

Special Issue
Preparation and Development of Mainstream Teachers for
Teaching Linguistically Diverse Classrooms

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ISSN: 0013-1725 (Print) 1938-8098 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/utef20>

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Sharon Feiman-Nemser

To cite this article: Sharon Feiman-Nemser (2018) What Does Research Tell Us About Educating Mainstream Teachers to Work With ELLs?, *The Educational Forum*, 82:2, 227-234, DOI: [10.1080/00131725.2018.1420872](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2018.1420872)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2018.1420872>



Published online: 13 Mar 2018.



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What Does Research Tell Us About Educating Mainstream Teachers to Work With ELLs?

Sharon Feiman-Nemser
Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, USA

Abstract

This commentary highlights findings from two reviews of research on the preparation and continuing development of regular classroom teachers to teach English language learners. Since both reviews use my “central tasks of teacher learning” framework, the commentary also assesses the framework’s usefulness in highlighting areas where research exists and where it is lacking. Looking across the reviews reveals that the area where most preservice studies cluster has the least number of inservice studies and vice versa.

Key words: *English language learners (ELLs), teacher education, teacher learning.*

Preparing mainstream teachers to work effectively with English language learners (ELLs) is a pressing educational need and challenge. Given the dramatic increase in the number of ELLs in public schools today and a complex policy context that tends to favor mainstreaming more than bilingual education, it is likely that most regular classroom teachers will find themselves teaching students whose first language is not English. How (and how well) are prospective and practicing teachers being prepared for this responsibility?

Ana Maria Villegas and her coauthors and Tamara Lucas and her coauthors have done a valuable service for the field. They have reviewed and appraised research reported from 2000 through 2016 about the preparation and continuing development of mainstream teachers to teach ELLs. Both reviews have important things to say to providers of teacher preparation and professional development, to researchers interested in the intersection of

teacher education and the education of ELLs, and to policy makers concerned about the public education of this growing student population.

The reviews are organized around a framework I developed that identifies central tasks of teacher learning at the preservice, induction, and inservice stages (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). This allows the reviewers to make visible what we know from research about the learning opportunities offered to prospective and practicing teachers and their associated learning outcomes and to map both against the “tasks of teacher learning” framework. In that sense the reviews test the usefulness of a framework designed to stimulate thinking about teacher preparation and development in general for thinking about the preparation and development of mainstream teachers to teach in linguistically diverse classrooms.

Developing a “Tasks of Teacher Learning” Framework

I wrote “From Preparation to Practice: Designing a Continuum to Strengthen and Sustain Teaching” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001) to “stimulate discussion and debate about what a teacher learning continuum from initial preparation through the early years of teaching could be like” (p. 1014). I argued that teachers were unlikely to teach effectively unless they had access to serious and sustained learning opportunities at each stage in their careers.

The notion of a continuum of professional learning opportunities geared to the learning needs of teachers at different career stages presumes that the practice of teaching, especially the kind of teaching reflected in high standards for teachers and students, must be learned and can be taught. It further presumes that learning to teach well happens over time and depends on teachers’ access to appropriate professional learning opportunities as part of the ongoing work of teaching.

In conceptualizing a curriculum for teacher learning over time, I considered three questions: (a) What do prospective teachers need to learn *before* they begin teaching? (b) What can teachers learn only after they begin to teach? (c) What are teachers in a position to learn after they have consolidated a basic teaching practice?

The first question implies that before people begin teaching, they need to develop basic understandings, skills, and dispositions. Such learning not only provides a necessary foundation for beginning teaching but also prepares teachers to learn well from on-the-job experience. The second question implies that teaching happens in a particular context. It follows that teachers can learn about their students, curriculum, school, and community only when they join a school faculty, find out who and what they are supposed to teach, and begin teaching. The third question implies that even well-started beginners cannot be expected to know or be ready to learn all the things that more experienced teachers can do or learn. Once new teachers solidify a basic teaching practice and gain a level of comfort and confidence in their new role, they are ready to tackle more complex aspects of teaching and develop their expertise.

