Chapter 13

Moving Toward a Diversity Plus Teacher Education:
Approaches, Challenges, and Possibilities in Preparing Teachers for English Language Learners

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ABSTRACT

Building upon existing research on preparing teachers for English language learners (ELLs), this chapter examines current practices and challenges of integrating ELL education into teacher preparation programs in the U.S. The analyses reveal sporadic efforts of ELL integration into the American teacher training institutions. Most programs focus on cultural diversity rather than language and linguistic challenges that all teachers will also encounter in their future classrooms. Findings also reveal several challenges in integrating language and linguistic diversity into teacher education: a lack of faculty expertise in ELLs, programmatic constraints, and minimum policy support. The findings suggest that teacher education programs need to extend the current focus on cultural diversity to equip future teachers with teaching competencies to address the increasing sociolinguistic complexities in the classrooms.

TEACHERS OF ELLs NEED DIVERSITY PLUS SKILLS

English language learners (ELLs) now constitute one-fourth of public school students in the U.S., but their educational goals and needs are yet well addressed. There exists a persistent achievement gap between ELLs and their native-speaking peers, and ELLs continue to have disproportionately high dropout rates (Sheng, Sheng, & Anderson, 2011), low graduation rates (Menken, 2010), low college enrolment and completion rates (Kohler & Lazarín, 2007), and overrepresentation in special education placement (Sullivan, 2011). One factor that contributes to the status quo of ELLs is teachers’ ill-preparedness to
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Teach them. Several U.S. studies have revealed that teacher education courses neither sensitize pre-service teachers to cultural and linguistic differences they are expected to encounter in their future classrooms nor provide them with real tools and strategies to address these disparities (Durgunoglu and Hughes, 2010). Therefore, in this era of testing, standardization, and accountability, teachers’ lack of preparation for cultural and linguistic diversity prevents them from providing support and targeting appropriate instruction for ELLs (Colombo, McMakin, Jacobs, & Shestok, 2013).

One prevailing assumption about preparing teachers for ELLs is that teaching ELLs “is seen as a matter of pedagogical adaptations that can easily be incorporated into a mainstream teacher’s existing repertoire of instructional strategies for a diverse classroom” (de Jong & Harper, 2005, p. 118). This “just good teaching” assumption expresses that teachers’ existing repertoire of “best practices” that works for native English-speaking students or students with special needs would also work for ELLs and therefore, teachers need no special training for this population (de Jong & Harper, 2005, 2008). According to de Jong & Harper (2008), this perspective “renders invisible those educational needs that set ELLs apart from US-born, fluent English-speaking students,” and “leads to classroom practices that, although not necessarily harmful, are not always effective in meeting the needs of ELLs” (p. 129).

This perspective has led to the neglect of integrating ELL content into the existing teacher education courses, and hence under-preparedness of teachers for teaching ELLs (Li & Martinez, 2014). One common practice in teacher education programs is to treat diversity requirements as ELL requirements believing that if teachers are prepared for diversity issues, they are ready to teach ELLs (Lucas & Villegas, 2011). Consequently, most teacher education programs focus on preparing pre-service teachers to learn about understanding and accommodating cultural and ethnic differences, rather than on learning about language and linguistic differences as well as pedagogical tools to address these disparities (Lucas & Villegas, 2011; Tellez & Waxman, 2006; Levine, Howard & Moss, 2014). In the U.S., state requirements for teacher certification often focus more on diversity requirements (though vast variation exists across states) (Akiba, Cockrell, Simmons, Han, & Agarwal, 2010). Accordingly, most state examinations for teachers include more diversity than language requirements (Samson & Collins, 2012). It is not surprising that the two largest teacher education organizations in the U.S., the Association of Teacher Educators and the American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education, have devoted “great attention to preparing teachers for culturally diverse students while paying little attention to teachers who will face language diversity” (Tellez & Waxman, 2006, p. 9).

Empirical studies on in-service teachers have found that effective teachers of ELLs have different skills and that just good teaching with attention only to cultural diversity is not enough for teachers of ELLs. Master, Loeb, Whitney, and Wyckoff (2012) surveyed 1221 math teachers in the New York City (NYC) public school system, (which includes a vast and diverse population of ELLs) and asked detailed questions about their teacher preparation experiences and their in-service training in their first year. Their analysis revealed that characteristics associated with more effective teachers for students, in general, were not necessarily related to effective math teachers of ELL students. As well, they found that a variety of ELL-specific instructional experiences or training predicted differential effectiveness with ELL students, particularly among novice teachers. They concluded that closing the ELL achievement gap may benefit from greater attention to those specific ELL-related instructional skills.

However, what specific skills and expertise that teachers need to know and how they should know them remains a question. This paper presents a synthesis of the knowledge base that teachers of ELLs need based on a review of research articles published in the past two decades. This is followed by a description of the current practices that teacher education programs have undertaken to integrate the