

The Blind Spot: What Aspiring ESL Teachers Want Their Programs to Address

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Summarizing Statement

Obtaining perspectives from aspiring teachers regarding the strengths and weaknesses of their teacher preparation program, as well as their perceptions of the importance of the ESL Teaching standards has provided critical information regarding programmatic structure and areas to clarify as the program continues to grow.

Introduction

The School of Urban Education at Metropolitan State University, with campuses in both Minneapolis and St. Paul as well as surrounding suburbs prepares pre-service teachers with licensures in Elementary Education, Science, Mathematics, English Language Arts, Social Studies, and most recently, English as a Second Language. Examining the perception of aspiring ESL teachers of the program and instruction they are receiving in accordance with MN requirements for licensure is necessary to determine student perspective on relevance and rigor in meeting the standards required for licensure. Our investigation, The Blind Spot, endeavors to isolate the areas where students see the relevance of the standards and where more explicit connections to the standards are needed on a course and programmatic level, identifying the blind spots both Universities have to the needs and perceptions of their students, and the blind spots that teacher candidates may have in relation to the state standards and their relevancy to attaining a teaching license.

Methodology

In the fall of 2019, all students who were enrolled in required courses to attain an MN ESL teaching license were offered the opportunity to participate in the investigation. First, students responded to a written survey, and based on student willingness to participate in a focus group, were then offered participation in a small focus group held in person to further discuss perceptions around the standards and preparation program they were participating in.

The first part of the investigation, the survey, was comprised of several open-ended questions. The survey consisted of a statement followed by three open ended questions:

You have been selected to participate in a very important survey to give your feedback on the preparation you have been receiving regarding working with English Learners.

- 1.) Please identify the areas of strength
- 2.) Please Identify the areas of weakness
- 3.) Look at the ESL Standards [provided as an additional handout] and choose the most important standards and state why. Also select the least important ones and state why.

The focus groups involved two small groups (between 5 and 7 each) of students. Students examined the standards required to receive a state of MN ESL teaching license and discussed their opinions and perceptions on whether or not these standards were relevant or important to meet and understand in order to be able to deliver effective instruction to ELs.

Findings

The findings of the survey and the findings of the focus groups provided important insights into students' perspectives of the overall strengths and weakness of the licensure program as well as the students' perceptions of the importance and relevance of the MN State Standards for Teaching English as a Second Language.

Findings of the Survey. Several themes emerged from the responses to the survey. Regarding Question 1, the strengths of the program, the following themes emerged: Instructional Staff, Practical Application of Theory in Class Assignments, and Availability of classes. Regarding Question 2, the weaknesses of the program, the following themes emerged: Programmatic limitations system and University-wide, ESL knowledge existing in a silo, and a lack of knowledge of best practices for ELs in other coursework. For question 3, the most and least important standards required for licensure candidates to attain a teaching license in the field of ESL, the emerging themes were that Standard D was the standard most cited as being the most important.

Standard D states: An English as a second language teacher demonstrates the ability to communicate successfully with students, parents, colleagues, and community members. The teacher must:

- (1) understand that cultural practices may differ and that these differences may affect the way students learn;
- (2) understand schools as organizations within the larger community context and that successful communication with parents must be undertaken within that larger sociocultural framework;
- (3) understand how the student's environment, including family circumstances, community systems, and health and economic conditions, may influence learning; and
- (4) work with other professionals to improve the quality of educational services provided to students with limited English proficiency.

There was not clear consensus among respondents as to which standard may be the least important. Each standard had some respondents identify it as the least important.

Findings of the Focus Groups. The focus groups gave much more information regarding the respondent perspectives regarding the relevance of the standards to the practical application of pedagogical knowledge in teaching. Please see all standards in the Appendix. Each standard was discussed in the group and the respondents identified whether or not they viewed standard in question positively as an important and relevant component of knowledge necessary to teach ELs, or negatively as an irrelevant component of knowledge. The findings for each standard are as follows:

Standard A: The groups overall had a negative reaction to this standard.