Identifying central tasks of initial preparation, new teacher induction, and early professional development allows us to imagine a progressive and spiraling curriculum for learning to teach over time. While some tasks are unique to a given stage, others represent

aspects of teaching that require continuous attention in order to deepen or expand earlier learning. Thus the “tasks of teacher learning” framework projects an ideal situation in which learning opportunities build on one another across the learning-to-teach continuum.

In the case of preparing teachers to teach ELLs, the notion of a professional learning continuum is clearly aspirational. Thus, helping mainstream teachers embrace their professional responsibility to ELLs and gain the requisite knowledge and skills to teach in linguistically diverse classrooms must become a shared responsibility at every career stage.

This commentary is organized around several crosscutting topics. First I consider the relative emphasis at the preservice and inservice levels on selected tasks of teacher learning as reported in the research. Next I comment on the nature of the learning opportunities provided to prospective and practicing mainstream teachers of ELLs. Finally, I discuss some implications for research and practice, building on ideas put forward in the two reviews.

What the “Tasks of Teacher Learning” Framework Reveals

In reading the two reviews in relation to the central tasks of teacher learning, I was struck by two patterns. The biggest category of studies in the preservice review is the smallest category of studies in the inservice review. Similarly, the task associated with the most research at the induction and inservice levels receives minimal attention at the preservice level, despite a parallel task in the preservice framework. In addition, both reviews note the absence of opportunities for mainstream teachers to gain specialized foundational knowledge about second language learners and learning essential for working effectively with ELLs.

Changing Beliefs and Forming Visions

We know from decades of research that teachers come to their preparation and practice with deeply held, often tacit beliefs about teaching and learning, students, and subject matter based on their own schooling and upbringing. This includes attitudes and beliefs about people who differ from themselves in terms of race, class, gender, and language. If left unexamined, these beliefs continue to influence what teachers believe, learn, and do in the classroom.

I identify “analyzing beliefs and forming visions” as a central task of teacher preparation because it is a precondition and foundation for other aspects of teacher learning. A later synthesis of research on preservice teacher learning refers to this task as “the problem of preconceptions” (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005, p. 367). If, however, beginning or experienced teachers lack opportunities to examine critically their taken-for-granted beliefs and form a vision of what is possible and desirable, then this task must be addressed during the induction and/or inservice stages as well.

Villegas and colleagues’ review characterizes the largest group of preservice studies as belief-oriented because they focus on two related goals: (a) fostering more affirming beliefs about ELLs and (b) helping preservice teacher candidates develop an inclusive vision of teaching. Lucas and her coauthors include the task of analyzing beliefs and forming visions

in their analysis of research on inservice professional development even though only a handful of studies (six out of 29) examine it. They do so because many practicing teachers also need to examine critically their beliefs and assumptions about ELLs and develop a more inclusive vision of teaching.

It is not surprising that some teacher candidates hold deficit views of ELLs or regard teaching them as someone else's responsibility. Nor is it surprising that some experienced mainstream teachers share these views. If we expect mainstream teachers to create inclusive classrooms where ELLs receive the instructional support they need and deserve, however, then some targeted intervention is needed to transform these limiting beliefs and help mainstream teachers come to see ELLs as capable learners and themselves as responsible for their learning.

According to the reviews, there is some favorable evidence at the preservice level and mixed evidence at the inservice level of prospective and practicing teachers embracing more affirming beliefs about ELLs and a more inclusive vision of their instructional responsibilities. Still, several preservice studies note the persistence of deficit views of ELLs and the inservice review concludes that "real change in teachers' beliefs and practice takes longer and is influenced by more factors than were examined in the studies" (Lucas, Strom, Bratkovich, & Wnuk, 2018, p. 168).

