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Bilingual and ESL Pre-service Teachers Learn about Effective Instruction for ELLs through Meaningful Collaboration¹

Estudiantes de Educación Bilingüe y Maestros de Inglés como Segunda Lengua Aprenden sobre la Enseñanza Efectiva del Inglés por medio de la Colaboración Significativa

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a study conducted to identify the perceptions of bilingual and ESL pre-service teachers regarding the integration of a collaborative service learning project in a key course of their teacher preparation program. Pre-, process, and final reflective essays were written by participants as they engaged in the development of an ESL unit to teach language through content to ELLs. The analysis of participants' reflections revealed that pre-service teachers connect the learning they acquire in their teacher education program with their life experiences, which contributes to their identity formation as prospective teachers of ELLs. In addition, participants discovered the value of collaboration in their professional development as they applied and articulated effective practices in the instruction of ELLs. The integration of meaningful collaborative projects and reflective exercises in teacher education programs is suggested.

Key words: bilingual teacher education; ESL teacher education, collaboration, reflection, effective practices for ELLs, identity development

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Resumen

Este artículo presenta los resultados de una investigación que se realizó con el propósito de identificar las percepciones de estudiantes de educación bilingüe y docentes en formación de inglés como segunda lengua en relación a la integración de un proyecto colaborativo de enseñanza en un curso fundamental de su programa de formación como maestros. Los participantes escribieron ensayos de reflexión al inicio y al final a medida que se involucraban en el desarrollo de una unidad de inglés como segunda lengua en la que integraron la enseñanza del lenguaje con la enseñanza de contenidos académicos. El análisis de las reflexiones reveló que los futuros maestros establecieron conexiones entre el nuevo aprendizaje y sus vivencias, lo que contribuye al desarrollo de su identidad como futuros maestros de aprendices de inglés. Asimismo, los participantes descubrieron el valor de la colaboración en su desarrollo profesional a medida que aplicaron y articularon prácticas efectivas en la instrucción de los aprendices de inglés. Se sugiere la integración de proyectos significativos y colaborativos así como ejercicios de reflexión en los programas de formación de maestros.

Palabras clave: formación de maestros bilingües, formación de maestros de inglés como segunda lengua, colaboración, reflexión, prácticas efectivas para los aprendices de inglés, desarrollo de identidad

Resumo

Este artigo apresenta os resultados de uma pesquisa que se realizou com o propósito de identificar as percepções de estudantes de educação bilíngue e docentes em formação de inglês como segunda língua em relação à integração de um projeto colaborativo de ensino em um curso fundamental do seu programa de formação como mestres. Os participantes escreveram ensaios de reflexão no início e no final, na medida em que se envolviam no desenvolvimento de uma unidade de inglês como segunda língua na que integraram o ensino da linguagem com o ensino de conteúdos acadêmicos. A análise das reflexões revelou que os futuros mestres estabeleceram conexões entre a nova aprendizagem e suas vivências, o que contribui ao desenvolvimento da sua identidade como futuros mestres de aprendizes de inglês. Da mesma forma, os participantes descobriram o valor da colaboração no seu desenvolvimento profissional na medida em que aplicaram e articularam práticas efetivas na instrução dos aprendizes de inglês. Sugere-se a integração de projetos significativos e colaborativos, assim como exercícios de reflexão nos programas de formação de mestres.

Palavras chave: formação de mestres bilíngues, formação de mestres de inglês como segunda língua, colaboração, reflexão, práticas efetivas para os aprendizes de inglês, desenvolvimento de identidade

Introduction

The number of English language learners (ELLs) in the United States continues to increase (Genese, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005; Goldenberg, 2008; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007), and many of their teachers are not qualified to provide them with adequate instruction (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). For example, more than 40% of teachers in the United States taught at least one ELL in the 2001-2002 school year. Of those teachers, only about 23% had a bilingual or English as a second language (ESL) certification (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005). Therefore, the preparation of bilingual and ESL teachers is a topic that deserves attention. In an effort to monitor and improve the quality of experiences acquired through a bilingual and ESL teacher education program, a study was designed to explore the perceptions of bilingual and ESL pre-service teachers regarding the integration of a collaborative service learning project in a course that is a key component of their teacher preparation program.

