



**An On-line Journal for  
Teacher Research**

## **Preparing Teacher Candidates for the Instruction of English Language Learners**

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### **Abstract**

This inquiry utilizes a sheltered instruction approach to lesson planning with the intention of improving teacher candidates' instruction to English Language Learners (ELLs). In this study a web-based questionnaire and a sheltered instruction lesson plan template were used to facilitate opportunities for teacher candidates to reflect on and practice planning English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) instruction. Data collections used were nine web-based questionnaire responses and thirty sheltered instruction lesson plans. Findings suggest teacher candidates need more experiences with using ELLs' language proficiency data for instruction and need to learn how to use rubrics when giving ELLs feedback on their assignments.

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### **Introduction**

English Language Learners (ELLs) are the fastest growing student population in United States (US) public schools (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015) and the need for teachers who are prepared to work with ELLs has never been greater (de Jong, Harper & Coady, 2013). Therefore, teacher preparation programs face the responsibility of improving the ways in which teacher candidates are being prepared for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) instruction. United States (US) federal law requires teachers to comply with state curriculum standards to instruct to *all* students, including those who are learning to speak English for the first time as ELLs (Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), 1965; No Child Left Behind (NCLB), 2001; Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), 2015). Despite these attempts by the federal government, research suggests teacher candidates are under-prepared to teach to ELLs (de Jong, 2013; Durgunoğlu & Hughes, 2010). Moreover, most of the research surrounding English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher education conceptualizes the skills teachers need to be effective ESOL educators (Coady, Harper & de Jong, 2011; de Jong, et al., 2013;

Lucas, Villegas and Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008;) offering little insight about what works best in preparing teacher candidates for ESOL instruction.

Noticing a gap exists in the empirical research examining *how* teacher candidates are prepared to work with ELLs, this research will seek to provide a discussion of how five teacher candidates used a sheltered instruction (SI) approach for planning ESOL instruction.

## Review of the Literature

The label ELL is applied to *any* student who is participating in a public school's program of language assistance with the expectation of meeting the same content and academic achievement standards all students are required to meet (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2015; U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2016) and the term ESOL is applied to a program of language assistance and instruction designed for ELLs. Education statistic reports indicate the percentage of ELLs has doubled over the past 15 years to now include over 5 million students (Migration Policy Institute [MPI], 2016; NCES, 2015). The dramatic influx of ELL students in US public schools suggests most teachers will teach to an ELL within their first year of teaching, lacking the basic competencies need to be an effective ELL teacher (Coady et al., 2011; de Jong et al., 2013; Diego, 2013).

## Teacher Preparation and Student Achievement

US federal policy underscores the responsibility teacher preparation programs have in preparing preservice teachers with an understanding of content-based instruction and application of second language theory. Federal policies such as *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB, 2001) and the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, (ESSA, 2015) seek to resolve the achievement gap (Fry, 2008; Milner, 2013, MIP, 2016) between ELLs and their English speaking peers, requiring educators to focus more attention to the language needs of ELLs. *NCLB* (2001) requires all states to have English Language Proficiency Development (ELP/D) standards (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012; NCLB, 2001; TESOL, 2016) and use these standards as blueprints for state standards-based assessments and accountability for Title III funding (Bailey and Huang, 2011; USDOE, 2012). *NCLB's* Title III funds are used to support public schools' ESOL programs. Despite the attempts aimed at reforming ESOL education, the research indicates ELL's have still not made grade level expectations and teachers are underprepared to teach ESOL instruction (NCES, 2015; USDOE, 2015).

Under new law ESSA (2015) will replace NCLB beginning in the 2017-2018 school year, restructuring portions of Title III, giving more control to states' districts and less control to the federal government, whereas districts are allowed to create their own annual measurable objectives (AMO's). But are *ESSA's* amendments to Title III enough to make our nations' ESOL programs effective? Research indicates student achievement is directly related to the type of preparation teachers receive in teacher preparation years (Cochran-Smith and Zeichner, 2005; Diego, 2013), albeit, both *NCLB* (2001) and the *ESSA* (2015) neglect to outline the resources or pedagogical skills teachers should be equipped with in order to effectively teach to ELLs.

