# Impacting Pre-Service Teachers' Sociocultural Awareness, Content Knowledge and Understanding of Teaching ELLs Through Service-Learning

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Abstract

Preparing teachers to work with English language learners (ELLs) is of critical importance given their increased numbers in schools. One promising initiative is the subject of this study: combining ESL coursework with a service-learning component in a teacher education program. This research explores the impact of this service-learning initiative on pre-service teachers' sociocultural awareness, content knowledge and understanding of teaching ELLs.

## Introduction

Schools in the United States are faced with growing numbers of students whose primarily language is not English and who are often limited in their academic proficiency in this language. A recent report on the rate of increase of English Language Learners (ELL) in American schools paints a vivid picture: While there has been only a slight increase over this time period in total school enrollments overall (less than 5%), the number of ELLs has risen over 57% (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs, 2007). As the growth of ELLs in mainstream classrooms continue to rise, all teachers, not just ELL support personnel, must be prepared to meet the needs of this unique population.

Unfortunately, there are a number of mainstream teachers who have had few educational experiences in working with these culturally and linguistically diverse learners and feel ill-prepared to help them with their academic progress. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 41% of teachers who had participated in professional development attended activities about teaching students from "diverse cultural backgrounds," and just 26% of them had participated in training related to "addressing the needs of students with limited English proficiency" (Parsad, Lewis & Westat, 2001, p. 4). Even in the cases where educators have received professional development for working with diverse student populations, research about the preparation of teachers has uncovered "enormous variability in what counts as sufficient preparation to take on the challenge of teaching ELL students" (Working Group on ELL Policy, 2009, p. 13). In addition, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation does not require teachers to be certified in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL), nor do they have "to meet the 'highly qualified' requirements under the federal law" (Honawar, 2009, p. 28). As a result, teachers exhibit a wide range of skills and abilities for working with these learners.

Teacher preparation programs also exhibit this inconsistency. Ballantyne, Sanderman and Levy (2008)

point out that only twenty states require new teachers to have some kind of preparation for working with ELLs, and there is very little consistency among these offerings. These researchers discovered that "States' requirements vary considerably, with some peripherally mentioning ELLs in their standards for pre-service teachers, and others (Arizona, California, Florida, and New York) requiring specific coursework or separate certification on the needs of ELLs" (p. 9). Unfortunately, these underprepared pre-service teachers are the ones who are often on the front lines in their first years of teaching, as research has shown the "new teachers and teachers in the process of receiving their credential through intern or residency programs are placed disproportionately in schools and classrooms with large numbers of ELLs" (Working Group on ELL Policy, 2009, p. 12). A recent issue paper from the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality makes it very clear: "Teacher preparation programs must provide a content-rich and context-specific curricula for their teacher candidates…[which] instruct candidates on the distinct learning needs of particular student populations, including ELL students" (McGraner & Saenz, 2009, p. 2). Therefore, it is imperative that these pre-service programs begin to look at ways to provide the kinds of knowledge and experiences that will allow teacher candidates to feel confident working in today's classrooms of multicultural/multilingual learners.

An Integrated, Innovative Approach
Given the current state of teacher preparation programs, it is obvious that a restructuring needs to take place so that the cycle of unpreparedness that teachers feel when working with culturally and linguistically diverse populations can be broken. Much of the discussion about the kinds of knowledge and experiences that teachers need in order to be prepared to work with ELLs has focused on providing the requisite attention to linguistics and to methodological approaches that are sensitive to linguistics and other aspects of diversity. McGraner and Saenz (2009), in their review of the literature "on mainstream teacher education, teacher preparation for ELL teaching, and instructional practices in ELL teaching" (p. 4), identified six core components that should be addressed by teacher preparation programs:

- sociocultural and political foundations for teaching ELL students
- foundations in second language acquisition
- knowledge for teaching academic content
- effective instructional practices
- assessment and accommodation practices
- professional engagement and collaboration (p. 5)

Fillmore and Snow (2002) underscore the need to prepare teachers in these areas and argue
> the poor language outcomes for English language learners in California and elsewhere could have been avoided had teachers known enough about the conditions for successful

language learning to provide explicit instruction in English. Educators must know enough about language learning and about language itself to evaluate the appropriateness of various methods, materials, and approaches for helping students make progress in learning English. (p. 32)

Although there is a need to provide this preparation for pre-service teachers, the challenge remains to incorporate this kind of extensive education and development into the existing teacher preparation curriculum, which is heavily laden with other core requirements. One promising initiative to address three of these core areas (sociocultural aspects, knowledge base, and effective instructional strategies) is the subject of this study: combining ESL specific coursework in applied linguistics with a service-learning component that engages pre-service teachers with English language learners.

### Sociocultural Awareness.

Researchers credit the "theoretical underpinnings" (Alred, 2003, p. 5) of sociocultural theory to Vygotsky (1978) and his belief in the impact of social interaction on the teaching and learning process. According to Lemke (2001), "sociocultural perspectives include the social-interactional, the organizational, and the sociological; the social-developmental, the biographical, and the historical; the linguistic, the semiotic, and the cultural" (p. 297). In the realm of education, sociocultural awareness shines light on the need "to be aware that the particular language

forms that speakers choose to 'get things done' reflect not only their identities but also a broad range of sociocultural variables, such as their relationship to the interlocutor, and wider social structures" (McConachy, 2009, p. 117). This understanding is crucial, particularly in the realm of second language teaching, because it "moves beyond the view of the teacher as an individual entity attempting to master content knowledge and unravel the hidden dimensions of his or her own teaching and views learning as a social process" (Richards, 2008, p. 169). McConachy (2009) boldly states that "what is needed is for language teachers to increase their own awareness of the ways in which context affects the choice of language forms…[and] based on this heightened awareness, teachers will be in a better position to design [curricula] that focus not only on the skill of locating information but also on the skill of analyzing language use in reflection of sociocultural context" (p. 119).