Literature Review

Service Learning

Service learning can be defined as “a teaching method that engages students in service to their communities” (Bollin, 2007 p. 178). The integration of service learning projects in the United States is increasing both at the K-12 and college level. The goal of service learning is to develop responsible citizens who are committed to addressing social problems (Bollin, 2007). Service learning can be integrated into a particular college course (Bollin, 2007; Boyle-Baise, 2002). Bollin (2007) explains that a service learning course has several characteristics. First, students learn through carefully planned activities that meet real community needs. Second, students apply their newly-acquired knowledge to real situations within their community. In addition, students learn beyond the classroom and are encouraged to care for others. Finally, students must engage in guided reflection about their experience in the service learning course (Bollin, 2007; Boyle-Baise, 2002). Service learning follows constructivist principles as students build their own knowledge by being actively engaged in meaningful tasks (Miller & Gonzalez, 2009).

Service learning projects are learner-centered, meaningful, and purposeful because students are able to use their knowledge to meet the needs of the community. Similarly, instruction for ELLs should be learner-centered, meaningful, and purposeful (Freeman & Freeman,

1998). Therefore, bilingual and ESL pre-service teachers must learn to design instruction with these characteristics.

Types of ELLs

In order to design effective instruction for ELLs, pre-service teachers must understand the students whom they will teach. Teachers must understand that ELLs are very diverse in their personal and schooling experiences as well as in their academic needs (Maxwell-Jolly, Gándara, & Mendez Benavides, 2007). Freeman and Freeman (2011) distinguish between three types of ELLs: newly arrived students with adequate schooling, newly arrived students with limited or interrupted schooling, and long term ELLs. Newly arrived students with adequate schooling generally do better in school than the other two groups. This is in part because students with higher levels of first language (L1) development do better than those who did not receive sufficient instruction in L1 (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Long-term ELLs comprise the largest group of ELLs. In fact, close to 80% of ELLs at the elementary level and close to 60% of ELLs at the secondary level are US born (Goldenberg, 2008). Moreover, long-term ELLs are “falling through the cracks... [they] are likely to be segregated in their classrooms and in their communities... They are also likely to be taught by teachers who lack the preparation and skills to meet their academic needs” (Horwitz, Uro, Price-Baugh, Simon, Uzzell, Lewis, & Casserly, 2009, pp. 3-4).

As can be noted, ELLs conform a heterogeneous group with needs that are distinct from one another (NCTE, 2008). It is not possible to place all ELLs in the same category because they come from different backgrounds, have different levels of English proficiency, and have different levels of academic proficiency (Goldenberg, 2008; NCTE, 2008; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Although there is not a single answer to address the needs of ELLs (NCTE, 2008), bilingual and ESL pre-service teachers may benefit by becoming familiar with effective practices that will allow the students to succeed both linguistically and academically.

Effective Practices for ELLs

Teaching language and content. One way in which teachers can address the needs of ELLs is by combining the teaching of language and content. ELLs need to acquire the English language, but they also need to

acquire academic concepts. In fact, Short & Fitzsimmons (2007) explain that adolescent ELLs have “double the work” as their English dominant counterparts since they must not only learn the academic content, but they must learn it in a new language (p. 1). In addition, in order to do well academically, ELLs must develop both conversational and academic language proficiency in English (Goldenberg, 2008; Harper & de Jong, 2004). Cummins (2008) explains that academic language is the language of school. It is the language register that students need in order to follow instruction and to complete assignments. By teaching the English language in combination with academic content, ELLs are given the opportunity to develop the academic language they need.

There are a variety of approaches to teach language through content (Herrera & Murry, 2011). Integrated content-based instruction (ICB) integrates language and content by providing students with authentic activities and real-life experiences that facilitate the use of academic language in relevant ways. Sheltered instruction is another approach to integrate language and content instruction. Krashen introduced sheltered instruction in the 1980s as a way to safeguard ELLs from negative affective factors that may interfere with their acquisition of English. Since then, a series of variations have developed, such as content-based English language teaching (CELT), specially designed academic instruction in English (SDAIE), and the sheltered instruction observation protocol (SIOP), among others (Herrera & Murry, 2011).