Changing beliefs and forming visions of the possible and desirable in teaching occurs not only through self-examination and reflection, but also from getting to know ELLs directly and acquiring new knowledge and skills for teaching them effectively. In other words, narrow beliefs may be rejected in favor of more affirming ones as teachers develop greater confidence, understanding, and skill in working with ELLs. Both reviews underscore this interdependence of knowledge, skills, commitments, and beliefs in learning to teach. As Villegas and her coauthors observe, "as prospective teachers learn strategies for teaching ELLs and become more confident in their ability to do so, they may also become more open to having these students in their classrooms" (pp. 143–144). The same is true for practicing teachers whose attitudes toward and expectations of ELLs changed mainly as they learned more effective strategies to support their learning.

Developing Pedagogical Knowledge and Skill

Teaching is a complex practice that must be learned and can be taught. Prospective teachers need to develop a beginning repertoire in the areas of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Beginning teachers need to learn to enact an instructional repertoire that is purposeful and responsive to students and context. Inservice teachers need to refine and extend their curricular and pedagogical repertoire to meet the needs of all their students. That is why I include a version of this central task of teacher learning at every stage in the continuum.

The task of developing a beginning repertoire of practices for teaching ELLs received scant attention in the preservice research, while it accounted for the largest group of inservice studies (28 of the 29 studies). Is developing a beginning repertoire for teaching ELLs neglected at the preservice level because other aspects of diversity (e.g., race,

class, gender) receive more attention than linguistic diversity? Is it because preservice preparation focuses on developing a generic or subject-specific repertoire on the grounds that prospective teachers do not yet know what kinds of students they will teach? I wonder what the reviewers would say.

It seems easier to explain why the inservice studies focus on the extent to which beginning and practicing teachers have learned strategies for teaching ELLs. If mainstream teachers with no preparation for teaching ELLs find themselves facing this responsibility, they surely need to learn what to do. So it is not surprising that the largest group of inservice studies deal with developing, enacting, and refining knowledge and skills related to teaching ELLs.

The preservice review registers concern about the lack of attention to matters of practice, especially skills related to instructional scaffolding. The review also identifies knowledge of second language development as foundational to using these practices effectively. The inservice review registers concern about the strategic orientation in professional development without a concomitant grounding in principles of second language learning. I hear in these concerns a strong call for learning opportunities at all levels that integrate knowledge of second language development with strategies for teaching ELLs.

Learning Opportunities for Mainstream Teachers of ELLs

At a general level, the learning opportunities studied in the research embody some features of what is considered “good” practice in mainstream teacher education. Preservice courses are linked to field experiences, which offer direct contact with ELLs. This grounds new knowledge in practice and provides an experiential basis for self-examination and analysis. As Villegas and her colleagues point out, the learning process is “active and situated” (2018, p. 144). The inservice learning opportunities are extensive (one to three years) and often focused on problems of practice and collaboration, with teachers learning with and from one another rather than relying exclusively on outside experts.

The preservice review offers useful details about learning activities inside some of the courses and field experiences being studied. For example, Athanases, Wahleithner, and Bennett (2013) studied a course in which 15 English language arts student teachers used five inquiry processes to learn about ELLs and their writing. Jimenez-Silva and Olson (2012) studied a course in which teacher candidates wrote case studies of ELLs based on in-depth interviews, multiple observations, and readings. Knowing these details helps in speculating about how a given learning opportunity might produce the reported outcomes.

In the inservice review, the form of the learning opportunity (workshops, courses, summer institutes, mentoring) is identified but often there is less information about what happens inside these forms of professional development. While this may reflect a lack of details in the research, it makes it hard to link learning opportunities and outcomes. Even knowing that collaboration is a defining feature of most inservice learning opportunities studied does not tell us about the character or quality of teachers’ joint work and how the activities and interactions lead to learning.