### Content Knowledge.

In addition to having the requisite skills and strategies for working with ELLs, mainstream teachers, particularly at the elementary level, need to have a solid foundation in understanding and applying English grammar, and need to serve as appropriate role models for language usage. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) underscore this need: "The more teachers know about grammar, the more expeditiously they should be able to raise a learner's consciousness about how language works" (p.1). Denham and Lobeck (2002), in their work exploring "the

growing curricular possibilities directed at integrating linguistics into the K-12 classroom" (p.1), point to research that supports the notion that teachers have to have this background knowledge:

> The general thrust of [this research] is to highlight how linguistic knowledge enhances teachers' and students' understanding of language structure, acquisition, variation and change. Such knowledge, in turn, leads to a greater understanding of linguistic diversity, and to recognition of linguistic discrimination both inside and outside of the (often multilingual) K-12 classroom. (p. 1)

It is therefore imperative that teachers have strong content knowledge in order to provide appropriate support and instruction in the classroom.

Understanding of Teaching English Language Learners.

There exists a wealth of information about teaching ELLs (Fisher & Rothenberg, 2007; Freeman & Freeman, 2004; Gibbons, 2002; Samway & McKeon, 2007). However, Genesee, Lindhom-Leary, Sauders and Christian (2006) have discovered that "it is highly unlikely that a single instructional approach or method is likely to be effective for all ELLs given the diversity of backgrounds, resources, and challenges they bring to the learning environment, often within a single classroom" (p. 227). This is certainly true when it comes to teaching content knowledge, such as English grammar.

Teachers must "not only understand certain core grammatical concepts, but they must also know how to *apply* their knowledge of grammar in the classroom effectively" (Denham & Lobeck, 2002, p. 2).

But teaching is more than just the ability to convey content knowledge in interesting ways. As Richards (2009) states:

> Teaching is not simply the application of knowledge and of learned skills. It is viewed as a much more complex cognitively-driven process affected by the classroom context, the teachers general and specific instructional goals, the learners' motivations and reactions to the lesson, the teacher's management of critical moments during a lesson. (p. 167)

The pre-service teachers in this study encountered various aspects of these three teaching-learning dynamics—sociocultural awareness, content knowledge and understanding of teaching ELLs—as they worked their way through the service-learning project in the applied linguistics course.

Service-Learning

Service-learning in teacher education is not new (Anderson, Swick, & Yff, 2001; Boyle-Baise, 2002; Erickson & Anderson, 2005). This intensive pedagogical approach, which combines theory with a service component, can offer pre-service teachers an additional experiential offering beyond their traditional field experience and student teaching practicum. Swick and Rowls (2000) believe that this methodology

can transform teacher education programs by offering students more than just a foundation in the theory of English language learning:

> Service-learning, as an instructional method in teacher education, holds vast promise for reshaping teacher education programs. It can become the means by which we do a much better job of connecting teachers to children and the communities in which they live. Service-learning can become the vehicle by which we rethink teachers' roles, responsibilities, and functions. (p. 468).

The role of service-learning in teacher education has taken on considerable import in the last decade. As Buchanan, Baldwin and Rudisill (2002) state, "service learning exemplifies reciprocal benefits in which pre-service teachers increase their understanding of being a teacher, while members of the community benefit from the efforts of the pre-service teachers and the university" (p. 28). Through service-learning, pre-service teachers are exposed to a number of different experiences that they might not normally encounter in their traditional field experiences. Carrington and Selva (2010), in their research on critical social theory and transformative learning, have found that service-learning "requires university students to become involved in their community in order to critique and reflect on knowledge learned at university" (p. 47). Indeed, the power of this pedagogy is far-reaching, because preparation programs "with a focused service

learning component" provide pre-service teachers with "an opportunity to engage in meaningful interactions with students in real contexts that encourage reflection and conceptualization, which is especially important in working with minority students" (Guadarrama, 2000, p. 230). Unfortunately, according to Anderson and Erickson (2003), only 24% of teacher preparation programs provide service-learning opportunities for pre-service teachers (p. 112).

Purpose of the Study

Recently passed legislation in Pennsylvania now requires that by 2011 all teacher preparation programs include three credits or ninety hours in the curriculum for addressing the competencies and skills needed to equip teachers to assist English language learners (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2010). This case study sought to explore the impact of a three-credit upper level course in linguistic structures for English as a second language, offered as part of the requirements for a baccalaureate degree program in elementary education at a small branch campus (approximately 800 students) of a large, public research university in Pennsylvania.

