

Preparing Mainstream Teachers for Multilingual Classrooms

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Abstract

Increasingly, mainstream teachers rather than specialist language teachers (English as a Second Language, bilingual teachers) are expected to work with English language learners (ELLs) in their classrooms. This reality has drawn attention to the quality and content of the teacher preparation for this group of ELL teachers. Situated within this framework, this article problematizes an acceptance of mainstream classrooms as English-only, monolingual learning environments in mainstream teacher preparation. While English is the dominant medium of instruction in mainstream classrooms, a monolingual approach is problematic as it fails to draw attention to the role that ELLs' native language resources play in learning. The article thus advocates for ensuring that mainstream teachers embrace and know how to engage in bilingual practices, broadly defined.

Introduction

English language learners (ELLs) continue to outpace the non-ELL population in K-12 school enrollment (Shin & Kominski, 2010; Uro & Barrio, 2013) with the largest increases observed in regions with traditionally low numbers of ELLs (Ramsey & O'Day, 2010). 'New destination' states such as Georgia, North Dakota, and South Carolina have experienced a more than 200% increase in their ELL population, which has put unprecedented demands on schools and has created an urgent need for large-scale teacher professional development (Mikow-Porto et al., 2004).

These ELL enrollment increases combine with political, economic, and other educational trends to create a situation where many ELLs are placed fulltime or for most of the day in mainstream rather than specialist language programs. Schools with low incidence ELL populations and/or those experiencing a rapid influx of ELLs in a relatively short time may not always have access to the necessary human and material resources to support ELLs solely through a specialist language program, such as a bilingual or English as a Second Language (ESL) program. In these cases, administrators often resort to mainstream placements for their ELLs. In 2003, nearly 50% of all ELLs received minimal (fewer than 10 hours) or no special services, compared to 32% a decade earlier (Center on Education Policy, 2005). It is likely that these percentages are even higher today, particularly in rural districts (American Association for Employment in Education, 2008; Flynn & Hill, 2005). This trend does not imply that instructional time that is dedicated to specialized language and literacy development is not necessary or that the reduction in specialist language teachers and programs is necessarily a positive trend. In fact, a recent report of the Council of Great City Schools (Horwitz et al., 2009) identified the presence of specialized ELL expertise at all decision-making levels in successful school districts.

The increase in ELL mainstream classroom placement has been accompanied by targeted accountability for ELLs under No Child Left Behind. As a result, attention has shifted from bilingual and ESL classrooms and specialist teachers to what happens in mainstream classrooms and how to effectively prepare mainstream teachers to work with ELLs. Most states are only in the beginning stages of including requirements for preservice mainstream teacher preparation and/or developing policies for systematically providing ELL-related inservice professional development for practicing teachers on a statewide basis (Menken & Antuñez, 2001; Quality Counts, 2009). A recent study by Akiba, Cockrell, Simmons, Han and Agarwal, (2010) suggests that preservice teacher education programs pay closer attention to cultural diversity and multicultural education through a 'human relations approach' than through an approach that supports teachers in using students' cultural experiences as resources for teaching. In this study, California distinguished itself by its focus on *linguistic* diversity, as opposed to issues of culture and race, which tend to be the focus of courses related to 'diversity.' Uro and Barrio (2013) report that, while the states surveyed required certification or endorsements for bilingual or ESL specialist teachers, only 10 out of the 44 districts reporting were in states with such requirements for general education

teachers. In addition, three districts were in states with a requirement of a certain amount of professional development hours.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that many mainstream teachers lack basic foundational knowledge about ELL issues, despite the fact that 88% teach ELLs. In California, only 29% teachers with more than three ELLs in their classrooms reported being professionally certified in either English as a Second Language (ESL) or bilingual education (Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Driscoll, 2005). Mainstream teachers also vary greatly in their willingness to accommodate their instruction for ELLs in order to ensure the integration of language and content development (Reeves, 2006; Walker, Shafer, & Iiams, 2004). Moreover, some research suggests that general accommodations for comprehensibility appear more likely to emerge than the use of second language-specific support for ELLs (de Jong & Harper, 2011).

