

Developing Asset-Based Understandings: A Discourse Analysis of Teachers' Reflections on English Learners

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This qualitative study examines 20 U.S. mainstream teachers' perceptions regarding their English learners (EL) through a discourse analysis of written reflections. Consistent with Gee's (2011) discourse analysis theory, the ways teachers communicate about their students enact particular kinds of identities and relationships. Themes are discussed in terms of how teachers construct identities for ELs and how they perceive their relationship to students. Findings suggest that this group of teachers demonstrates emergent asset-based understandings of ELs and their first languages. They acknowledge the complex, multifarious roles they hold and express a commitment to educating ELs. Implications for professional development are provided.

Keywords: English learners, discourse analysis, teacher education

As U.S. immigrant families migrate from urban centers to suburban and rural areas, previously-monolingual classrooms are now filled with English learners (ELs), or students who speak another language at home. With a growth rate of 60% in the last decade (Batalova et al., 2006), ELs account for nearly 10% of all students nationwide (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). These students face the challenge of learning rigorous academic content alongside English, which means they “must perform double the work of native English speakers” (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007, p. 1), no small task for even the brightest of individuals.

Traditionally, schools have delegated the work of teaching ELs to language specialists who “pulled out” ELs to receive instruction separate from -and often inferior to- that provided to their native English-speaking peers. More recently, a political climate of accountability has shifted paradigms for teaching ELs to inclusion models, which give the ambitious charge of teaching ELs to mainstream teachers who have specializations in disciplinary expertise, but not necessarily in language pedagogy. In fact, these so-called “mainstream” teachers are now more likely than not to encounter ELs in their classroom (NCES, 2012), regardless of their backgrounds.

It is within this context that I sought to understand the ideas that mainstream teachers hold regarding ELs in their classroom. Given the impact that teachers' attitudes can have on student performance (Pettit, 2011), it behooves us to explore the perspectives of teachers with whom ELs spend the majority of their day. These understandings can inform professional development that will ultimately lead to improved schooling for ELs. Following, I briefly summarize literature and theoretical

assumptions that guided the study. I describe the methodology and then outline thematic findings prior to concluding with a discussion and recommendations.

Literature Review

Our knowledge about mainstream teachers' perspectives regarding ELs represents both qualitative designs, such as interviews and case studies (Clair, 1995; Gitlin, Buendía, Crosland, & Doumbia, 2003) that deeply investigate particular contexts, as well as survey methods (Byrnes, Kiger, & Manning, 1997; Penfield, 1987; Reeves, 2006; Walker, Shafer, & Liams, 2004; Youngs & Youngs, 2001) that reveal understandings of larger groups. Findings consistently suggest that mainstream teachers feel unprepared to teach ELs (Gándara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Driscoll, 2005; Penfield, 1987; Reeves, 2006) and are at times reluctant to take ownership of ELs, ceding the responsibility of educating ELs to the ESL teacher (Walker et al., 2004). Professional development and cross-cultural experiences seemed to impact teachers' attitudes (Byrnes et al., 1997; Youngs & Youngs, 2001), a hopeful sign for the potential of professional learning to instigate change in teachers. Despite the growing numbers of ELs in mainstream classrooms, recent work demonstrates that teachers persist in deficit ideologies and misunderstandings about ELs (Hansen-Thomas & Cavagnett 2010; Salerno & Kibler, 2013).

This study documents teachers' attitudes towards ELs revealed through their written reflections in online discussions. Unlike many previous studies, these teachers discuss ELs in the context of a voluntary online course, evidence of a sense of investment in educating ELs.

Theoretical Framework

I ascribe to the sociocultural notion that engagement with others leads to meaning-making (Vygotsky, 1978), which includes identity, or "being recognized as a certain 'kind of person' in a given context" (Gee, 2000, p. 99). A contextually-bound conceptualization of identity rejects a biological understanding of a "core" identity that progresses along a predictable trajectory (e.g., Erikson) and instead acknowledges the multiple, dynamic identities that we each possess. These identities morph and grow in uneven patterns based on our interactions with others in the world. Language is key in understanding identity from this perspective; it is not only the medium of the interactions we have with others, but it also transforms the very nature of the meaning we make. As Gutiérrez, Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, and Turner (1997) explain, language is "fundamental to construction of self and is at the core of our social, emotional, and cognitive experiences" (p. 369).