The course itself is designed to provide an overview of the structure of the English language through a functional/discourse analytic approach to linguistic analysis, and service-learning integrates the academic content with a tutoring project where the pre-service teachers work with adult English language learners enrolled in an ESL (English as a Second Language) program at a local community-based

agency. The partnership between the course instructor and the agency was developed years ago through a state-initiated literacy program that links college students with adult literacy programs to provide supplemental tutoring services to adult learners. This particular agency in the study is a state-funded program that offers a variety of free or low-cost adult basic education, general education development, workforce development, prison literacy, and ESL programs. The pre-service teachers worked with the ESL programs, which are specifically developed to help the learners improve their reading, writing, speaking and listening skills in English. The agency identifies adults who need additional assistance and matches the pre-service teachers with these adults who are from all over the world and who come into the literacy program with varying levels of proficiency in the English language and a wide range of educational goals. Many of them are well-educated in their native languages and want to gain the same proficiency level in English; others have been living in the United States for many years but are only now taking steps to improve their English in order to get better jobs or to help their children in school. The pre-service teachers spent approximately three hours a week over the course of the semester tutoring these adults in one-on-one or small group instructional settings. Working with adult learners provides these pre-service teachers with different instructional demands from the typical K-6 classroom. Sherow (2006) in her overview of adult learning theory and practice provides evidence of these differences:

--Adults participate in learning activities when they see the outcomes as relevant to their roles as family members, workers, and citizens.
--Adults have a need to know why they should learn something—they must see a reason.
--Adults have to consider it important to acquire the new skill, knowledge, or attitude.
--Adults tend to learn best when what is to be learned is related to a real-life context that they are familiar with or associated with—topics they find compelling.
--Adult learners need to make connections between familiar ideas and new ideas to be acquired, and see how skills relate to real-life contexts. (p. 20)

In addition, "adults have a volume of prior knowledge and past experiences that can be connected to new learning experiences, and, in doing so, can make learning more meaningful and assist in the acquisition of new knowledge" (Sherow, 2006, p. 21). This is a different context from teaching elementary-age students, but one that the pre-service teachers can learn from in ways that will challenge them to know and apply English grammar.

The overall goals of the linguistic course are to introduce pre-service teachers to the current theoretical issues related to pedagogical grammars and to provide students with a variety of opportunities to apply their developing skills of linguistic analysis to

recognize, and analyze, and remediate both oral and written grammatical errors through this community-based project. What follows is an examination of the impact of service-learning on pre-service teachers' sociocultural awareness, content knowledge, and understanding of teaching English language learners.

Methodology

The case study involved 20 pre-service teachers enrolled in a baccalaureate certification program in elementary education. In many ways, they fit the profile of "the typical teacher candidate" (Lowenstein, 2009, p. 166). Of the total number of pre-service teachers in the study, 75% were female (n=15) and 25% were male (n=5). They were primarily White (n=18; 90%), 70% (n=14) of them were 21 year of age or younger, and 80% (n=16) were monolingual. All of these pre-service teachers had been involved in the schools in some capacity (observing, tutoring, etc.) prior to enrolling in the course, but the majority of them have had limited exposure to working with English language learners.

An inductive approach was used to identify patterns in the qualitative data of the participant-produced reflective writings. "The primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies" (Thomas, 2003, p. 2). Through this process, "extensive raw data" is compressed into a summary format that provides links between the objectives of the research project and

the findings in order "to develop a model or theory about the underlying structure of the experiences or processes which are evident in the text (raw data)" (p. 2). The raw data in this study was coded initially by the author; two additional raters recoded a sample of the data with an inter-rater reliability score of 82% and 88%, respectively. Although relying on students' self-perceptions in addition to the researcher's observations can be problematic, Matthews and Zimmerman (1999), in their own study of the impact of this pedagogy, found "that qualitative methods were best for determining whether students developed particular benefits of service learning" (p. 386).

The case study methodology is an important approach used in the field of education. "As a research strategy, the case study is used in many situations to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political and related phenomena…and has been a common research strategy" in many disciplines (Yin, 2009, p. 4). Anderson (1998) states that "case study deals with contemporary events in their natural context...[and] is concerned with how things happen and why" (p. 162). Case studies allow researchers to examine "complex social phenomena" and at the same time "retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events" (Yin, 2009, p. 4).

This methodology is not without its critics, however, many of whom believe that this method of research lacks robustness. According to Tellis (1997):

> Critics of the case study method believe that the study of a small number of cases can offer no

grounds for establishing reliability or generality of findings. Others feel that the intense exposure to study of the case biases the findings. Some dismiss case study research as useful only as an exploratory tool.

In spite of these criticisms, "researchers continue to use the case study research method with success in carefully planned and crafted studies of real-life situations, issues, and problems [and] reports on case studies from many disciplines are widely available in the literature" (Soy, 1997). This appears to be the circumstance in research about service-learning, as a number of scholars have employed this methodology to examine patterns and relationships in the data collected (Boyle-Baise, 2002; Burton & Reynolds, 2009; Callahan & Root, 2003; Jensen & Burr, 2006).

Data Collection

To effectively and systematically investigate the impact of the course on the participants, data was gathered through a variety of sources:

--*Pre- and post-course surveys*: Pre-service teachers were given pre- and post-course surveys to elicit their perceptions about the experience. The pre-course survey was a short questionnaire developed by the author to gather students' perceptions about their understanding of grammar, the ability to teach this content, and their expectations for the course (Appendix A). This survey instrument gathered data about the pre-service teachers' perceptions in five areas: 1) whether they liked grammar, 2) whether they had had formal instruction in English

grammar, 3) how they would rank their understanding of English grammar on a Likert-scale of low to high, 4) how they would rank their ability to teach English grammar using the same Likert-scale, and lastly, 5) their expectations and concerns about the course. The post-course survey incorporated select statements regarding attitude toward community involvement from the Community-Based Learning Student Survey developed by Campus Compact (Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring & Keerigan, 2001). The purpose of the survey is "to describe students' perspectives and attitudes on issues related to their experience in a service-learning course" (p. 30).