When these findings are juxtaposed with the increased placement of ELLs in mainstream classrooms, the need for more comprehensive approaches to teacher preparation for English language learners (ELLs) is clear and has indeed been recognized. Several frameworks for improved mainstream teacher preparation for ELLs have been suggested (e.g., Coady, de Jong, & Harper, 2011; Fillmore & Snow, 2002; Lucas, 2011; Lucas & Grinberg, 2008). These frameworks do not intend to replace existing professional standards for specialist language teachers nor do they deny the need for the continued preparation of language specialists. They aim to outline the necessary knowledge and skills related to issues of language and culture in the classroom that mainstream teachers need to develop in addition to those presented in their general educator preparation (de Jong & Harper, 2005). After briefly outlining the main components of these conceptual frameworks, this article focuses on a dimension that receives minimal attention in these frameworks, namely the monolingually oriented learning environments that by default dominate mainstream classrooms. I argue that, while the frameworks often include reference to the role of the native language in second language acquisition processes, actual classroom practices provide minimal guidance for mainstream teachers to become advocates for additive bilingualism.

Mainstream Teacher Preparation for ELLs

To date, most studies on mainstream teacher ELL preparation and ELL student achievement have been conceptual; that is, scholars have sought to outline what mainstream teachers should know and be able to do when working with ELLs (Commins & Miramontes, 2006; de Jong & Harper, 2005; Fillmore & Snow, 2002; Lucas & Grinberg, 2008; Lucas & Villegas, 2013). Broadly conceived, the various frameworks share their emphasis on the roles that language and culture play in school for ELLs and the ELL-targeted second language, literacy, and content area classroom practices needed in mainstream classrooms. Lucas and Grinberg (2008), for instance, introduce the term ‘linguistically responsive practices’, a set of language-related knowledge and skills that mainstream teachers of ELLs need to have. They subsequently outline understandings about language, language proficiency, and second language acquisition (theory) and strategies for scaffolding instruction for ELLs (practices) for preservice teachers. Similarly, Lucas and Villegas (2013) frame the ELL preservice teacher knowledge base in terms of sociolinguistic consciousness and valuing linguistic diversity. Sociolinguistic awareness focuses on the integral connection between language, culture, and identity and the sociopolitical contexts of language use. They add that preservice teachers also need to develop a readiness to advocate for ELLs (de Oliveira & Athanases, 2007). In addition to these foundational skills, teachers need to command a set of strategies to get to know their students and ways to scaffold their instruction. Interestingly, while some bilingual strategies (i.e., translation, native language writing) are mentioned for getting to know the ELL, such strategies are not mentioned under curriculum planning and delivery. The role of the native language is thus acknowledged as an influencing factor in second language acquisition but how mainstream teachers can use and be taught to use the students’ native languages as a resource for teaching is largely invisible.

Unfortunately, the research base documenting how ELL-related knowledge and skills are and can be effectively included in the teacher preparation program lags far behind the discussions on conceptual frameworks. Small-scale studies that focus on individual programs has indicated that institutional support is important and that changes in course syllabi, professional development for faculty, and content and ESL faculty collaboration can be effective in helping candidates develop a more effective “ELL lens” (e.g., Brisk, 2006; Costa, McPhail,

Smith, & Brisk, 2005; Gort, Glenn, & Settlage, 2011; Lucas, 2011; Meskill, 2005).

Since these preparation models are connected and linked to general education teacher preparation programs, it is almost unavoidable that they focus on how English-medium environments can be made more accessible to ELLs. The role of the native language in second language learning is acknowledged and respect for students' linguistic and cultural resources is viewed as an important value. In terms of classroom practices, however, the default is English (sheltering English instruction, teaching academic English). The remainder of this article illustrates the sociopolitical context of this monolingual stance, its potential impact, and the importance of ensuring that mainstream teachers (and administrators), as one important group of educators working with ELLs, are prepared to effectively negotiate monolingual policies and practices for their ELLs.

Monolingual Lenses in U.S. Educational Policy

Language policies for ELLs are typically considered from the perspective of explicit policies that affect special language programs for ELLs. Current policies clearly favor an English-only approach to teaching ELLs. Only a handful of states officially encourage or allow bilingual education. Legislation such as Proposition 227 in California, Proposition 203 in Arizona, and Question 2 in Massachusetts mandated the default placement of ELLs in structured English immersion (SEI) programs. Although the definition of role of the native language within SEI has changed significantly over time (McField, 2006), SEI is an English-only program option, which severely limits and/or prohibits the use of and access to core instruction in languages other than English.