Language emerges as a powerful lever for enacting teacher and student relationships. The words, phrases, and sentences that teachers use are pregnant with social context and underlying assumptions that construct meaning. Discourse analysis of language choices therefore reveals the ways in which social understandings are built, sustained, or transformed. This study focuses on how teachers describe ELs, which

then play a part in enacting student and teacher identities. With this premise in mind, the following research questions guided this discourse analysis: How do teachers describe ELs? What identities and relationships do these descriptions enact?

Method

Participants

Participants were 20 in-service educators in a graduate certificate program on teaching ELs. Prior to the program, participants had only occasional short-term training in working with ELs. Seventeen (85%) educators were from one suburban school district with 16% ELs overall. In two of participants’ schools, ELs comprised over half the study body. The three other participants worked at different districts, each of which had a growing number of ELs. Only 14 of the 20 participants were classroom teachers; the others held specialist or administrative positions, and some worked across multiple schools. I refer to the participants in the course as either “teachers” or “educators,” with the assumption that all participants contributed to the teaching of ELs. Table 1 summarizes characteristics of participants.

Table 1. *Participant Characteristics*

<i>Level</i>	<i>Number of Participants</i>
Elementary	2
Secondary-Middle	7
Secondary-High	8
Multiple	3
<i>Role</i>	<i>Number of Participants</i>
Classroom Teacher	14
Coach	2
Specialist	4
<i>Content (Secondary Level)</i>	<i>Number of Participants</i>
English Language Arts (ELA)	3
Math	1
Social Studies	2
Science	1
Spanish	3
Other	2

Data Sources

Teachers responded to weekly discussion board prompts as part of a semester-long course. Many of these responses included reflections about the ELs in their school. While findings represent posts from a variety of course topics, relevant data emerged from two prompts that elicited teachers’ personal reflections: (a) an introductory post: “What is your teaching context? Who are your students?” and (b) a

post on native language (L1) use: “Have you incorporated students’ first language in your classroom? Have you seen effective examples of other teachers doing this?”

Data Analysis

Data analysis was an iterative process resulting in codes that were then compiled into themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Subsequent to the course, I re-read all responses, assigned emic codes that addressed the research questions, and developed cross-case matrices to identify areas of prevalence. In analyzing responses, I used Gee’s identity-building tool, asking “what socially recognizable identity or identities the speaker is trying to enact or get others to recognize” and “what sorts of identities the speaker recognizes for others in relationship to his or her own... how the speaker is positioning others [and] what identities the speaker is ‘inviting’ them to take up” (Gee, 2011, p. 110). I examined both the content of the responses, as well as lexical and grammatical devices that teachers chose.

Limitations

Multiple factors limited this analysis. First, the topics in the discussion prompts and peers’ responses likely impacted the language teachers used in their responses. Second, the context of the online class likely led to a degree of social desirability bias, wherein teachers wrote in particular ways to earn a favorable grade. Third, written discourse does not reveal the extralinguistic cues or spontaneity that goes along with oral language.

Findings

Findings provide insight into teachers’ conceptualizations of ELs and their relationship to ELs. Three themes are explored in this manuscript: (a) ELs as expert L1 speakers; (b) teachers as intermediaries; and (c) teachers as allies.

“A wealth of knowledge”: Positioning ELs as L1 experts in the classroom

Teachers recognized ELs’ L1 as a central part of their identity, taking up progressive discourses that value bilingualism. For these teachers, ELs’ ability to speak two languages positioned them as experts in the classroom. However, these asset-based understandings were sometimes superficial and limited to the classroom. As an example, a high school teacher wrote that his ELs “have a wealth of knowledge about their language, and they need to feel like it is an asset in learning and life, which it is.” In this statement, the teacher forefronts ELs’ “perception” of their L1 as an asset, with the phrase “which it is” coming as an afterthought. This teacher did not expand on exactly “how” knowledge about language is an asset, beyond mentioning that students of the same language background sometimes “translate for each other [which] means they’re helping each other learn.” The individuals who realize the asset that this teacher mentions are not the ELs who use the L1, but their peers who need help, or possibly

the teacher himself who benefits from the ELs who translate course content to beginning-level ELs.