--*Reflective writings*: Pre-service teachers kept tutor logs of their individual sessions with the ELLs and also wrote a final case study report about their experience. The importance of reflection in service-learning is well-documented in the service-learning literature (Jacoby, 1996; Silcox, 1993). "The most effective service-learning approaches appear to be those that integrate service experiences with course content and provide for reflection about the service experience through discussion or writing" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 611).

--*Pre- and post-course knowledge assessments*: Pre-service teachers completed a 50-point assessment on their knowledge and understanding of various English grammatical concepts and common errors made by ELLs. This knowledge assessment was designed by the author to measure the pre-service teachers' content knowledge of major grammatical components. Questions for this evaluation were taken from the

course text (Cowan, 2008) and from the course mid-term and final exams and covered three broad areas:

o *linguistic metalanguage and parts of speech*
    Students were given a series of sentences and asked to identify specific metalinguistic terms (for example, morphemes) as well as parts of speech or word class (for example, identify the part of speech of an underlined word).

o *language structure and analysis*
    Students were given a series of common sentence-structure errors made by ELLs and asked to explain what the error is and how to remediate it (for example, *There are much children in the classroom*—students would identify that *children* is a countable noun that requires the specific determiner *many* rather than *much* which is used for non-count nouns).

o *conventions*
    Students were given a series sentences and paragraphs to identify convention level errors (for example, comma splices) or writing development problems (for example, lack of transitional expressions).

This diverse and varied data collection provided a rich source of information from which to glean the participants' initial knowledge about English grammar, their perceptions about their ability to teach this content, and their growing awareness and understanding of supporting these learners in their future classrooms.

Results

Sociocultural Awareness

Pre-Course Survey.

In the pre-course survey, pre-service teachers were asked about their thoughts and feelings regarding the upcoming service-learning. Most of them expressed an interest in the project, although a number were concerned about working with adults who did not speak English and with the time that they would need to invest in the project. Nevertheless, many of them stated that they felt they would learn a great deal from the experience. One student, in particular, made the connection that this project may serve as a springboard of understanding in her future career:

> *The [learners] may be the parents of my future students and learning about lifestyles differing from my own will aid me in understanding my future students.*

At this time, some of the students expressed a hope that the adult ELLs would learn something from them as well, such as "how to be a part of our culture, along with [an] appreciation of the American culture." Overall, this pre-service-learning feedback presented a picture of students who were concerned and apprehensive, but nevertheless willing to get engaged and try to understand the learners whose culture, background and experiences were very different from their own.

Reflective Writings.

The pre-service teachers kept tutor logs about their sessions and submitted them periodically throughout the semester. At the beginning of the experience, more than one-third (n=7;

35%) of the pre-service teachers had expressed negative assumptions about ELLs, and, in particular, their commitment. As one stated, "I honestly had in mind that the students were not going to be motivated to learn." One expressed that the learners' responsibilities outside of class would certainly impact their dedication "since they were adults and had many other things going on in their lives."  Almost all of the pre-service teachers (n=18; 90%) expressed anxiety about the upcoming experience, using words such as *nervous*, *anxious*, *afraid*, and *doubt*. Some of these sentiments were tied to their own apprehension about engaging with others who they wouldn't be able to understand or communicate with because of the "language barrier." Others expressed concern about the working with adults rather than elementary-age children. As one pre-service teacher stated, "I was worried they wouldn't listen to me or take me seriously because I was younger than them."

During the semester, these tutor logs provided the kinds of nuts and bolts details about what went on in each session, but they also exhibited a growing concern about the need to get to know the learners.

> *I began each session with a discussion about what we did during the past week and plans for [the] weekend. I liked starting each morning with this because it allowed students to practice past and future tense. Additionally, it created a friendlier, less formal atmosphere. They can tell that I*

*am interested in them and their lives, and I allow them into mine.*

The importance of recognizing the learners as co-constructors of knowledge is important. Walqui (2000) believes that "in effective classrooms, teachers and students together construct a culture that values the strengths of all participants and respects their interests, abilities, languages, and dialects."

By the end of the course, the pre-service teachers who had held negative expectations expressed dismay at having judged the learners before even meeting them. There seemed to be a slow awakening to the fact that these adults were in the literacy program because they wanted to become proficient in English in order to integrate more into the fabric of the society in which they lived.

> *In time, I came to realize that I was moved by the fact that they had jobs, husbands/wives, and children and still were so motivated and driven to reach their goals of learning English…From my own experiences, such dedication would be hard to find in mainstream elementary classrooms.*

Even the pre-service teachers who had not overtly expressed negative assumptions going into the experience but who had been anxious and afraid were surprised at what they learned as a result of having engaged with the ELLs. As one pre-service teacher stated, "I feel like I was opened up to a whole new world from this experience, a world that I did not know existed." This idea of opening up appeared in the end of the

course case study papers when they reflected on their time working with the learners. As one pre-service teacher stated, "This tutoring experience made me open my eyes and gave me new insights for ELLs and the struggles they have in life in the United States." These kinds of insights proved to be powerful for the pre-service teachers, particularly those who felt the ELLs would not be motivated to learn.

