016).

Pre-service teachers must first understand that all learners have unique backgrounds, schema and instructional needs; ELs are no different. Rather than using broad generalizations to assume instructional needs, pre-service teachers must realize that each EL has unique instructional and academic needs based on his or her own unique experiences, native language, and level of English proficiency (Goldenberg, 2008; NCTE, 2008; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007; Maxwell-Jolly, Gándara, & Mendez Benavides, 2007). Further, they must recognize that there are different types of ELs. Freeman and Freeman (2011) classify them as newly arrived with adequate schooling, newly arrived with limited or interrupted schooling, and long-term EL. Studies indicate that newly arrived students with adequate schooling tend to perform better academically than the latter two groups because students with a strong L1 generally acquire English faster and perform better academically than students with insufficient L1 instruction (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Most ELs are considered to be long-term; about eighty percent of elementary ELs were born in the U.S. (Goldenberg, 2008). According to Horwitz et al, (2009)

## TRAINING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

these are the students most likely to fall through the cracks of our educational system. “They are also likely to be taught by teachers who lack the preparation and skills to meet their academic needs” Horwitz et al, 2009, pp. 3-4).

While understanding that each EL has unique instructional needs, it is also important for pre-service teachers to learn proven strategies for teaching them. A large body of evidence exists to support the efficacy of dual language education as a highly effective and enriching method of teaching both ELs and native English speakers. However, dual language instruction and teacher preparation for this method are virtually ignored because of a host of concerns ranging from financial constraints to societal pressures and politicized educational policies (Ray, 2009). Garcia, Arias, Murri and Serna (2010) studied culturally and linguistically diverse responsive teacher preparation and emphasized the importance of enhancing teacher knowledge through contact and collaboration with diverse ethnolinguistic communities. Their research supports a framework that includes developing teacher knowledge through contact, collaboration, and community (2010).

ELs must develop both conversational and academic language proficiency in English (Cummins, 1979) in order to be successful in today’s classroom (Goldenberg, 2008; Harper & de Jong, 2004). While Cummins (1979) found that interpersonal communication skills developed in more informal settings and non-academic conversations, particularly during informal conversations with peers, Rodriquez (2013) asserts that both conversational and academic language can successfully occur when English is taught in tandem with academic content. By teaching a combination of language and content, ELs are afforded the opportunity to develop the academic language they need (Rodriquez, 2013). There are a variety of ways to teach language through content, including the sheltered instruction observation protocol, popularly known as SIOP (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2008). Freeman & Freeman (2007) found that teaching content and language through thematic instruction can be particularly powerful, allowing students to make important connections between content areas and develop language. Thematic instruction can offer all students authentic and relevant opportunities to activate schema and learn content and language. Research has indicated that ELs need meaningful and relevant situations in which to use English (Freeman & Freeman, 1998; Goldenberg, 2008) and that instruction connecting students’ schema and prior knowledge to content can be especially effective (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005). Cooperative learning, using authentic texts and utilizing students’ interests and backgrounds can also serve as powerful strategies for teaching ELs (Freeman & Freeman, 2002).

The lack of preparation for teaching ELs in pre-service teacher programs is an important issue facing both higher education and K-12 schools. The challenge for educators grows daily as the number of ELs in public schools increases along with expectations for student achievement and teacher performance. According to the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of

English Language Acquisition (January, 2015), during the 2011-12 school year there were 4,472,563 EL's in the U.S. comprising nine percent of students in grades K-12 nationwide. Meanwhile, the Office for English Language Acquisition (2015) reports that the average scores for ELs on the 2013 reading National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessments in grades 4, 8, and 12 were significantly lower than the average scores for non-ELs and the gap in reading scores between ELs and non-ELs widened by grade, from 39 points in grade 4, to 45 points in grade 8, and to 53 points in grade 12.

ELs have unique instructional and cultural needs that should be respected and addressed. To do this effectively, pre-service teachers must be trained in best practices and research-based strategies for teaching EL's. They must be made aware of cultural differences and they need to be taught content area strategies. They must learn important concepts about language acquisition, such as how to identify and use transfer errors to interpret assessments and how to use cognates effectively. Most state universities in the United States have not substantially changed their undergraduate education curriculum to adequately reflect the diversity and ever-changing needs of our schools' student populations. Although our nation continues to become more diverse and more non-English speaking students enter our schools, our teacher preparation programs do not yet reflect current curricular needs. Pre-service teachers graduate from undergraduate programs with little knowledge of phonology, language acquisition, ESOL strategies or methods. Pre-service teachers are not aware of current research or theory related to the unique needs of English Learners and subsequently have little confidence in their teaching ability or readiness to teach ELs.

