Chapter 9
Can Online Education Be the Answer?
Exploring Transformational Learning in Two Online Teacher Education Courses

Nilufer Guler
Avila University, USA

ABSTRACT

The number of English Language Learners (ELLs) is increasing rapidly in American schools, and mostly, they are enrolled in mainstream classes. This means that mainstream teachers have an important role in the academic success of these students. However, research on mainstream teachers and ELL students suggests that mainstream teachers may have negative perceptions of ELLs, and they may use the wrong approach to teaching these students, owing to their lack of knowledge in ELL education. This study aims to demonstrate how online classes on ELL education, and developing online communities of practice, might change mainstream teachers’ methods of instruction of ELLs. The results showed that mainstream teachers significantly changed their perceptions and instructional strategies for teaching ELLs as a result of taking online classes, and particularly, online discussions had an important role in this change of perception. Some implications for developing online ELL education courses for pre-service and in-service teachers are also provided.

INTRODUCTION

English Language Learners (ELLs) account for the fastest growing student group in schools in the United States. During the 2012-2013 school year, there were 4,851,527 ELLs at public schools, comprising 9.8 percent of the school population as a whole (Immigration Policy Institute, 2015). In a speech made in 2005, the former Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, predicted that by 2025, one in four K-12 students from kindergarten through to the 12th grade (K-12) will be an ELL (Spellings, 2011).

This rapid increase in the number of ELLs throws up some important issues related to teaching this student group. One of the most important challenges in ELL education is closing the academic achieve-
ment gap between the ELL and non-ELL students. ELLs lag behind their non-ELL peers in reading and math (Fry, 2008), they have a higher dropout rate than other student groups (Echevarria, Short & Powers, 2006; Menken, 2010), and they have the lowest graduation rate among all student demographics (NCES, 2013).

ELL students spend most of their school time in mainstream classes and are “pulled-out” for a few hours during the school week for ELL education classes (Liggett, 2014; Reeves, 2006). As a result, ELLs must rely on mainstream teachers for the vast majority of their educational experiences. Thus, mainstream teaching and learning environments must be optimized for ELLs in order to support the entire K-12 educational infrastructure. However, mainstream teachers complete their degrees with an “overwhelming lack of knowledge of second language acquisition (SLA), multicultural education, and ESOL pedagogy” (Pettit, 2011, p. 125). The number of teachers who have received some training in ELL education is very limited. Even though almost 42 percent of mainstream teachers in the United States need to teach ELLs, only 26.8 percent have had some preparation in ELL education (NCES, 2013). In addition to this, research on mainstream teachers and ELL learning reveals that mainstream teachers are unwilling to have professional development (PD) opportunities on ELL education due to their heavy work schedules. So, structure of these PD opportunities should be changed to apply to the needs of teachers.

Online classes have a great potential to reach more teachers, owing to their flexibility in time and space. Several colleges have started to offer online courses to prepare pre-service and in-service to teach ELLs. While a large number of researchers have investigated the effects of online education on students’ achievement of course objectives and program learning outcomes, few studies have analyzed the effect of online learning on the daily practices of K-12 teachers. In addition, literature addressing the humanization of online teacher education courses is almost non-existent. Adopting a socio-constructivist theory, social presence and communities of practice (CoP) as a theoretical frameworks, this study aims to close this gap by analyzing how two online classes helped K-12 teachers learn more about teaching ELLs, and how this learning changed their instructional strategies.

**BACKGROUND**

Research on mainstream teachers and ELL education reveals that experience in teaching ELLs, speaking another language, and even the geographic location of the teachers influence mainstream teachers’ instructional methods and perceptions of ELL students. However, the most consistent and important factor found to influence mainstream teachers’ ELL instructional methods is education (Echevarria et al., 2006; Pettit, 2011; Reeves, 2006; Walker, Shafer & Liam, 2004; Youngs & Youngs, 2001). ELL students bring strong linguistic, social and cultural backgrounds to classrooms, and they have considerably different academic needs from those of non-ELL students. Therefore, strong pedagogical knowledge and good teaching are not enough to teach ELLs in mainstream classes; mainstream teachers should learn about second language acquisition and ELL education theories (Coady, Harper & de Jong, 2015; Lucas, 2011).

However, many mainstream teachers are unwilling to participate in ELL education professional development activities due to their busy work schedules and their geographic locations (Gandara, Maxwell-Jolly & Driscoll, 2005). Additionally, these professional development opportunities are usually one-shot or stand-alone workshops that fail to change teachers’ perceptions and teaching methods (Uzuner-Smith, 2014). This suggests that the structure of professional development opportunities should be changed to prepare mainstream teachers to teach ELLs. They should cover all of the gaps cited above and should