Overall, the data collected from these reflective writings demonstrated a consistent effort to engage with the adults beyond the level of a typical tutor-tutee relationship and to get to know them as people as well as learners. Through this process, the pre-service teachers gained a lot of understanding about themselves as well. As one pre-service teacher stated, "Not only did I teach the students new things, but I too learned from them."

Post Course Survey.

By the end of the course, the pre-service teachers appeared to have moved beyond their initial apprehension and fear about working with culturally and linguistically diverse learners and almost embrace this difference. The post-course survey incorporated select items from the Community-Based Learning Student Survey developed by Campus Compact (Gelmon et al., 2001). The purpose of the survey is "to describe students' perspectives and attitudes on issues related to their experience in a service-learning course" (p. 30). The select statements regarding attitude toward community involvement were pertinent to this particular service-learning experience and further confirmed the data collected through other measures.

After the service-learning project, over 80% of the pre-service teachers (n=16) indicated that they felt "comfortable working with cultures other than [their] own," and 65% (n=13) felt the experience helped them "to become more aware of the needs of [their] community." And approximately (60%; n=12) believed that the service-learning project made them "more aware of some of [their] own biases and prejudices." As Pransky and Bailey (2002/2003) state, "teachers must be willing to learn not only who their students are but also who they, themselves, are as cultural beings and how that strongly colors their teaching" (p. 3). This was certainly the case for the pre-service teachers in this study.

Content Knowledge

Pre-Course Survey.

The pre-course data indicated a sense of inadequacy and almost an aversion to English grammar itself, even though 95% (n=19) of the pre-service teachers had had formal instruction in grammar and the majority of this instruction had occurred at the high school level. When asked to rank their understanding of English grammar on a Likert scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), a majority of the students (75%, n=15) ranked themselves at 3 or below. The anxiety that the pre-service teachers had about the service-learning project was manifested in the fear that they did not feel confident in the knowledge base they would need to tutor the adults. As one student lamented, "I do not know how I will help to teach [ELLs] grammar aspects if I do not know them myself."

Reflective Writings.

At the beginning of the experience, a majority of the students (n=13; 65%) expressed in their tutor logs that they were very anxious about teaching grammar to the ELLs. As one pre-service teacher stated, "teaching [grammar] to a group of students who speaks another language terrifies me." Many alluded to the fact that they did not feel confident with their own knowledge base and felt it was frightening to have to teach this content since their "knowledge of grammar is limited at the moment."

During the semester, the tutor logs showed some development in being able to apply their growing knowledge base in the tutor sessions, although there was little consistency and there sometimes seemed to be a lack of connection between their understanding of English grammar and the recognition of grammatical errors that could be identified for the adult ELLs in order to accelerate their progress. Throughout most of these logs, the connections that were made seemed to be rather basic and fragmented. At this point, the metalinguistic terms covered over the course of the semester began to appear in these reflections, but in some cases it was either inaccurate or undeveloped. For example, one pre-service teacher wrote "[The learner's] big problem this time was between *with* and *a* in sentences. We worked with more sentence exercises with these vowels." Another pre-service teacher stated that she "did take note that all three of them [learners] had difficulty with plurals such as *what's* and *that's*." The inability to understand basic parts of speech or

the difference between plurals and contractions was not obvious to these students, even though these particular comments were made toward the middle of the tutoring experience.

In addition, there were times when the pre-service teachers would either provide undeveloped or incorrect feedback because they did not want to come across as not knowing English grammar or they felt uncomfortable telling the learners that they would need to find out the answer to a questions and get back to them:

> *I explained that you do not say "I went to camping." it is just "I went camping." I said this is because camping is an action. You would say "I went swimming.", "I went running.", because those are actions. I tried to explain that you use "to" before a noun or an actual place such as "I went to the campground." It was really hard to explain why it was that way but I did the best I could…*

As one student noted, "I was also nervous that I wouldn't know an answer if they asked me and that would confirm their belief that I didn't know what I was doing or saying."

In addition, during the tutoring sessions, almost two-thirds of the pre-service teachers (n=14; 70%) mentioned at one point or another problems they had explaining a grammatical concept. Some of these pre-service teachers also struggled with error correction and knowing when and how to point out mistakes that would help the learners recognize and remediate their grammatical problems. As one student stated:

*I found that I tried to hold back as much as possible when [the learner] struggled. I was not quick to correct her. I was not sure if I was right in doing this or not. I have had so many teachers that made a fool out of their students. I do not want to be that teacher. I do want to make a difference all the same.*

However, when the pre-service teachers were able to understand and explain a grammatical concept, many times it was because they had presented that particular topic in class as a part of a presentation requirement. More often than not, the pre-service teachers would make statements such as "Words such as recently were easy for me to describe since adverbs were the topic of my concept presentation" or "I was quite prepared because the topic…was my concept presentation." The thrill at being able to explain a rather complex was empowering. As one pre-service teacher stated, "After I was able to explain the misused pronoun in her sentence, I was overjoyed. I was finally using the information I had learned and used it to explain it to others."

As the semester went by, the logs began to incorporate some of the grammatical metalanguage ("Prepositions are hard for ESL students because of the problem of polysemy"), as well an understanding of the tenets of second language acquisition, such as the differences between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1981):

*He is very good at expressing his thoughts verbally, but his written skills need much more improvement. It's interesting because I have been doing research on learning language through conversation and he is the perfect example of why conversation is just the beginning.*

Pre/Post Knowledge Assessments and Post-Course Survey.