A review of relevant literature begs many questions. Why are undergraduate programs still not addressing EL instruction in methods courses? Why are pre-service teachers not offered meaningful teaching experience with ELs? How can EL strategies be effectively implemented in Early Childhood/Elementary methods courses? How can PK-12 and higher education collaborate to more effectively prepare pre-service teachers to teach ELs? As we continue to seek relevant and research-based practices to effectively prepare our pre-service teachers, we must purposefully and strategically implement EL strategies and experiences into our methods courses to better equip our pre-service teachers to teach all students, including English Learners.

## References

- Cummins, J. (1979) Cognitive/academic language proficiency, linguistic interdependence, the optimum age question and some other matters. *Working Papers on Bilingualism*, No. 19, 121-129.
- Echevarría, J., Vogt, M.E., & Short, D. (2008). *Making content*

## TRAINING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

- comprehensible for English language learners: The SIOP Model*. 3rd edition. Boston, MA: Pearson/Allyn & Bacon.
- Freeman Y. & Freeman D. (2002). *Closing the achievement gap: How to reach limited formal schooling and long-term English learners*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Freeman, D., & Freeman, Y. (2007). *English language learners: The essential guide*. New York: Scholastic.
- Freeman, D., & Freeman, Y. (2011). *Between worlds: Access to second language acquisition*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Garcia, E., Arias, M.B., Murri, N.J.H., & Serna, C. (2010). Developing responsive teachers: A challenge for a demographic reality. *Journal of Teacher Education*. 61(1-2) 132–142.
- Genese, F., Lindholm-Leary, K., Saunders, W., & Christian, D. (2005). English language learners in U.S. schools: An overview of research findings. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 10(4), 363-385.
- Goff, K.C., & Eslami, Z. (2016). Exploring change in preservice teachers' beliefs about English language learning and teaching. *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research*. 4(3), 21-36.
- Goldenberg, D. (2008). Teaching English language learners: What the research does – and does not – say. *American Educator*, 32(2), 8-44.
- Horwitz, A. R., Uro, G., Price-Baugh, R., Simon, C., Uzzell, R., Lewis, S., & Casserly, M. (2009). *Succeeding with English language learners: Lesson learned from the Great City Schools*. Washington DC: The Council of the Great City Schools.
- Maxwell-Jolly, J., Gándara, P., & Mendez Benavides, L. (2007). *Promoting academic literacy among secondary English language learners: A synthesis of research and practice*. Davis, CA: UC Davis School of Education.
- Meltzer, J., & Hamann, E. T. (2005). *Meeting the literacy development needs of adolescent English language learners through content-area learning. Part two: Focus on classroom teaching and learning strategies*. Providence, RI: Brown University.
- NCTE (2008). *English language learners: A policy research brief produced by the National Council of Teachers of English*. Urbana, IL.
- Nihat, Polat (2010). A comparative analysis of pre-and in-service teacher beliefs about readiness and self-competency: Revisiting teacher education for ELLs. *System*. 38 (2), 228-244, 17.
- Office of English Language Acquisition (2015). *Profiles of English Learners (EL's)*. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Office of English Language Acquisition (2015). *English Learners (EL's) and NAEP*. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Rodriquez, A. (2013). Bilingual and ESL pre-service teachers learn about

- effective instruction for ELLs through meaningful collaboration. *Gist Education and Learning Research Journal*. 7, 12-34.
- Short, D., & Fitzsimmons, S. (2007). *Double the work: Challenges and solutions to acquiring language and academic literacy for adolescent English language learners – a report to Carnegie Corporation of New York*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.
- Stoddart, T., Bravo, M., Mosqueda, E., Solis, J. (2013). Restructuring pre-service teacher education to respond to increasing student diversity. *Research in Higher Education Journal*. 19, 1-19.
- Watson, Sandy; Miller, Ted L.; Driver, Jennifer; Rutledge, Valerie; McAllister, Deborah (2005). *English language learner representation in teacher education textbooks*. *Education*, 126 (1) 148-157.

**Lauri Johnson** earned her Ph. D. in reading education at Auburn University with a graduate certificate in YEFL/TESL. She taught at reading education at Auburn and has been an elementary educator at Auburn City Schools.