When language is being taught through content, instruction should be organized around themes (Freeman & Freeman, 2007; NCTE, 2008; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Freeman and Freeman (2007) explain that thematic instruction allows students to make connections between the different content areas and facilitates academic language development which is repeated naturally. In addition, Freeman and Freeman (1998) suggest that instruction for ELLs should have meaning and purpose. When ELLs see that language serves a real purpose and experience the need to communicate using the English language either orally or in writing, they are more likely to complete the tasks presented in the new language.

Learner-centered instruction that values students’ first languages and cultures. ELLs need opportunities to use English in meaningful and relevant ways (Freeman & Freeman, 1998; Goldenberg, 2008). Tapping on students’ backgrounds makes instruction relevant and learner-centered. Meltzer and Hamann (2005) stress the importance of connecting instruction to students’ prior experiences and background knowledge. ELLs comprehend reading material better when it relates

to their cultures (Goldenberg, 2008). In addition, ELLs benefit when clarifications and explanations are provided in their first language (Goldenberg, 2008). Moreover, students' native language is a resource that facilitates English language development (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005; NCTE, 2008).

Providing comprehensible input. Krashen (2008) explains that individuals acquire a second language when they comprehend the messages they receive. He calls this comprehensible input. Teachers of ELLs must provide students with comprehensible input when teaching language through content by integrating a variety of sheltered strategies into their lessons. Sheltered instruction is used to adapt instruction to the students' level of language proficiency when teaching content to ELLs in English. Instruction is made comprehensible and academic language development is promoted (Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2013). There is a wide variety of sheltered strategies such as the use of visuals, realia, and manipulatives, adapted speech to the level of students' language proficiency, controlled vocabulary, collaboration among students, etc. (Echevarría, et al., 2013).

Integration of the four language skills. ELLs should receive instruction that promotes the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English simultaneously (Freeman & Freeman, 1998; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Research shows that reading and writing skills support one another, and that literacy is facilitated by oral language development (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). ELLs can acquire academic language when the language classroom provides integrated opportunities to listen, speak, read, and write (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007) about content in collaboration with others (Harper & de Jong, 2004).

Promoting social interaction. As mentioned before, ELLs need opportunities to develop both social and academic language proficiency. When students interact in the language classroom, they are given the opportunity to use English in meaningful and authentic ways (Goldenberg, 2008). Research studies have shown that group work contributes to raise the achievement level of ELLs when they collaborate on meaningful tasks (Aguirre-Muñoz & Amabisca, 2010). For example, Brooks and Thurston (2010) found that ELLs are more academically engaged in content area classrooms when they interact in small groups. Therefore, teachers of ELLs should promote cooperative learning (Harper & de Jong, 2004). Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1994) explain that cooperative learning has five essential elements: positive interdependence, individual accountability, interpersonal and

small group skills, face-to-face interaction, and group processing. In cooperative learning tasks, students depend on each other to succeed while each group member is required to do their part, and each student is held accountable for knowing all of the material.

Collaboration among teachers. Not only do ELLs benefit from collaborating among themselves, but they benefit when their teachers collaborate in the planning and delivery of instruction (Russell, 2012; Short, Cloud, Morris, & Motta, 2012; York-Barr, Ghere, & Sommerness, 2007). York-Barr, et al. (2007) found that collaboration among teachers fosters improvement in ELLs' academic achievement, behavior, and relationships. Collaboration among teachers can take different forms. For example, ESL and mainstream teachers can plan instruction together and even team-teach (York-Barr, et al., 2007). Collaboration can also occur as teachers receive professional development on meeting the needs of ELLs (Brancard & Quinnwilliams, 2012; Martin-Beltrán & Peercy, 2012). Teachers can also mentor one another on how to provide effective instruction for ELLs (Spezzini, Austin, Abbott, & Littleton, 2009).

Teacher Identity

Pre-service teachers are in the process of developing their identity as educators. Teacher identity formation is shaped by the individuals' past experiences in combination with the newly acquired knowledge and experiences in their teacher preparation program (Bustos Flores, Riojas Clark, Guerra, & Sánchez, 2008). In the case of bilingual and ESL pre-service teachers, their first language and culture also shape their identity formation as prospective teachers of ELLs (Galindo & Olgún, 1996).