Though not explicitly formulated or positioned as language policies, national and state educational reform efforts to improve the quality of schooling for all students nevertheless greatly shape language practices in schools (Harper, de Jong, & Platt, 2008; Menken, 2006, 2008; Shohamy, 2006). The monolingual practices that have accompanied many of these educational policies are reinforced through the monolingual assumptions that are explicitly and implicitly made about the nature of language, language proficiency, and language development. These assumptions and practices greatly affect the mainstream classroom environment for ELLs.

The Nature of Language Proficiency and Language Development

The federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and the development of new accountability systems has raised important questions about what language proficiency is needed for schooling purposes. That is, what is the specific register of language of school (also referred to as 'academic language') that students need to learn to meet the language demands of content learning (Bailey, 2007; Krashen & Brown, 2007; Scarcella, 2003; Schlepppegrell, 2004). To date, researchers and teacher educators have focused on identifying the specific linguistic features of academic English in general and for specific content areas, how these features can best be taught (in English), as well as the relationships between academic English proficiency and performance on content assessments in English (Anstrom et al., 2010; Bailey, Butler, LaFramenta, & Ong, 2004). Importantly, attention to issues of linguistic diversity are largely absent from these discussions, with the exception of (Spanish-English) cognates (e.g., August & Shanahan, 2006).

Similarly, the measurement of achievement, annual growth, and learning gains in and through English on standardized reading tests has intensified English-only practices nationwide (Evans & Hornberger, 2005; Menken, 2006; Valenzuela, 2005). These tests are normed on native English speakers rather than bilingual learners. Moreover, there is an expectation that ELLs will achieve sufficient proficiency in English within less than two years such that their scores on an English achievement test are reliable and valid. Even with the most academically prepared ELLs, this expectation is unrealistic; for those who come with gaps in their schooling, two years is even more in conflict with current research on second language acquisition for school purposes. Regardless of these and other reservations by assessment experts (Abedi, 2004), the accountability expectations under NCLB have led to a resurgence of the view that bilingualism is a liability rather than a resource for ELLs' school success (Black, 2006; Escamilla, Chavez, & Vigil, 2005). It has also led to a narrowing of the curriculum where the literacy curriculum stresses the basic, lower-level, discrete reading skills that are measured by the test (Cummins, 2007; Sleeter & Stillman, 2005).

Monolingual Stance through Standardization

Another aspect of the monolingual lens of current educational reform is the assumption that, despite student diversity, the same approach to school improvement or classroom interventions will be appropriate. Like NCLB, other national and state educational reform efforts (such as the Common Core Standards, the Response to Intervention movement) assume that they are inclusive of the needs of ELLs. In practice, however, these policies tend to glance over significant implications for working with ELLs. While the proposed curricula, interventions, and strategies can be appropriate for some ELLs, they are not necessarily sufficient to meet their diverse linguistic, academic, and cultural needs (Buck, Mast, Ehlers, & Franklin, 2005; Harper & de Jong, 2004, 2009).

For instance, in the wake of NCLB and Reading First, older ELLs were often assigned to receive interventions designed for struggling native English speakers. However, the texts used in these classes were often too difficult for ELLs and the curriculum was generally inappropriate for those whose reading difficulties in English lie in vocabulary development and reading comprehension, and not in the decoding and basic skills practice provided in these remedial classes (Callahan, 2006).

The Limitations of Monolingual Stances or The Need for Multilingual Orientations

The placement of ELLs in monolingual settings becomes problematic when teachers or administrators fail or are unable to mediate their practices to address the specific linguistic and cultural needs of ELLs. The mere placement of ELLs in mainstream classrooms without attention to their linguistic and cultural needs can lead to significant inequities in student participation, access to quality curriculum, and opportunities to learn for ELLs (Cohen, 1997; de Jong & Harper, 2005; Losey, 1995; Verplaetse, 2000). Although the focus here is on mainstream classroom settings, it should be noted that the shift to more English-only special language programs also contributes to a monolingual definition of the schooling of ELLs.