Standard B: The groups had a unanimously positive reaction to this standard.

Standard C: Unanimously Positive

Standard D: Overall positive, with D1 and D3 mentioned most often as areas of critical importance.

Standard E: Unanimously positive

Standard F: Mixed reaction. Roughly half of the respondents identified standard F as important, and roughly half did not.

Standard G: Negative Reaction. In the focus groups, the highest number of respondents identified standard G as their standard of least importance.

Standard H: Positive Reaction. This area was identified as an area of particular importance by respondents.

Standard I: Mixed reaction. This standard had many participants identify this standard as unimportant.

Standard J: Mixed reaction. Some respondents had a positive and some had a negative reaction.

Overall, the standards that were more related to practical application and skills in delivering instruction aligned to best practices for ELs tended to be viewed positively among respondents. Standards that encompass more abstract or theoretical knowledge were more likely to be viewed negatively or as unimportant among respondents.

Discussion and Implications

From a programmatic standpoint, it is important to sustain practices that are identified by students as being particularly helpful and/or effective. Maintaining a high quality instructional staff for the program will be critically important as the program continues to grow. Attracting and retaining high quality staff will be a key component of the success of the program moving forward. Again, from a programmatic standpoint, the availability of classes and the relevancy of the coursework to practical application will be practices to sustain as the program continues. Increasing the number of fully- and partially- online courses to create more flexibility for students, many of whom are working adults with families, is another discussion happening presently at the University.

Items to consider modifying would include the items stressed by respondents as areas of weakness, such as university constraints, and the isolation of knowledge regarding ESL best practices. Licensure candidates state that the relative absence of information regarding ELS practice included in coursework for other licenses is an area of concern. As the program is focused on the needs of urban students and Districts, the assertion that there is not enough coursework for students of all licensure specialties explicitly and directly tied to making their content accessible to EL students. This will be an area that we will address in conversation with the Department and leadership.

Overall, students did see the value of many of the state standards required for MN ESL licensure. However, the fact that there is a discrepancy between the more likely positive perception of standards more explicitly tied to practical application and the more likely negative perception of standards more explicitly tied to theoretical and abstract knowledge indicates that there must be more clear and direct links made between these standards and the coursework. While it should be noted that this is required for the approval of the coursework to count for a MN state licensure, it has not been made as clear to the students as it has to the department of education. This will need to be adjusted in course syllabi and in course presentations by instructors in forthcoming semesters to address the importance of the theoretical knowledge and make the explicit connections between how the theoretical and abstract will inform the practices with which an educator must engage in order to be able to deliver effective and appropriate instruction to ELs.

Conclusion

Student perspective is an essential part of monitoring the success of a teacher preparation program. Receiving the specific feedback about strengths and weakness will allow for maintaining the successes and making adjustments to the areas for growth. Making explicit connections between coursework and standards will also be of help when relating the importance of the abstract to the practical as aspiring ESL teachers develop their content and pedagogical knowledge.

Appendix

ESL STANDARDS 8710.4400 TEACHERS OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