The pre- and post-course knowledge assessment was designed to measure the pre-service teachers' content knowledge of major grammatical components that were covered during the course (linguistic metalanguage, parts of speech, language structure and conventions, etc.). Questions for this evaluation were taken from the course text (Cowan, 2008) and from the course mid-term and final exams. In the pre-course assessment, the pre-service teachers' average score out of 100 was 48% with a range of scores between 36-60. The post-course assessment revealed an overall increase of 18% in these scores (66% with a range of 45-78), but in general, these scores were still relatively low. In fact, the scores on the exams during the semester validate these findings: The average score for the students on these course assessments was 78.7%.

On the post-service-learning survey, students were asked to respond to questions from the Community-Based Learning Student Survey (Gelmon et al., 2001) regarding their perceptions about the knowledge they gained from the course. When asked whether the community work helped them "to better understand the course material," only 25% (n=5) felt that it had. In fact,

when queried about whether they "would have learned more if time was spent in class instead of doing service-learning work," 65% (n=13) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.
Understanding of Teaching English Language Learners

Pre-Course Survey.

At the beginning of the course, when asked about what they expected to learn in the course, pre-service teachers were very focused on not only knowing more about the academic content, but on how to actually teach this content in classroom setting. As one student expressed, "My only aim is to walk away from the course better prepared to teach grammar in a classroom environment than I feel I am now." This lack of confidence in their ability to teach this content to others was evident in their other responses as well. When asked to rank their ability to teach English grammar on a Likert scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), a majority of the students (85%, n=17) ranked themselves at 3 or below; in fact, the overall average for the group was 2.75.

When challenged about the level of knowledge and understanding they should have about English grammar, some pre-service teachers had the perception that they really didn't need to know much about the language beyond what they would be required to teach in the classroom:

> *I will most likely not be teaching dangling modifiers to first graders so I would rather use this class to learn how to teach them what they need to know…*

In many cases, the pre-service teachers exhibited the juxtaposed positions of fear that they did not know a lot about English grammar and of relief that they probably wouldn't need to know much if they ended up teaching in a lower level elementary grade.

Reflective Writings.

During the semester, the tutor logs revealed the struggles and successes the pre-service teachers had in teaching English grammar to the ELLs. Almost one-third of the pre-service teachers (n=6; 30%) had difficulty making connections between what was happening with the ELLs and the actual process of teaching grammar, stating such things as "I did not do much with grammar," or "I did not put much emphasis on teaching grammatical concepts." Instead, many of them relied on the strategies they learned for working with native English speakers such as modeling the correct form, not realizing that just repeating information over and over may not work, particularly if the pre-service teachers themselves did not understand the grammatical concept. As one pre-service teacher described:

> *I asked them to look at the picture and tell me what they see. [One learner] said, 'Go school.' I then asked how she knew it was a school, but they had difficulty understanding what I was asking. So, I used more questions…[Another learner] was creating the sentence, 'Come girl to school.' We worked on the pronoun and preposition of the sentence to form, 'The girl comes to school.'*

These errors in content knowledge would surface from time to time in the tutor logs coupled with the frustration that although many of the pre-service

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teachers knew the correct grammatical structure, they did not know why. There was a certain comfort level with the activities, however, and the pre-service teachers often mentioned how fun it was to "play games," such as Pictionary, Hangman, and Jeopardy. One-half of the pre-service teachers (n=10; 50%) reported employing the use of games in their tutoring sessions. However, what was lacking in these log entries was the connection of this game playing to learning beyond the idea of building vocabulary.

As time went on and the pre-service teachers became more comfortable working with the adult ELLs, there appeared to be a shift in their confidence level. One student, upon having an ELL return after an absence of three weeks because he was away on business, asked him questions about his trip. Since the other learners seemed to be interested in this conversation, the student decided to involve everyone in the class:

> *I asked them to each stand up and tell us about place that they had visited and one thing that was popular or famous about that area. [One learner] described his trip to New York City..[Another] described a trip to Atlantic City…[and another] described her country, the Dominican Republic…To extend this I had them each take out a piece of paper and write a brief sentence [about which] famous places they would like to visit and why.*

These later tutor logs exhibited more self-assurance in their abilities to know what to do in certain

circumstances: "I knew from class that using diagrams to teach prepositions was helpful because it provides the students with something visual to look at and connect the words." In fact, their final case studies appeared to focus more on what strategies worked and why:

> *When [the learner] could not explain his parking troubles, or when [another learner] did not know what a crab was, pictures made the connections*

> *I would either explain with diagrams on the board or with actions using objects within the classroom*

> *I used the cardboard clock that was in the room and gave them random times to figure out*

In addition, there appeared to be a growing recognition of the challenges inherent in working with ELLs. As one pre-service teacher expressed,

> *The differentiation between students, however, was not something I had originally anticipated…I went into the tutoring with one myopic strategy that I thought would be helpful to all my students, but I neglected to take into account the fact that I would have learners at a variety of levels.*

This understanding of the need to consider many different aspects of teaching and learning in multicultural, multilingual classroom was best expressed by one pre-service teacher: "Not only did I have to be conscious of

the many cultural differences, but I had to conscious of the speed of my speech, the sentence structure I used, and the words I chose to say."