As was previously mentioned, due to the need to prepare highly skilled teachers who can address the needs of a growing ELL population, a collaborative service learning project was designed to help bilingual and ESL pre-service teachers understand best practices in language teaching and help shape their identity as educators. A study was conducted to identify bilingual and ESL pre-service teachers' perceptions regarding this collaborative project.

Methodology

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of a collaborative service learning project in which bilingual and ESL pre-service teachers created an ESL unit to teach language through content to English language learners (ELLs). The aim of the research study was examined by answering two research questions: 1) What is the effect of service learning on the professional development of pre-service teachers? and 2) What is the effect of service learning on the comprehension of second language teaching methods by bilingual and ESL pre-service teachers?

Context and Participants

This study was conducted in a Hispanic serving institution in south Texas. The sample for this study consisted of 53 juniors and seniors majoring in elementary ESL or bilingual education. Participants were enrolled in one section of a course on foundations of bilingual education and ESL during one of three semesters in which the study was conducted. There were 49 female and 4 male pre-service teachers who participated in the study. All but one of the participants were Hispanic.

Data Collection Instruments

Part of the course requirements of the foundations course in which participants were enrolled included designing instruction to teach English to ELLs through content. Because the city where the study was conducted identified the need to educate the children of the community about how to properly take care of their pets, pre-service teachers were asked to create an ESL unit organized around a pet welfare theme. Participants were asked to include activities that children in the community could complete to learn about proper pet care. Participants were informed that the best activities would be donated to be used with the students in the community to instruct them on pet welfare. Participants worked in groups to create their ESL units which included lessons, booklets, coloring books, skits, and games, among other activities. As they developed their units, pre-service teachers applied their newly-acquired knowledge about second language teaching methods with a real and meaningful purpose.

In order to collect data to answer the two research questions, the principal investigator asked participants to write three reflective

essays (Bussert-Webb, 2009). The first essay, or pre-reflective essay, was written before engaging in the pet welfare project. The process reflective essay was written as pre-service teachers were engaged in the development of their ESL units. The post reflective essay was written after participants had completed their projects. The reflective essays were part of the course requirements as was the development of the ESL unit on pet welfare. However, participation in this study was voluntary. Therefore, the data analyzed includes only those reflective essays from students who agreed to participate in the study. Figure 1 includes the topics on which participants were asked to elaborate in each of their essays.

Pre- Reflective Essay Major	Process Reflective Essay	Post Reflective Essay
Expected date of graduation	Description of individual work	Acquired learning
Ethnicity	Description of group work	Connection to the course
Educational background	Similarities and/or differences between the quality and quantity of their work in this project as compared to other projects	Service learning
Experience with service learning	Service learning	Final comments
Experience creating curriculum materials for ELLs		
Expected learning		
Anxieties and/or questions		

Figure 1. Reflective essay topics

Data Analysis and Interpretation

A systematic textual analysis of reflective essays was conducted. The reflective essays were read as they were graded during the semester they were submitted. The essays were read a second time after the completion of the third semester in which the data was collected. All pre-reflective essays from the three semesters were read first. The data was segmented by topics. Subsequently, a thematic analysis was conducted by focusing on repeated ideas. A block and file approach was used to organize the resulting themes. Through this approach, data segments are grouped in columns with categorizing headings (Grbich,

2007). The same procedure was followed with the process reflective essays and with the final reflective essays.

Results

The data analysis revealed a series of themes regarding the perceptions of bilingual and ESL pre-service teachers about the impact of the collaborative service learning project in their preparation as teachers of ELLs and also in the development of their own identities as teachers. These identities were beginning to shape as participants' previous personal experiences intersected with the formal instruction they were receiving in the college classroom.