Subp. 3. Subject matter standard. A candidate for licensure as a teacher of English as a second language must complete a preparation program under subpart 2, item C, that must include the candidate's demonstration of the knowledge and skills in items A to J.
A. An English as a second language teacher demonstrates a high level of proficiency in English commensurate with the role of an instructional model and develops an awareness of the process of formal language learning by learning a second language through two years of second language instruction in a high school setting or one year of second language instruction in a postsecondary setting, or the equivalent.
B. An English as a second language teacher understands a variety of methods, techniques, and program models suitable for second language instruction with diverse learners including adapting existing materials to meet the needs of the students with limited English proficiency. The teacher must:
(1) demonstrate an understanding of the importance of using multiple forms of instructional approaches to address different learning styles, background experiences, and performance modes of limited English proficiency students;
(2) be able to adopt appropriate learning materials and adapt teaching strategies to meet the second language needs of students with limited English proficiency in a school setting; and
(3) understand the developmental progression and range of individual variation of students with limited English proficiency in the context in which taught.
C. An English as a second language teacher uses various content-based methodologies and integrates language acquisition and use of language functions across learning experiences to facilitate full inclusion of students with limited English proficiency in the school setting. The teacher must:
(1) understand how limited English proficiency affects learning; and
(2) understand that both language learning and subject matter content are essential to student success in an academic setting.
D. An English as a second language teacher demonstrates the ability to communicate successfully with students, parents, colleagues, and community members. The teacher must:
(1) understand that cultural practices may differ and that these differences may affect the way students learn;
(2) understand schools as organizations within the larger community context and that successful communication with parents must be undertaken within that larger sociocultural framework;
(3) understand how the student's environment, including family circumstances, community systems, and health and economic conditions, may influence learning; and
(4) work with other professionals to improve the quality of educational services provided to students with limited English proficiency.
E. An English as a second language teacher demonstrates an understanding of communication instruction in the second language context and the importance of developing communication skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing across the curriculum. The teacher must:
(1) understand the differences between literacy development in the first language and the second language, and the implications for teaching second language learners;
(2) understand how to develop communication skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing as an important contributor to academic success across the curriculum; and
(3) understand and use a variety of communication techniques and be able to use verbal, nonverbal, and multimedia and other technology based resources that enhance student learning.
F. An English as a second language teacher understands and uses formal and informal second language assessment techniques to determine appropriate placement and to evaluate the progress of students with limited English proficiency. The teacher knows and uses criteria for determining the readiness of students to enter and exit limited English proficiency programs. The teacher must:
(1) understand the characteristics, uses, advantages, and limitations of formal and informal second language assessment techniques;

(2) understand the limitations of using traditional assessment procedures in the identification and placement of students with limited English proficiency in academic programs, including gifted and special education programs;
(3) understand second language assessment including item and test construction methods appropriate for students with limited English proficiency; and
(4) know how to administer, interpret, and explain the results of standardized tests and alternative methods of assessment to students with limited English proficiency, the students' parents, and to colleagues.
G. An English as a second language teacher understands the contributions of general and applied linguistics to second language education. The teacher must:
(1) understand basic linguistic concepts;
(2) understand features of English including phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics;
(3) relate knowledge of English to other languages; and
(4) understand the history and development of the English language.
H. An English as a second language teacher understands the fundamentals of the first and second language acquisition processes and their similarities and differences. The teacher must:
(1) understand the processes of first and second language acquisition; and
(2) understand that there are similarities and differences between child, adolescent, and adult language acquisition.
I. An English as a second language teacher is aware of how the historical, social, and political aspects of language and cultural patterns in the United States influence second language instruction. The teacher must:
(1) understand cultural pluralism in the United States, how cultural and social differences are reflected;
(2) be knowledgeable about the sociolinguistic dynamics of the cultures of the United States; and
(3) understand how cultural, linguistic, ethnic, regional, and gender differences affect communication in the classroom.
J. An English as a second language teacher must demonstrate an understanding of the teaching of English as a second language that integrates understanding of English as a second language with the teacher's understanding of pedagogy, students, learning, classroom management, and professional development. The teacher of English as a second language in kindergarten through grade 12 must:
(1) understand and apply educational principles relevant to the physical, social, emotional, moral, and cognitive development of children, preadolescents, and adolescents;
(2) understand and apply the research base for and the best practices of kindergarten and primary, intermediate, and middle level and high school education;
(3) develop curriculum goals and purposes based on the central concepts of English as a second language and know how to apply instructional strategies and materials for achieving student understanding;
(4) understand the role and alignment of district, school, and department mission and goals in program planning;
(5) understand the need for and how to connect students' schooling experiences with everyday life, the workplace, and further educational opportunities;
(6) know how to involve representatives of business, industry, and community organizations as active partners in creating educational opportunities;
(7) understand the role and purpose of cocurricular and extracurricular activities in the teaching and learning process; and
(8) apply the standards of effective practice in teaching students through a variety of early and ongoing clinical experiences with kindergarten and primary, intermediate, and middle level and high school students within a range of educational programming models.