By the end of the course, more than three-quarters of the pre-service teachers (n=16; 80%) had expressed that the experience of working with ELLs had a significant impact on their understanding of how to teach them. Many of these students mentioned learning the importance of patience and of adapting their strategies to meet the needs of the learners. Moreover, these final reflections took on an almost empathetic stance as the pre-service teachers acknowledged the challenges and came away with a deeper understanding of the difficulty ELLs face trying to learn the English language:

> *I personally feel that this tutoring experience opened my eyes to a whole new group of learners and helped me create empathy for individuals new to the country. Tutoring at the Literacy Center allowed me to witness the hardships and anxiety ELLs face when transitioning into American culture and learning our language. When teaching ELLs in my future classroom, I will better be able to understand their struggles and know teaching techniques to help them learn.*

Post-Course Survey.

On the post-service-learning survey, students were asked to respond to questions from the Community-Based Learning Student Survey (Gelmon et al., 2001) regarding their perceptions about how the knowledge they gained from the experience could be applied in real world setting. When asked whether the community work helped them "to see how the subject matter [they] learned can be used," more than half (55%, n=11) felt that it had. When asked whether the community work helped them to "learn how to plan and complete a project," 45% (n=9) agreed, 35% (n=7) were unsure and 20% (n=4) disagreed or strong disagreed with the statement. When asked whether the work "enhanced [their] ability to communicate [their] ideas in a real world context," the majority of the students (65%, n=13) agreed, 20% (n=4) were unsure, and 15% (n=3) disagreed. Many of the students commented in the survey about the time-consuming nature of this endeavor. As one student stated, "College students have jobs, upcoming projects, and an average of five other classes to worry about. [The hours] added too much stress." These sentiments were underscored when asked about the number of hours they work outside of school: 95% (n=19) held jobs and of those working, 90% (n=18) stated they worked over 11 hours per week, with little more than half of that group (55%, n=11) working 21 hours or more.

## Discussion

The data presented in this study offer a picture of pre-service teachers and their growing understanding of the need to provide instruction for learners in their classrooms whose native language is not English and whose background and experiences are very different from their own. The data also provide initial evidence that service-learning can provide pre-service teachers with an introduction to some

of the core competencies needed to work with ELLs. Cognizance of the sociocultural aspects that impact teaching and learning, confidence in the content area and ability to teach this material are all major factors when it comes to working with ELLs (McGraner & Saenz, 2009).

Marx (2000), in an overview of the research of Fuller (1994) and Valli (1995), found that the key to the success for teachers working with culturally and linguistically diverse students in both these studies was "a willingness to learn from students, to examine curriculum for dominating and marginalized views, and for the teachers to adjust their own world views to better understand those of their students" (p. 3). If this willingness were all that educators would need to do, then the pre-service teachers in this study certainly exhibited the ability to be successful. Yet, along with sociocultural awareness, teachers need to be well-versed in the content, particularly linguistic knowledge which "leads to a greater understanding of linguistic diversity" (Denham & Lobeck, 2002, p. 1). This content knowledge must also be coupled with the ability to teach it. However, according to Richards (2009), "the capacity to transform content to accessible and learnable forms" (p. 162) is a challenge for many teachers. In fact,

> recent research…shows that teachers in fact often fail to apply such knowledge in their classrooms. Despite knowing the theory and principles associated with Communicative Language Teaching, for example, in their own teaching, teachers are often

seen to make use of traditional 'grammar-and- practice' techniques in their classrooms. (p. 162)

As evident in the data, many of the pre-service teachers experienced the kinds of paradigm shifts in critical thinking that occur in service-learning coursework, and these sentiments were expressed in their growing awareness of the importance of connecting personally with the ELLs and finding out about how their cultural and linguistic backgrounds influenced their learning. The pre-service teachers also articulated an understanding of the need to differentiate instruction to accommodate these learners. Where they consistently missed the mark was in their ability to not only understand English grammar, but also in their capacity to identify these errors, provide explanations for why they were incorrect, and present this information to ELLs for their own personal growth and development. Part of the reason may be that the pre-service teachers did not possess a basic knowledge base to begin with, and the struggle to not only learn the content at an accelerated rate but to turn this knowledge around and teach it to someone else was overwhelming for many of them. This frustration may, in part, account for their feedback in the post-course Community-Based Learning Student Survey where the majority felt that they would have learned more if they had spent more time in class rather than in the community, even though the service-learning had a positive impact on their sociocultural awareness and their understanding of teaching ELLs. The data overall confirms the findings of

Belk and Thompson (1999): although pre-service teachers "have numerous opportunities to acquire grammatical skills through courses and practicum experiences…many students in the program, however, have not acquired these skills" (p. 3). This lack of knowledge can have detrimental effects, particularly for teachers who need to "meet the multiple instructional needs of a diverse student population" (p. 2). As these researchers assert, "public perception of teachers is widely influenced by the teachers' grammatical use of the English language…but use of poor language by teachers decimates their credibility as competent educators" (p. 2). Even if teachers have acquired a basic proficiency, it appears more often than not that they are challenged when trying to negotiate their understanding of the English language and their application of this knowledge in a meaningful way in the classroom (Smagorinsky, et al., 2007). This is a challenge for teacher preparation programs because as Meyer (2003) states, "We will not have good instruction in the structure of English unless teachers themselves are curious about it, are trained to observe it, and know where to look for answers" (p. 42).