Pre-Reflective Essays

Development of bilingual and ESL teacher identity. Participants elaborated on their background in their pre-reflective essay. As they explained their schooling experiences, it was evident that 20 participants were ELLs themselves. In addition, 19 of those 20 participants were also immigrants to the United States. As will be explained below, most participants fell under the category of immigrants with adequate schooling, although there were a few with interrupted schooling and some long term ELLs. As participants shared their ethnicity and educational background, several themes emerged: First, participants expressed pride in their Hispanic background (n=4). One participant wrote, "Being a Mexican gives me motivation to reach all my goals in life because I want to raise my culture up high and never become assimilated to the point my identity falls apart." Another participant elaborated on her Hispanic identity:

Ethnicity, for example makes me a strong and open minded individual, especially being Hispanic I get to take the best out of two cultures and take them and make one of my own. I was molded to who I am because of my race, traditions, culture and family.

Second, many participants shared their childhood experiences, which coincide with the different types of ELLs they will encounter in their future classrooms. Some participants described themselves with the characteristics of immigrant students with adequate schooling (n=9):

At the age of 10 years old, my family decided to move to ... [a city in Texas] in search of a better life and education for my brother and me. Living in... [a city in Mexico], I always attended school and was

an excellent student. When I moved here ..., my grades remained the same. I was getting good grades on all content areas, but I had so much difficulty speaking English. At home everyone spoke Spanish, and I only heard English at school...

Participants who displayed the characteristics of ELLs who arrive in the US with adequate schooling struggled with the language more than with the academic content, but were capable of succeeding due to the academic and literacy skills they had developed in their first language:

When I first came to the United States, I didn't imagine it would be this hard to adapt myself to school. I entered middle school without English and the school placed me in an ESL classroom where I learned some English. The rest of the content classes were all in English and that is where I had trouble. I took this opportunity as a challenge that I accomplished already. Before coming to the United States, I lived... in Mexico, where I had received my previous schooling. I attended elementary in Mexico with a high level of education and with good grades and I think that helped a lot when I came here. I knew the content, but not the language. As time passed, I learned the language and now I am here in college ready to graduate next year.

Other participants elaborated on characteristics that described them as ELLs with interrupted schooling (n=2):

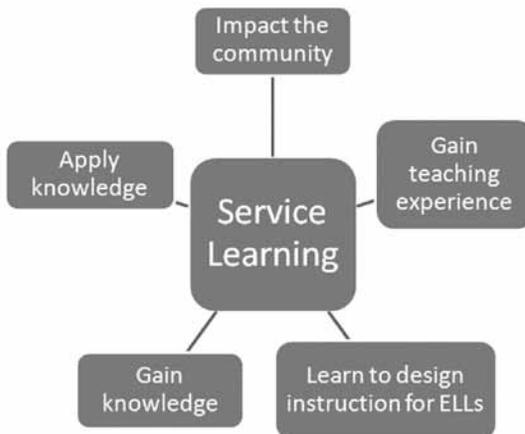
I have now come to realize that I wasn't taught using the best methods. I was a bilingual student, whose parents only spoke Spanish. My parents had very little education in their native country. I was also a migrant who traveled frequently up North. My schooling was at times interrupted, and was exposed to different methods of teaching which didn't encourage the acquisition of my first language and only focused on acquiring English. This class has helped me realize why I struggle in certain areas. Throughout the years I have struggled to communicate orally in either language and although I have gotten better in communicating in English, I find myself struggling to communicate in Spanish. I have always wanted to help students such as me and I hope to get the opportunity to do so soon.

Finally, a few participants described their educational experiences with characteristics of long term English learners (n=3):

I grew up as a bilingual student, but unfortunately the bilingual program I was in was not a very good quality program. Due to the low quality bilingual program that I was in, I never fully acquired my first language and my English is not as great as I would like for it to be. This is why I want to be a bilingual teacher so that I can help students in maintaining their first language and also be successful in English.

The above examples display the intersection of personal past experiences with the knowledge acquired in the college classroom, shaping the identity of the participants as prospective teachers of ELLs. Participants expressed a desire to impart effective instruction for ELLs with whose backgrounds they can relate. Participants also elaborated on the development of their bilingual skills. Some participants were grateful to their bilingual and ESL teachers who helped them succeed in schools.

Expectations regarding service learning. Participants also elaborated on their expectations about the service learning project in their pre-reflective essays. It is important to keep in mind that these reflective essays were written before beginning to work on their ESL unit on pet welfare. There were several themes that summarized participants' expectations about service learning, which are represented in Figure 2.