Another teacher from the same school explained how students with low-incidence L1s could assist each other. He wrote that his knowledge of Spanish enabled him to point out cognates for ELs, but he had “a much harder time doing this in certain other languages.” In these cases, he paired ELs of the L1, writing, “they have a way even beyond sharing a language, of explaining things to each other in ways that teachers can’t.” When read in context of the teacher’s ability to explain cognates in Spanish, we see that the expertise “beyond sharing a language” is only granted to ELs who share each other’s native language. ELs have the opportunity to “explain things to each other in ways that teachers can’t” only when they hold linguistic knowledge that the teacher does not possess.

One teacher summarized how her sole Arabic-speaking student taught monolingual English-speakers in the class about Arabic. She said, “all of the students agree that Arabic is beautiful but don’t know how people write it. [Student] had a field day teaching all the other students a few basics. It blew their mind that it is written right to left as well.” The student’s ability to speak Arabic marks him as exceptional for the teacher and other students. While this comment demonstrates a positive connotation towards the L1 (“Arabic is beautiful”), the response normalizes the experiences and perspectives of “all the other” monolingual students. This statement risks reifying other students’ assumptions about the exoticism of non-English languages.

“Bag of tricks:” Teachers as implementers of strategies

Teachers deployed mechanical language to position themselves as intermediaries between strategies or materials and ELs. In the introductory post, 16 (80%) teachers referred to “strategies” in the context of helping ELs. Comments included, “I’ve found some of the strategies have been helpful,” “I’m focused on trying new strategies to help teach my ELs,” or “my professional goal is to use vocabulary strategies...to help better meet the needs of my students.”

Teachers described themselves as technicians who apply ready-made strategies that can be “found” or “learned.” When describing strategies, one teacher used the metaphor of a “bag of tricks” and another teacher referred to adding to her “toolkit,” both metaphors invoking tangible images of strategies. The relationships teachers enacted here recall economic models of specialization, wherein teachers apply technical skills to operate instructional mechanisms (e.g., strategies or materials) that then lead to learning for ELs.

Participants also described themselves as providers of tangible materials for ELs. Even though the second prompt explicitly queried teachers about their actions (i.e., Have you incorporated students’ first language in your classroom?), four of the ten teachers who responded focused on materials. Two teachers explained how they “provided” ELs with bilingual dictionaries, and one teacher described her struggle “to

order Arabic posters.” A specialist wrote that she felt “ill-equipped to provide resources to the teachers in [her] schools who are struggling to support ELLs.” The implication in her comment is that her role in supporting teachers is to “provide resources.” In these cases, teachers delegated the work of incorporating students’ languages to materials that they bring into the classroom.

A few participants distanced themselves from the process of implementing strategies through passive voice, granting the grammatical subject to the strategy or material. For instance, one teacher explained that “word walls and graphic organizers are helpful to give ELs prompts when trying to respond to a question.” Another teacher said about his classes, “there are about five or so students . . . that need stronger scaffolding and accommodations to help them access the content.” These comments underscore the value of the strategy and implicitly assume the role of teachers as channels to deliver these techniques.

“A Passion for Working with ELs:” Teachers as Allies

In a turn from the mechanical language about implementing strategies, participants also invoked emotion to express their commitment to ELs. The majority of teachers took ownership of ELs, describing them as “my students” or “my ELs,” with only one elementary teacher saying that ELs “were placed” in her classroom. A high school teacher wrote that his administrators placed newly-arrived immigrants in his class, but instead of perceiving the ELs as a burden, he explained, “I feel blessed to be given this responsibility.” Other teachers used the terms “lucky” and “privileged” to describe their roles at schools with large numbers of ELs.