Another related concern about teaching English grammar specifically may be that the pre-service teachers have adapted the attitude that the practices they learn about and encounter in their field experiences will work for all students, even ELLs. As de Jong and Harper (2005) indicate, "The failure to include bilingual or English as a second language (ESL) courses as an integral part of teacher preparation

stems, at least in part, from the assumption that teaching ELLs is a matter of pedagogical adaptations that can easily be incorporated into a mainstream teacher's existing repertoire of instructional strategies for a diverse classroom" (p. 102). Pre-service teachers need to be introduced to "just good teaching" practices, the researchers argue, but they "must also have the opportunity to systematically develop additional knowledge and skills related to the domains of language and culture in order to be effective in integrated classrooms that include native and non-native speakers of English" (p. 103). In this particular study, the pre-service teachers worked to bridge this gap between their understanding of good teaching practices in general and their knowledge of language learning and literacy development for ELLs. Through the course, they were introduced to this foundational understanding and strategies for scaffolding the curriculum, and many of them made attempts to integrate this into their tutoring sessions with the adults ELLs. It will remain to be seen whether they can transfer this knowledge into a multicultural, multilingual classroom setting.

Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations in this particular study. First, the relatively small number of participants precludes generalizing the findings from this study. A more comprehensive evaluation involving a significant number of teacher preparation programs integrating coursework in ESL theory and practice would need to be

implemented to measure the potentially broad impact of this initiative on the knowledge, skills and practice of pre-service teachers.

Second, is the possibility of researcher bias, as data had been collected and reported by the instructor for the course. Even though some of the data collected was done on an anonymous basis and was not utilized for evaluation purposes, some researchers (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995) point out that researcher bias can influence results.

Implications for Research

The data from this study draw attention to the impact of a service-learning applied linguistics course on pre-service teachers' sociocultural awareness, content knowledge, and understanding of teaching English language learners. Although the evidence from this study provides a preliminary picture of the potential of service-learning as a pedagogy that can be utilized in teacher preparation programs, there are some issues that first must be addressed with further research.

First, it would appear from the data that service-learning had an impact on pre-service teachers' sociocultural awareness and their knowledge of and initial application of teaching methodology for English language learning, but longitudinal studies of pre-service teachers need to be conducted to assess the impact over time. It would be important to follow these pre-service teachers into their professional careers and study the impact on actual classroom practice over the first years of teaching. An additional aspect that would need further exploration is the

impact of service-learning on content knowledge, particularly English grammar. Since the majority of the pre-service teachers expressed the belief that time might have been better spent in class understanding this content than in the community with their service-learning work, there is a need to investigate the impact on content knowledge examining courses with and without service-learning components to see if there are significant differences.

Second, studies with different types of service-learning projects (perhaps with different grade levels of learners) will need to be instituted to determine whether some kinds of community-based learning are more influential than others. In addition, a more comprehensive, statewide or national evaluation involving a larger population would need to be done to measure the widespread impact of service-learning as an appropriate methodology for preparing pre-service teachers to work in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms.

Lastly, teacher preparation programs, particularly those preparing elementary level teachers, must determine general criteria for what constitutes a preliminary knowledge base of understanding of English grammar. Many of the pre-service teachers in this study struggled with this course and the corresponding service-learning project because they did not have a firm foundation in this content area, despite years of formal education in elementary, middle and high school. Graduates of teacher preparation programs should be confident in their knowledge and understanding of how the English language works and be able

to convey this knowledge to all students. Integrating English grammar instruction into various aspects of the teacher preparation program should be considered, particularly for pre-service teachers who have not developed this knowledge prior to entering their teacher education programs.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of service-learning on pre-service teachers' sociocultural awareness, content knowledge, and understanding of working with English language learners. Although the study raises a number of issues about service-learning as a vehicle for this development, nevertheless the evidence supports the assertion that teachers need to be prepared to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students. Since there are a small number of teacher preparation programs that provide consistent coursework or certification for working with ELLs (Ballantyne, Sanderman & Levy, 2008) and fewer still that offer service-learning opportunities (Anderson & Erickson, 2003), sharing the promising impact of this pedagogy may be of value, particularly when it comes to introducing pre-service teachers to the sociocultural dimensions of teaching and learning and to differentiated instruction. A curriculum which provides opportunities through service-learning for these future educators to examine their own assumptions and how they impact classroom practice, as well as to examine how sociocultural factors influence learning may help to address some of the problems identified in the

research that are associated with inconsistency and variability in current preparation programs. The consequences of this action may change the way teachers are prepared in the future to meet the needs of all learners, including those with culturally and linguistically different backgrounds and experiences.

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**Appendix A**
**Pre-Course Survey**

Q1.   I like grammar.
[ ]Yes
[ ]No
[ ]Undecided

Q2.    I have had formal instruction in English grammar.
[ ]Yes
[ ]No

Q3.   If you answered YES to the previous question, at what level of education did this formal instruction occur? Please check all that apply.
[ ]elementary school
[ ]middle school
[ ]high school
[ ]college/university

Q4.  On a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), I would rank my understanding of English grammar as:
[ ]1
[ ]2
[ ]3
[ ]4
[ ]5

Q5.  On a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), I would rank my ability to teach English grammar as:
[ ]1
[ ]2
[ ]3
[ ]4
[ ]5

Q6.  What do you expect to learn in this course?

Q7.  What concerns, if any, do you have about this course?