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Figure 2. Participants' expectations of service learning

First, bilingual and ESL pre-service teachers wanted to impact the community (n=16). For example, one participant wrote, “with this

project we can make a difference and start the education process early and in turn, break the terrible cycle of animal abuse and negligence.” Second, participants wanted to gain teaching experience through service learning (n=13) as one participant explained: “I am looking forward to begin my service learning to gain proper skills and knowledge of my future career.” Third, participants expected to learn about planning lessons specifically for ELLs (n=11): “I expect to learn how to create appropriate curriculum materials, especially for ELLs as I am a novice in this area. In addition, I am also expecting to learn what curriculum works best with ELLs...” Fourth, participants wanted to gain general knowledge as they engaged in the project (n=6). One participant wrote, “I would like the opportunity to do service learning not only to help others, but to learn from it.” Finally, participants expected to apply what they learned in the classroom (n=4). One participant stated, “I am looking forward to experience service learning and be able to put into work what I am learning.”

Process Reflective Essays

Participants wrote their process reflective essays as they were working in groups designing their ESL units on pet welfare. There were three themes that emerged from participants’ reflections, which are depicted in Figure 3.



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Figure 3. Participants’ perceptions of collaborative service learning project

The most salient theme that emerged from the process reflective essays was the value participants placed in cooperative learning (n=31). Participants elaborated extensively on how they communicated with group members, how they divided the work, and how they managed their time. They also appreciated the structure of the assignment and the grading system which fostered positive interdependence as well as individual accountability. Regarding positive interdependence, one participant wrote, “Everyone is doing their part because everyone has a different topic working towards the same goal.” Another participant elaborated on individual accountability by stating:

In other projects we have not had much equality. Some group members had more work or did more work than others. Here we each have one lesson to do. We write what we are contributing to the project as a whole we keep track of what we are writing, what information we have obtained and so on.

In addition, participants emphasized the importance of communication in cooperative work. For example one participant wrote, “The important thing is to always have good communication skills and take advantage of the many ways in which we can relay information to each other.” Another participant explained, “Our communication is great and we really work well together. We have been emailing each other back and forth and have not had any disagreements.” Participants also realized the benefit of working with others to refine their ideas: “Doing it with a group brings so many ideas to the table.” Another participant wrote,

As a group we gave each other an opportunity to toss out all of our ideas and then go through the process of tweaking the ideas until we came to an overall consensus of what topics and different activities we could use.

Participants also expressed in their process reflective essays that they were gaining a variety of knowledge as they worked on their ESL unit (n=18). They elaborated on how much they learned about pet welfare through the extensive research they had to conduct to create a unit on the topic (n=6). They also elaborated on how they were learning about pedagogy and second language teaching methods (n=8). For example, one participant wrote, “I never thought that a theme like pet welfare could be taught through content such as history, mathematics, and science but I learned it sure can.” Participants also expressed that they improved their academic skills (n=2) and grew professionally (n=2), for example through improved self-confidence.

In their process reflective essays, participants also indicated that the collaborative service learning project implied more work than other projects completed for other classes (n=13). They found that this project required careful work to create learner-centered lessons. Moreover, they were very clear in indicating that the real purpose behind the project made it meaningful and encouraged them to work harder. One participant wrote, “I have had to work much harder. Service learning projects require for us as students to deliver the information in a way that will be beneficial, interesting, and fun for students to learn.” Another participant explained, “In order to complete this project successfully, we would have to work as a team and treat this project as if we were actually preparing to teach our students because ultimately it may be used to do just that.”

Finally, participants explained that the ESL unit on pet welfare was helping them design learner-centered instruction (n=6). For example, one participant wrote, “We are making a lesson that is relevant to the students’ lives, and this is how students are motivated to learn.” Another participant expressed that “the most difficult aspect of this project is trying to create an activity that meets all of the requirements but yet is still fun and engaging for the students,” while a third participant explained that they “also had to make sure that the quality of the work would provide meaningful connections to the students.”

Final Reflective Essays

After participants completed their projects and presented the outcomes to the class, they were asked to write a final essay in which they reflected on their overall perception of the project as well as on their understanding of service learning.