## **ESOL Teacher Education**

The research on ESOL teacher preparation states teacher candidates need an understanding of ways to supplement and modify written and oral forms of the English language (Banks, Cochran-Smith, Moll, Richert, Zeichner, LePage & McDonald, 2005; Coady, et al., 2011; de Jong, et al., 2013; Lucas et al., 2008). In addition, teacher candidates need to understand the differences between conversational and academic language types (Cummins, 1981, 2000; Lucas et al., 2008). Thus, teacher preparation programs need to provide teacher candidates with guidance in how to include language instruction within content area instruction (Baecher Farnsworth & Ediger, 2013; Lucas et al., 2008). Empirical research studies have proven language-focused instruction is a critical developmental skill of ESOL educators (Baecher et al., 2013; Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2008; Kareva & Echevarria, 2013), whereas teachers who are trained in language instruction outperform those who are not. Still, no few research studies have empirically examined how teacher candidates plan for ESOL instruction. Because teachers' attention to language instruction is the desired means of supporting the educational and linguistic needs of immigrant and nonimmigrant second language learners (Hansen-Thomas, 2008), this research will discuss how five teacher candidates planned for ESOL instruction using a sheltered instruction.

## **Sheltered Instruction**

Sheltered instruction is a set of teaching practices teachers use to make content more comprehensible for ELLs (Echevarria, et al., 2004). When using sheltered instruction, teachers must provide ELLs with the same high-quality academic content that native English speakers receive (Hansen-Thomas, 2008). Sheltered instruction can be used in mainstream classrooms where teachers teach to a combination of ELL and non-ELL students but may also be used in bilingual or English as a Foreign Language teaching contexts.

Sheltered instruction causes teachers to pay attention to ELLs unique second language needs and design instruction that is academically challenging. When using sheltered instruction teachers plan for ELLs to practice the English language by engaging in listening, speaking, reading and writing activities (Kareva & Echevarria, 2013). For example, a combination of good teaching practices focused on explicit language instruction are characteristics of effective ESOL educators and sheltered instruction creates a way for teachers to scaffold the level of English according to ELLs' language proficiency levels, to make academic content more comprehensible. Academic content language is made comprehensible through the use of supports such visuals, modeling, peer assistance and native and social language support. Effective sheltered instruction lessons require high levels of student engagement and lead to critical thinking and when used effectively can vastly improve ELL academics and language development (Echevarria et al., 2008).

## **Positionality**

I am a second-generation, bilingual, Cuban-American. As a child, I learned to speak, read and write in Spanish and English. I was exposed to different languages growing up and lived in a neighborhood where those around me were culturally different from me. When I began the first grade in an English-only school, I was the lowest reader in my class. My first

grade teacher, Mrs. Diaz, pulled me aside to a small kidney table, reading with me every day, offering me the language supports I needed to advance academically and develop my understanding of the English language. I credit my desires to improve the education of ELLs to my own experiences growing up as an ELL student and Mrs. Diaz's effective ESOL lesson planning. My experiences have led me to believe language instruction in all content areas is needed to improve the academic experiences of ELLs.

Today, I work as a teacher candidate educator. I supervise teacher candidates working in field experiences. In my supervision, I have encountered great ESOL teachers but have also observed educators fail our ESOL students. I believe ineffective ESOL teacher preparation is the cause of teachers' lack of ESOL preparation. I also believe it is the responsibility of teacher preparation programs to equip future teachers with the tools they need to initiate ELLs' academic improvements. Therefore, with this research I seek to share how I sought to improve the ESOL instruction of five teacher candidates. I hope my research inspires you to reflect on your own teaching practices and ESOL teacher preparation program requirements. I invite you to also seek out ways to improve ESOL teacher preparation and share them with others to add new knowledge to the field.

## **Conceptual Framework**

This inquiry is guided by Teacher Inquiry (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014), a vehicle used by teachers to untangle some of the complexities that occur in the teaching profession to bring upon educational reform.

## **Statement of Wondering**

How do teacher candidates use sheltered instruction to plan for ESOL instruction?

