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Preparing Pre-Service Teachers to Teach English Learners (ELs): A Phenomenon in Teacher Education Programs

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Preparing pre-service teachers to teach English learners (EL): A phenomenon in teacher education programs

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The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the learning experiences Teacher Candidates (TC) from varied education major or minor programs have while attending a class about strategies to work with English learners (EL) during their junior or senior year in a Teacher Education program. Researchers offer an analysis of TCs’ interviews, reflections and lesson plans (data) in which participants describe their learning experiences. This study affords the audience an insight into the participants’ analysis of their learning process, process of awareness and professional development, as they re-visit their experience with specialized content to work with multicultural classes (ESOL content). The following pedagogical implications are discussed: Teacher candidates benefit from: (1) – occupying a space where they can exchange ideas with colleagues and instructors, (2) - reflecting upon their learning experiences to elaborate actions for future implementation, (3) – developing a community of practice among TCs in order to support collaboration, (4) – practicing reflective practices that would help TCs improve their experiences.
Increasing numbers of English Learners (EL) in American public schools in the last two decades:
Cumulative increase of 27.8 percent in ten years in FL (Florida Department of Education, 2013)

Federal Government laws: Support and guarantee ELs’ access to education

Title III: Part A: English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement Act (No Child Left Behind, 2001)

Common Core State Standards: Establish high quality academic standards in Mathematics and English Language Arts (National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO))

State of Florida teaching certification requirements:
- English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL) Endorsement for Language Arts teachers
- Agreement on Multicultural Education and Training Advocacy (META)
- Consent Decree
Preparing pre-service content area teachers

- Traditionally teacher education programs developed:
  - knowledge about direct and systematic ELs’ instruction
  - knowledge of how to access ELs expertise resources
  - skills and dispositions required to teach academic content to ELs (Ballantyne, Sanderman & Levy, 2008; McGraner & Saenz, 2009; Hollins & Guzman, 2005)

- Nowadays teacher education programs seek to develop:
  - TCs’ linguistic and cultural knowledge
  - awareness about diversity and needs of all students (especially ELs)
  - more effective teaching practices (De Jong & Harper, 2005; Nutta, Mokhtari and Strebel, 2012)
The following research questions guided the study

1- What experiences with learning strategies necessary to work with English Learners (EL) are Teacher Candidates (TC) from varied education majors or minor programs and in a theory and practice course of a teacher education program exposed to?

2- How, if at all, do Teacher Candidates (TC) reflect about their experiences with learning strategies necessary to work with English Learners?
Phenomenological Research

Brief description of study I

- **Phenomenological research**: explores a phenomenon with a group of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013)

- **Phenomenon definition**: TCs’ perceptions of new knowledge being developed
  - phenomena descriptions and analysis

- **Sampling**: purposeful (selected cases that produce valuable information) (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007)
  - homogeneous (participants have common experiences, attributes or characteristics) (Goodson & Sikes, 2001)
Brief description of study II

- **Sample**: - 38 students in a course about theory and practice of teaching ELs in primary and secondary mainstream classrooms during Fall semester 2014

- **Data Collection**: - collected literacy questionnaire, reflections and lesson plans
  - conducted class observations and interviews
  - included instructor’s narrative reflections about the course
  - included researchers’ own reflections on the study process

- **Data Analysis**: - steps in Grounded Theory
  - Line by line coding
  - Focused coding
  - Axial coding
  - Theoretical coding
  (Charmaz, 2001)
Demographics I

Participants age distribution
(N=38, M=19.85, ST=4.907)

Participants ethnical distribution
Demographics II

Academic Plan Distribution

Year Level

University of Central Florida
Teacher candidates’ experiences with learning strategies

- Building instrumental knowledge
  - “(…) the course has provided me with so many tools that I can use to meet the ESOL requirements in my classroom (…)” (Part. 27)
  - “(…) I think it is incredibly important to be aware and educated with ESOL strategies (…)” (Part. 17)
  - “(…) I think that it is extremely valuable to pursue a better education in ESOL skills. Especially in this day and age were immigration is so prevalent in the USA (…)” (Part. 27)
  - “(…) so diversity wise I think they did a good job just as a way of diversifying the students (…)” (Part. 26)

- Building cultural knowledge
Teacher candidates develop their process of awareness

- Recognizing ELs have needs
  “(...) such as adding more visuals and (...), they are such simple and easy fixes to help close this sometimes giant gap that we find with ELs (...)” (Part. 27)

- Finding new knowledge (difficulties ELs have with a new language and content in the new language)
  “(...) (studs) cannot speak English and having to work with them is totally different (...) because that language barrier (...)” (Part. 26)

- Learning to respect ELs struggle and needs
  “(...) to have a great classroom you need to make these students feel comfortable(...)” (Part. 11)

- Analyzing the need to have prepared teachers to teach ELs
  “(...) I would like to do more, just so I can have a good experience for my EL students and have a good education (...)” (Part. 11)
Teacher candidates analyze the process of professional career development

Getting specialized certification (ESOL)

“(...)but I am thinking of minoring in ESOL just because I think it will benefit me more to have that extra endorsement on my resume, on my professional documents (...)”(Part.26)

Analyzing teachers’ knowledge

“(…) I do feel that a future educator pursuing a career in teaching EL students should have a class or two on different cultures to get a base knowledge (...)”(Part.27)

Analyzing teachers’ practice

“(…) Students want to learn, but teachers just have to change certain things in the assignment that the student can understand in English better (...)”(Part. 11)

Analyzing teachers’ attitudes, feelings and beliefs

“(…) I think providing for these students you need to have an open mind and meeting their needs (...)”(Part. 11)
Teacher candidates analyze their experience with ESOL content

Analyzing the experience

“(…) just by being able to learn how to communicate, how to work with ELs, is definitely an advantage from this… I think my experience (…) it just has been an enlightening one (…)” (Part. 26)

Analyzing field experience: Service learning

“(…) (service learning), has been a good experience for me, cause, they are students (…) they don’t let the language get in the way of their learning (…)” (Part. 26)

Interest in further ESOL education

“(…) I would like to further my education taking another TSL class to get an endorsement (…)” (Part. 17)
Findings for Research Question 1

- TCs experience with learning strategies:
  - use of graphic organizers, visual and foldable materials, technology, use of worksheets, word-banks
  - think-pair-share activities, hands-on activities, step-by-step explanations
  - use of repetitive, detailed language, point to objects, use of gestures, step-by-step explanations, use of ELs’ native language
  - workshops in other languages (Italian), guest speakers from other languages (Farsi)
Findings for Research Question 2

- TCs’ reflections about their experiences with learning strategies:
  - reflect on their present experiences in their process of awareness development
  - revisit their past and present experiences while preparing themselves for their future profession
  - start developing their own teacher identity parallel to their discovery of others’ identity and the existence of diversity in society
  - engage in awareness process is fundamental in TCs’ positionality as future teachers who can be instruments of change in school communities
Pedagogical implications

- TCs would benefit from the development of communities of practice to foster:
  - common objectives, practices, beliefs, values and power relations
  - ideas exchange, content reflection, actions for future application elaboration
  - dialogic interactions
  - collaboration with colleagues in learning and meaning construction
  - individual’s development of personal and group identities
  - network and stronger bonds among future professionals
Selected references