When it comes to effective practices for ELLs, the research consistently points out that additive rather than subtractive responses to linguistic and cultural diversity significantly and positively affect ELL achievement and performance. Policies and practices that affirm and create learning environments that purposefully build on ELLs' language and cultural resources are the most effective for ELLs (Brisk, 2006; de Jong, 2011; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005; Lucas, Henze, & Donato, 1990; Miramontes, Nadeau, & Cummins, 1997; Nieto & Bode, 2008). This additive stance is grounded in a basic learning principle that students' prior knowledge and experiences affect how and what they learn. Applying this principle to ELLs implies using and accessing ELLs' native language because ELLs' prior and on-going learning and knowledge development is encoded in that language (Cummins et al., 2005).

High-quality and well-implemented bilingual programs that reflect this additive principle have consistently demonstrated positive academic and language outcomes for ELLs (August & Hakuta, 1997; Cummins & Corson, 1997; Lindholm-Leary, 2001). It is important to stress, however, that an additive bilingual stance goes well beyond bilingual programming (de Jong, 2011). Even in English-only classrooms (including SEI classrooms), effective English teachers strategically use students' native language resources for multiple purposes, such as clarifying and assessing content learning, building social relationships, teaching key concepts, making cross-linguistic connections (Gersten & Baker, 2000; Karathanos, 2010; Lucas & Katz, 1994; Tikunoff & Vazquez-Faria, 1983). Effective teachers use their students' cultural experiences in order to mediate unfamiliar content for their ELLs and ensure better comprehension (Herrera, 2010; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Nieto, 2002).

From these observations we have to conclude that, even when ELLs are placed in English-medium settings, these schools and classrooms should not become monolingually-oriented contexts of learning. Arguably, they do not need to – taking an additive multilingual and multicultural stance can and needs to extend to mainstream classrooms; it is not limited to bilingual educators teaching in bilingual programs. Simply because the language of instruction is in one language (English), this should not imply that these educators should engage in monolingually oriented policies and practices that largely ignore the cultural and linguistic resources that ELLs bring to school.

In fact, doing so would deny ELLs equitable access to opportunities to learn and achieve optimally within the school system (Cummins, 2005; de Jong, 2011).

Teacher Preparation for ELLs in Monolingually Oriented Classrooms

If the majority of teachers of ELLs will in fact be working as mainstream teachers in English-medium classrooms that are monolingually oriented, it challenges teacher preparation program to provide them with the tools to be able to effectively leverage students' linguistic (native language and second language) and cultural resources for instruction in these contexts. Given equity and excellence for ELLs as our goal, the ability to challenge monolingualizing trends in educational policies and to advocate for multilingually oriented practices become essential, non-negotiable skills for teachers and administrators working with ELLs. While it is understandable that most mainstream teacher preparation frameworks take a monolingual focus (i.e., how to teach English within the existing mainstream classroom structure), this will not be sufficient to prepare them to create the most optimal learning environments for ELLs. Teachers and administrators need to show respect students' native languages and understand its role in supporting second language and literacy development (Lucas & Grinberg, 2008; Proctor, August, Snow, & Barr, 2010). However, they also need to move beyond tolerance of the native language at beginning stages of second language development and develop the knowledge and skills to actively engage in language practices that reflect this additive stance. Second, they need to be able to critically analyze their mainstream context from a bilingual learners' perspective and understand where mainstream policies and practices are inappropriate and insufficient and where they are useful for specific ELLs. Both dimensions are presented in more detail below.

Supporting a Multilingual Stance

ELL-specific expertise combined with proficiency in a language other than English (LOTE) would certainly more easily implement bi-or multilingual practices (Karathanos, 2010). Learning another language, traveling abroad, and exposure to culturally diverse settings assists in the development of more empathy for the task ELLs have to face. Research on study abroad and other culturally diverse placements have demonstrated that these experiences positively affect teachers' perceptions of effectiveness and efficacy working in diverse contexts, including ELLs (Barkhuizen & Feryok, 2006; Clark & Flores, 1997; Ference & Bell, 2004; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Reyes, 2009; Teague, 2010; Willard-Holt, 2001). This finding points to the importance of actively recruiting bilingual individuals into the mainstream teaching force and to provide opportunities within teacher preparation for study abroad experiences for those with less proficiency in a language other than English.