## **Setting and Participants**

The five teacher candidates included in this inquiry are in the final semester of a teacher preparation program at a large research university in the southeast and are enrolled in a final internship course where I am the university supervisor. The teacher candidates intern five days a week in general education classrooms (including at least one ELL) in a public elementary school and have completed three semesters of coursework in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) online. Upon graduation they will receive credentials to add the ESOL Endorsement to the State Professional Teaching Certificate.

## **Data Collection**

During the first week of the semester the five teacher candidates expressed they wanted to become better at their ESOL instruction. To better understand their instructional needs, I created a web-based questionnaire using *Goggle Docs* asking teacher candidates to share (1) how they plan for ELL instruction and (2) what they feel when planning lessons for ELLs. Initial data analysis of PSTs' questionnaire responses revealed all five teacher candidates shared a desire to improve their ELL instruction. Here are their responses:

Participant 1: " I feel that it is difficult for me to teach to ELLs according to their needs. I learned there are four pre-production proficiency levels, but I feel my ELL students are always expected to speak as much English as possible even though we have learned

that it's ok and natural for various pre-production levels. I know ELLs tend to be silent at first and may want to speak their native language. I want to learn how to teach using this knowledge I have about ELLs."

Participant 2: "I feel the difficulty teaching ELLs at times because of language barriers. I know a few of my ELL students do not understand me. I feel the stress knowing that my students aren't understanding the information that I am giving them.

Participant 3: "I feel I'm unhelpful sometimes because I am unable to effectively communicate with my ELLs. Even when I spend extra time with them and use the pictures in the text as visual aids to help them understand I feel like I am doing them injustice because I don't have the resources or the experience to effectively help them understand the content."

Participant 4: "I want to help and I try as best as I can, but do not feel adequately prepared to do so. However, I do feel bad during instructional times and I see my ELL students are struggling."

Participant 5: "I catch myself trying even harder when working with ELL's, I want them to feel comfortable. I try everything I can think of that will benefit the ELL students and myself during the learning experience. I try my best and hope the students are understanding, I also feel bad because I know it's a struggle on both ends."

After reading the research and reflecting on my own instruction of ESOL students as a former public school teacher, I decided to introduce the teacher candidates to the sheltered instruction lesson plan template (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004) found at <http://www.cal.org/siop/lesson-plans/>. The sheltered instruction lesson plan template requires teachers to plan for a lesson objective and content standard but also consider the academic language demands of content-specific vocabulary. For example, the words 'addition' and 'subtraction' are content-specific vocabulary words that are not used in social discourse but are used frequently in math instruction. Thus to complete the sheltered instruction lesson, each teacher candidate had to incorporate ways for ELLs to practice English language fluency with listening, speaking, reading or writing activities using both social and academic language types.

In seminar we began dissecting the sheltered instruction lesson plan template for better understanding of each component. We went over the four features of an effective sheltered instruction lesson (1) objectives are clearly, defined, displayed and discussed with students, (2) language objectives are clearly defined displayed and discussed with students, (3) content concepts are appropriate for age and educational backgrounds (4) supplementary materials are used to a high degree (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2004). I then distributed a sheltered instruction model lesson plan and a blank sheltered instruction lesson plan template to each teacher candidate. Then teacher candidates sat in groups discussing each of the sheltered instruction components to decide if the lesson "model" plan was effective or if modifications were needed. In doing so, teacher candidates worked together in their table groups adding necessary changes to the blank template. Next, teacher candidates shared their findings with each other as I rotated between groups to answer questions. Collaboratively, we decided all future lesson plans for the remainder of the semester would be completed using the sheltered instruction lesson plan template.

## Findings

I conducted an inductive analysis of thirty sheltered instruction lesson plans (six per intern), using HyperRESEARCH qualitative analysis software, coding for patterns and meaning reviewing the language objectives within each lesson plan. I analyzed the sheltered instruction lesson plans individually to investigate how each teacher candidates was planning for ELLs to practice English fluency. To do this, I broke the data into analyzable parts or “frames of analysis” and created patterns before looking at the data as a whole (Hatch, 2002). I then used domains to express the structures of my initial findings and read the data over again looking for semantic relationships (Hatch, 2002). Domains were then used to create overall themes (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014) to describe how teacher candidates used sheltered instruction plan instruction for ESOL instruction.