Teachers also used emotional language to ally themselves with ELs. A Spanish teacher described “how much [ELs] matter to us,” and a high school teacher wrote, “I love the population here. It has its own challenges but I could not see myself anywhere else.” Likewise, a specialist explained feeling “overwhelmed” when learning about ELs but then countered, “I’ve found that I have a passion for working with newcomers and ELs in general. I’m not sure I’d ever want to go back to teaching at a school with few ELs!” These participants pair the “challenges” that come with teaching ELs with “love” and “passion.” Exemplifying the dynamic and multiple nature of professional identities, these teachers who spoke of their emotional connections to ELs are some of the same ones who wrote of strategies and materials in relatively detached language.

Further, participants generally wrote positive comments about their colleagues’ capacity to work with ELs. For instance, a high school Spanish teacher wrote, “I have the privilege of working with monolingual English educators that effectively teach ELL students . . . these incredible colleagues simply exude genuine care and willingness to establish a positive human connection with their students.” Instead of concrete strategies or materials, this teacher points to affective characteristics (“genuine care and willingness”) that serve ELs. Only two comments indicated other teachers held negative attitudes towards ELs. First, one high school teacher referred to “the blindness of some of my colleagues . . . who have not considered life at home for these

students or just don't care." Second, in describing pressures at home for ELs, a specialist said, "there are many teachers (and by no means all) that expect these students to bring in their homework. They can't understand why they are unable to do just four problems at night." Both of these comments reveal the participants' assumptions that "care" and "understanding" are essential to meeting ELs' needs. Unfortunately, the comments also demonstrate that many teachers still hold deficit views towards EL. Participants are able to recognize negative attitudes, a first step in combatting them.

Discussion

This study explored the perspectives of 20 mainstream teachers regarding ELs through discourse analysis. Findings suggest reasons to be cautiously optimistic about ELs' education in mainstream classes.

First, the ways teachers extolled ELs' L1 is hopeful in the face of English-only policies and messages hostile towards immigrants. However, despite well-intentioned desires, teachers' efforts to elevate the status of ELs' L1 risk turning into hollow euphemisms. Descriptions of ELs' first languages do not disrupt school norms, and in fact may support existing structures designed for monolingual speakers. For instance, L1 emerged in the classroom largely to facilitate content-learning in English, or else to display the differences between languages (i.e., EL teaching peers "a few basics" of Arabic). No teachers articulated translanguaging philosophies (Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015), which acknowledge porous boundaries among languages and normalizes the use of multiple languages within the classroom.

Second, teachers demonstrated a complex understanding of their roles as teachers of ELs, which points towards an awareness of the sophisticated endeavor of teaching ELs. Reflecting multiple, simultaneous identities, the same teachers who drew on affect to describe their role towards ELs also conceived themselves as practitioners to implement strategies. While lists of best practices often promulgated on websites and in textbooks are helpful for improving EL education, they are not enough on their own. Teachers in this group articulated a sense of caring "for" ELs, beyond simply caring "about" them, not unlike the care that Valenzuela (1999) discussed in her ethnography of Latinx students in Texas. These dispositions can act as powerful motivators for these teachers to advocate for ELs.

Implications

One implication from this study is to harness the enthusiasm and emotional commitment that mainstream teachers of ELs may hold. Professional development can develop EL leaders by first identifying educators who are invested in the well-being of ELs and then preparing them as not only effective teachers for ELs, but effective leaders and advocates for change. Beyond a focus on practical step-by-step strategies, teacher educators might challenge these teachers to reflect on their assumptions about ELs and their position in school. Such critical, and potentially

uncomfortable, conversations can empower teachers to disrupt status quo practices at schools that implicitly maintain monolingual norms.

Real change for ELs also requires reforms at a systemic level. For instance, established curricula and assessments can thwart teachers from integrating students' L1s in meaningful ways; high-stakes exams are all in English, and ELs are held accountable for moving "up" in English proficiency levels, regardless of their L1 development. Further, teacher evaluation revolves around objective, observable instructional strategies that teachers can implement rather than development of dispositions that indicate commitment and the kind of "caring for" that Valenzuela (1999) describes. Current educational contexts in the U.S. hold little incentive for teachers to create multilingual classrooms that uplift ELs and challenge norms. While structural change requires time and resources, this study demonstrates that the will to undertake this work may lie within particular mainstream teachers devoted to ELs. The task for professional development is to develop within these teachers the deep knowledge and critical consciousness necessary to emerge as leaders for ELs.

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