Learning effective practices for ELLs. Participants continued to elaborate on the value of cooperation and communication in the learning process. They also expressed that they learned from other groups as they listened to their presentations. Most importantly, bilingual and ESL pre-service teachers comprehended second language teaching methods as they were successfully able to apply them in their work and elaborated extensively about how to teach ELLs appropriately. Figure 4 displays the effective practices for teaching ELLs that participants included in their final reflective essays.

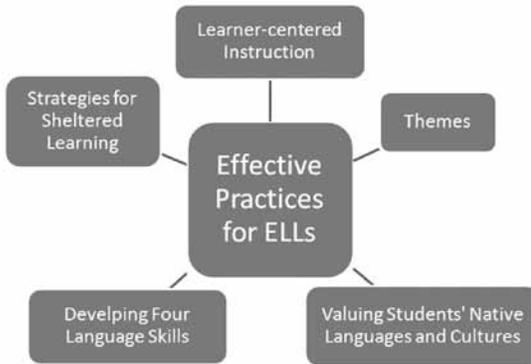


Figure 4. Effective practices for teaching ELLs

Participants gave examples of the learning they acquired when engaging in this project and on how they integrated effective practices in their ESL units. One important category in this theme was valuing ELLs' native languages and cultures (n=16). One participant explained that through this project she “learned how to connect the student’s first language and background with the lesson and curriculum.” Even though the project was designed to teach ESL, participants understood that when teaching ELLs, their first languages must be valued, respected, and used as resources, even when teaching in English, which differentiated this project from other projects that participants had developed for courses where the focus was not ELLs. Participants responded positively to this aspect of the project. For example, one participant wrote, “Something that I really liked about this project was that students have the opportunity to use their first language which can help build their self-esteem and motiv[ate] them to freely give their opinions and engage in this project.” Another participant expressed, “This service learning project helped me learn and understand that respecting a student’s primary language is the most important factor and it should be above anything else.”

Participants also reflected on the integration of sheltered strategies when teaching ELLs (n=15). One participant wrote, “I learned to use visuals, body language, and manipulative objects.” Another participant explained,

The purpose of our Pet Welfare Unit is to teach ELLs English through comprehensible material. In order to accomplish this we have learned that we need to use... [sheltered] strategies, for example, visuals, videos, an over-head projector, gestures, as many things in order to make it comprehensible.”

Another important effective practice when teaching ELLs is the integration of the four language skills into instruction. Participants successfully acquired this concept as they engaged in the development of their project (n=16). In this respect, one participant wrote,

Incorporating reading, writing, speaking, and listening was also not complicated. I just had to be creative with my activities to use all four of the ... [language] skills in a few simple short activities. I tried my best to make them flow smoothly and not be choppy or out of place.

Participants also learned the importance of providing ELLs with learner-centered instruction (n=10). One participant explained that “it is essential to value the students’ culture and relate it during their learning experiences.” Another participant wrote that it is important to ensure that they are teaching “something they [ELLs] are interested in... [so they can] have fun as well.” A third participant clearly elaborated on this point: “It is simply a learner centered project that allows students to have fun because the learning activities are meaningful, authentic, and designed for the students to have fun; students get to choose from a variety of them.”

Finally, participants also understood the importance of organizing instruction based on themes when teaching language through content (n=7). One participant mentioned, “During this project I learned that if you include in your lesson relevant topics like in this case ‘pets welfare’ the students get more engaged, and they participate more...” Another participant explained, “the children can relate thru [sic] a thematic instruction which will make it easier for the children to understand.”

One of the participants summarized how the project helped her understand effective practices for ELLs as follows:

By using the different strategies in our lesson... [ELLs would] be able to listen, speak, read, and writing [sic] through our unit service learning project. We had to make our unit engaging to the students, but at the same time meaningful. I believed our overall service learning unit was focusing on strengths and not weakness[es] of students. The material was designed to meet the students’ level academically through content...