### One Size Fits All Instruction

Analysis of sheltered instruction lesson plans revealed teacher candidates mostly focused on speaking or writing activities, neglecting to consider listening or reading activities. For example, in most sheltered instruction lesson plans ELLs were paired with other students to answer class discussion questions, however there was no mention of how social and academic language connections were made for students.

Also of important mention, lesson plan analysis revealed all conversations between students and ELLs were used to practice content-specific, academic English vocabulary. None of the lesson plans required ELLs to practice conversational (social) English. ELLs engaged in writing practices independently using teacher generated handouts or tasks. For example, one PST wrote, “First grade students will fill-in a graphic organizer at their desk to determine the story’s beginning middle and end.” In addition, teacher candidates planned for language objectives, using the phrase “Students will”, failing to consider how ELLs’ language needs differ depending on their English language proficiency levels (i.e. starting, emerging, developing, expanding, bridging).

### Insufficient Feedback

Further review of the lesson plans indicated teacher candidates feel teachers need to control students’ behavior during class read-alouds. All five teacher candidates planned to read stories to the class rather than having students read the stories together in peer groups. This finding ignores the research indicating ELL students benefit from reading with a native English-speaking peer (Echevarria et al., 2008).

Also, when facilitating group discussions, teacher candidates felt the need to present all questions guiding group discussion with no mention of linking discussion questions to students’ background experiences or cultures. Lesson plans revealed teacher candidates felt it was their responsibility to make sure every student mastered the objective by pulling students to provide one-on-one instruction, however, little mention was made on how teacher feedback would be provided to guide students’ learning. For example, one teacher candidate wrote, “As students are presenting their graphic organizer in front of the class, I will listen and correct their grammar errors.”

## Discussion

When teaching teacher candidates how to plan for language instruction, teacher preparation programs need to consider the use of assessment. Formative assessment is central to designing language standards to match students' individual linguistic needs. Although sheltered instruction allowed teacher candidates to consider how ELLs would practice language fluency (reading, writing, speaking and listening), the use of data in determining ELL's language proficiency was missing. For this reason it is suggested that teacher preparation programs provide explicit instruction and modeling on how to use language proficiency assessment data for ESOL lesson planning.

Findings also indicate all of the teacher candidates used a "One Size Fits All" approach to their ESOL lesson planning and need more guidance in how to use data in designing language instruction according to students' linguistic levels for instructional differentiation. This was exemplified with feedback plans that were corrective in nature (ex. "I will correct students grammar as they speak"). While ESOL teachers should model correct grammar, it is important for ESOL teachers to not call attention to the specific error and place ESOL students "on the spot" in front of the whole class. For this reason it is recommended that teacher preparation programs expose ESOL teacher candidates to rubrics, so ESOL students can self-assess their academic progress. As mentioned by Farina, and Hammond- Carrasquel, (2015) rubrics allow ESOL students to track their language progress and self-evaluate their work.

## Conclusions

While sheltered instruction proved to be beneficial, teacher candidates need assistance with how to use ELLs' language proficiency data to design instruction that is "comprehensible" for ELLs. Findings from this research also suggest teacher candidates need more experiences with using rubrics with ELLs.

Sheltered instruction improved teacher candidates understanding of language instruction as a critical component of ESOL instruction, however the use of ELL student data and rubrics would have made teacher candidates' ESOL instruction even more effective. More research is needed to examine how teacher candidates use ELLs' language proficiency levels to design ESOL instruction. In addition, a more longitudinal study might be effective in determining how teachers use sheltered instruction as they transition from teacher preparation to in-service teaching assignments. Findings from this research suggest teacher preparation programs need to consider how teacher candidates can become more familiar with ELLs' language proficiency data for lesson planning and using rubrics to share teacher expectations and allow ESOL students to self-assess academic progress.

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