Even when teachers of ELLs are limited proficient in LOTE, however, they can be encouraged to adopt an additive stance in their practices (Schwarzer, Haywood, & Lorenzen, 2003). Teacher educators can explain the importance of multilingual practices such as the use of cognates in vocabulary teaching, grouping strategies by native language, cross-age tutoring with students from the same language background, creating bilingual books, and building metalinguistic awareness through cross-linguistic analyses (Cummins, 2005, 2006; de Jong & Freeman, 2010; Irujo, 2005; Schwarzer et al., 2003). Teacher candidates can be taught to use specific strategies that tap into students personal and communal funds of knowledge and use these understandings to adapt curriculum in ways that are more appropriate for ELLs, student-centered, and still connected to content standards (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Herrera, 2010). They can assist teacher candidates in identifying bilingual resources for the classroom (bilingual dictionaries, bilingual children's books, books in LOTE, students' native language supplementary materials) and in the community.

Administrators, too, need to develop knowledge and skills to support multilingual approaches. Examples may include finding ways to ensure multilingual home-school communications, how to produce multilingual signage, bilingual hiring practices, and how to facilitate access to interpreters. When evaluating teachers, they can encourage and expect multilingual practices and materials and ensure that teachers use appropriate differentiation strategies for ELLs.

Bilingual advocacy

Teacher candidates also need to learn to critically use bilingual lenses to reflect on policies and their practices related to curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Preservice teachers need to understand the linguistic and cultural needs of ELLs and how these needs intersect with general state and federal educational policies (de Jong, Harper, & Coady, 2013). Recent initiatives, such as No Child Left Behind, the Common Core Standards, and Response to Intervention carry the assumption that the needs of ELLs will be addressed. In practice, however, implementation of such policies and initiatives has consistently overlooked the distinctive needs of bilingual learners or addressed them only as an after-thought (e.g., Harper & de Jong, 2009; Herrera & Murray, 2006). Curricula and instructional interventions that are promoted for “diverse” mainstream classrooms may be effective for some ELLs; however, they are not necessarily appropriate or adequate to meet the diverse linguistic, academic, and cultural needs of many ELLs (Harper & de Jong, 2004, 2009), nor do they typically take bilingualism into consideration. Mainstream teachers need to understand the difference and use their understanding the role of language in school and the processes of bilingualism and second language acquisition to advocate for effective practices for ELLs (Lucas & Grinberg, 2008).

A second step is to enhance this critical analysis with a bilingual lens. When discussing home-school relations and communications, teacher preparation programs can discuss how to support parents in their efforts to maintain the native language and design home-school literacy projects that involve both languages (de Jong, 2008). Teachers and administrators can interpret accountability results from a bilingual perspective (Escamilla, Chavez, & Vigil, 2005); for example, one that acknowledges the nature of second language development and the importance of including native language assessment data. They can learn how to disaggregate assessment data by important background variables that affect ELLs, such as transiency, initial English proficiency, and prior schooling.

Conclusion

The increased linguistic and cultural diversity combined with the monolingualized nature of schooling in the United States adds a new layer of complexity for mainstream teacher preparation. The diversity of ELLs and the importance of additive multilingual and multicultural practices for effective ELL schooling challenges teacher preparation programs to go beyond providing teachers with a toolkit of second language methods and basic principles of learning a second language. Rather, they need to ensure that mainstream teachers understand bilingual learners, bilingual development, and ways that they can build on and extend students linguistic and cultural resources. Moreover, they need to provide future educators with the skills to critically analyze national, state, and district policies through a bilingual lens and identify areas where change is needed.

Advocacy for a multilingual stance and practices is more important than ever as more and more ELLs are schooled in English-only mainstream classrooms or language programs. Preparation programs need to provide their candidates with the conceptual and practical understandings to take ELLs’ L1 and L2 resources into consideration as a starting point for district, school and classroom policies and practices. Such expertise includes:

- An understanding why multilingual practices are essential for ELLs and why this stance is not limited to bilingual education programs. They need to understand the role that ELLs’ linguistic and cultural resources play in content learning, in language and literacy development, and in their successful integration into the sociocultural environment of the school.
- Advocacy for and engagement in multilingual practices. They need to be able to examine policies from an ELL perspective and ‘teach for transfer’, i.e., use strategies for accessing students’ linguistic and cultural resources for instructional purposes and to leverage school and community resources to support their instruction for ELLs.

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