Understanding service learning. In their final reflective essays participants also elaborated on their understanding of service learning. Some participants were able to explain the concept of service learning (n=15). One participant explained it is an “opportunity that we as students have to make an impact in our community to apply what we

have we learned in our courses.” Another participant wrote, “It is great to know that my group efforts could make a difference in showing children the importance of taking care of their pets.” A third participant expressed, “I have come to understand that I can help the community in many ways without having to be physically there.” Nevertheless, other participants wished they would have had the opportunity to interact with the children as part of their service learning project (n=5). For example, one participant explained, “I thought it was a little unusual since my previous classes literally required our presence in a precise place” when conducting service learning.

One very interesting finding was that some participants conceptualized service learning as a practice they could implement in their future classrooms (n=9). One participant explained, “I hope to use this method one day in my own classroom because students will be able to take with them meaningful information about the topic I choose to teach.” Several participants envisioned their future students engaging in service learning (n=9). For example, one participant explained that service learning “helps students enhance their academic skills and to become conscious about community problems.” Finally, a few participants (n=4) viewed this project as a way to communicate the importance of contributing to their community as was stated by the participant who wrote that service learning would “give our students and our community valuable material to inform them about important issues like pet welfare.”

Conclusions

A collaborative service learning project was implemented in a course on foundations of bilingual education and ESL for three semesters. The results of the study indicated that the collaborative project had a positive effect on the professional development of bilingual and ESL pre-service teachers.

Participants valued cooperation and communication among peers as they engaged in the development of their ESL units on pet welfare. The essential elements of cooperative learning identified by Johnson, et al. (1994) were embedded into the structure of the project. Participants discovered the importance of well-structured cooperative learning projects. Moreover, participants realized the importance of cooperation as part of their professional development, as one participant explained: “With this experience, I would like to be able to team-teach or at least plan lessons with someone else in the future when I become a teacher.” This type of attitude will facilitate the type of teacher collaboration that

has been found to positively impact the achievement of ELLs (Russell, 2012; Short, et al., 2012; York-Barr, et al., 2007).

In addition, as pre-service teachers reflected on their work, the shaping of their identities as teachers of ELLs was evidenced. Pre-service teachers shared personal experiences and connected those to the newly acquired knowledge in their teacher preparation program. This finding is aligned with Bustos Flores', et al. (2008) claim that educators begin to develop their identities before they start teaching, with factors such as personal experiences and teacher education playing important roles in their identity formation.

Interestingly, the concept of service learning was clearly developed by about one third of the participants. The rest of the participants elaborated on the possibilities of incorporating service learning in their future teaching, or on the value of sharing information with students regarding issues that impact the community. This may have been due to the lack of contact with students throughout the project. It can be hypothesized that, if pre-service teachers would have delivered their lessons to students instead of donating their activities to bilingual teachers, they might had been able to appreciate more the service they provided through their work. Based on this finding, a service learning project was designed where bilingual and ESL pre-service teachers would work directly with ELLs providing support in the students' classrooms. Further research will be conducted to assess pre-service teachers' perceptions of that service learning project.

The results of the study have valuable implications for teacher preparation programs. It is evident from the findings that pre-service teachers engage in the projects and assignments given in their coursework with the intention of maximizing their learning and with the hopes of implementing the acquired learning in their future classrooms. Therefore, teacher educators should carefully design meaningful and purposeful assignments as part of the professional development of future teachers. In addition, teacher educators benefit from assessing the perceptions of pre-service teachers regarding their experiences in their teacher education program. Moreover, reflective exercises are ideal to assess the meaning pre-service teachers extract from the instruction they receive and how they connect such meaning with personal experiences to further refine their developing identities as teachers.

Finally, participants were able to clearly articulate effective practices for second language instruction. They expressed the importance of researching topics of interest to provide meaningful, learner-centered instruction to their future ELL students. Moreover,

participants gained knowledge about effective practices in the instruction of ELLs, such as integrating sheltered strategies and the four language skills, and valuing students' first languages and cultures as they planned a unit that integrated language and content instruction for ELLs. This collaborative project had a positive effect in the preparation of bilingual and ESL teachers, as was expressed by one participant: "I learned that with proper research and preparation I can teach ESL students. My confidence in myself and my abilities has grown." Given the great need for well-prepared teachers of ELLs in the United States (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007), it is important to engage bilingual and ESL pre-service teachers in meaningful projects that help them develop the necessary skills to take on the challenge of educating ELLs.

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