A stated purpose of the reviews is to connect research on preparing teachers for linguistic diversity with promising ideas in the mainstream teacher education literature. So I want to mention a small but growing movement to refocus teacher education around a set of core practices essential for beginning teaching (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009). To advance this work, teacher educators have been experimenting with and studying new pedagogies for teaching core practices along with the knowledge, skills, and commitments needed to enact those practices. Two websites for learning more about this movement are TeachingWorks (<http://www.teachingworks.org>) and the Core Practices Consortium (<http://corepracticeconsortium.com>). Many of the pedagogies provide repeated opportunities in campus courses and K–12 classrooms for teacher candidates to rehearse core practices with coaching and feedback (McDonald, Kazemi, & Kavanagh, 2013). A goal of the movement is to help teachers “implement core practices in ways that leverage and build on students’ intellectual, cultural, linguistic, and emotional assets” (Core Practices Consortium website).

This effort reflects a shift from relying on “pedagogies of reflection and analysis” to an emphasis on “pedagogies of enactment” (Hammerness et al., 2005; Kennedy, 1999). The former are prominent in the preservice learning opportunities reviewed, with a few exceptions such as a study by Pu (2012) of a required TESOL course. Participants observed strategies teachers used to make academic content understandable to ELLs and received coaching in how to use those strategies in their teaching of small groups of ELLs.

A major finding regarding inservice learning opportunities is their emphasis on helping practicing teachers implement new strategies for teaching ELLs, sometimes but not always in conjunction with knowledge of second language development. One strong example of an inservice learning opportunity combining inquiry, reflection, and enactment is the learning lab studied by Brancard and Quinnwilliams (2012). For 2 years on a monthly or bimonthly basis, participating teachers identified a common problem of practice in teaching ELLs, observed one of the teachers addressing that problem, discussed the problem, and chose a relevant strategy to practice in their own classroom with coaching and feedback. We see here the potential to identify and teach core instructional practices for working effectively with ELLs, using other teachers’ classrooms at the preservice stage and teachers’ own classrooms at the induction and inservice stages.

Implications for Research and Practice

The two reviews bring together a modest research base regarding a pressing educational issue: preparing mainstream teachers to respond appropriately and effectively to the learning needs of ELLs. Organizing the research around the tasks of teacher learning framework reveals an emphasis on changing beliefs and developing visions at the preservice level and on learning appropriate instructional strategies at the inservice level. The reviews point to needed directions in both research and teacher education practice.

The preservice studies focus on a single course, so even if they document promising learning outcomes, we do not know what happens to the learning outcomes as prospective teachers move into teaching. And we also need to know how the course fits into the

program as a whole. What are the tradeoffs of integrating the preparation of mainstream teachers for linguistic diversity into a larger multicultural or diversity agenda or treating it separately? We need research to address these questions.

The reviews identify some core knowledge, dispositions, and practices for teaching ELLs. What version of this agenda is most appropriate for preservice, beginning, and experienced teachers? Does it depend on the location of programs and schools where teachers teach or are likely to teach? For instance, if beginning teachers come to their teaching with an affirming perspective on linguistic diversity and some appropriate strategies, can schools capitalize on practicing teachers' need to know how to work with their own ELL students and provide the kind of learning opportunities that link appropriate strategies with relevant knowledge?

In the mainstream teacher education literature, there is a strong press for research that links specific features of teacher education and professional development with desirable learning outcomes, especially changes in teachers' practice and students' learning. This problem lends itself to various research designs and methods. If we want to understand what promotes or limits teacher learning, however, we need research that examines the learning process as well as the learning opportunities. We also need to know how school context interacts with teacher beliefs and professional development opportunities to shape teachers' perspectives and practice.

Finally, using the tasks of teacher learning framework to organize research on the preparation and continuing development of mainstream teachers to teach ELLs sheds valuable light on what is being taught and learned in preservice and inservice education and where gaps exist. At the same time, the framework may encourage the separation of tasks of teacher learning that must come together in practice and in a dynamic, interactive learning process. The field would benefit from design experiments at both the preservice and inservice levels that aim to integrate language-specific learning tasks related to vision, knowledge, and repertoire.

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