Assessing the Effect of Professional Development on Teaching Reading to Limited English Proficient (LEP) Students: A Study of K-12 Florida Teachers

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The study assessed the effect of professional development on the self-efficacy perceptions of practicing Florida K-12 teachers toward teaching Limited English Proficient (LEP) students. Twenty-four teachers, who attended the 2003 Summer Reading Professional Development Program, participated in the study, which employed a pre-test post-test design with no control group. Participants rated themselves on a scale from 1-5, 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest perception of ability. They also explained why they rated themselves as they did. The pre and post test results showed statistical significant differences: the pre-test mean was 2.4 and the post-test mean was 3.7 with p<.000. The qualitative analysis of responses revealed the course filled a gap in the participants’ knowledge base regarding LEP students. The findings indicated that professional development activities could increase teachers’ self-efficacy in a given area by expanding their knowledge base.

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Current views of successful teaching emphasize the idea that a teacher must be equipped to teach all children (Darling-Hammond, 1997). In addition, the teacher is regarded as the most significant variable in increasing student achievement in American classrooms. Hawley and Valli (1999) state that the most effective way to positively influence schools is to invest in teacher professional development. Furthermore, Elmore and Burney (1999) see professional development for teachers and administrators as fundamental for educational reform and instructional improvement.
One of the challenges professional development should address is related to the increasing number of culturally and linguistically diverse students. In the past decade, the United States has been experiencing an impressive wave of immigration. The latest U.S. census registered a 57% increase of the foreign-born population in the U.S. compared to 1990 (NCELA Newsline Bulletin, 2005). These dramatic changes in American demographics have brought more students with limited English proficiency and varying degrees of school readiness (Fueyo, 1999; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Florida is a great example of such demographic change in student population. To illustrate, the total number of students enrolled in K-12 schools in 1995 was 2,356,369, of which 284,820 or 12% were English language learners (ELLs). Ten years later, English ELL students represented 17.9% of the total school population, with a growth of over 90% compared to their 1995 level. The chart below illustrates this ascending trend of ELL student enrollment in Florida between 1995 and 2005 (Florida Department of Education, 2005).
The increased diversity in American classrooms is not proportionately reflected in the makeup of the teacher force. Teachers in the United States are mainly middle class monolingual Caucasian females (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) with limited preparation vis-à-vis culturally and linguistically diverse students. 41% of almost 3 million public school teachers surveyed by the National Center for Educational Statistics report they teach Limited English Proficient (LEP) students. However, only 12.5% have received eight or more hours of training (NCELA Newsline Bulletin, 2005). In another survey conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics, 83% of the teachers reported that they felt unprepared to teach or assess their ELL students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1999).

It is evident that this discrepancy between students’ and teachers’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds needs to be addressed through professional development programs and initiatives. State and federal educational entities should take an active part in preparing teachers to teach and ever-increasing diverse student population. The Reading Endorsement Professional Development Program, which was part of the state-endorsed Just Read, Florida! Initiative and coordinated by Florida State University, is such an example where the needs of English Language Learners were taken into account from the very beginning, instead of being just an afterthought. In 2003, when this study was conducted, the program offered three courses in four locations for over 400 Florida K-12 teachers. One of those courses was FLE 5295 Teaching Reading to Students with Limited English Proficiency, a graduate course designed for in-service teachers who were expected to teach reading to English language learners. The inclusion of such a course at
a state-wide level is indicative of Florida’s commitment to increase the effectiveness of teachers who teach culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to assess the effect of professional development on the self-efficacy perceptions of K-12 teachers toward teaching LEP students. In the case of this study, professional development referred to a course in teaching reading to LEP students offered by Florida’s Department of Education to in-service teachers.

Research in education has linked the construct of self-efficacy with teachers’ success. Self-efficacy is defined as a set of beliefs that act as a mechanism of behavioral change and self-regulation. In other words, self-efficacy is the conviction that one can successfully implement the behavior required for producing the desired outcomes (Bandura, 1997). Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, and Hoy (1998) characterize teacher self-efficacy as a teacher’s evaluation of his or her capabilities to fulfill desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult or unmotivated. Greater teacher self-efficacy produces more persistence and effort that result in greater performance. In reverse, lower teacher efficacy may lead to decreases in performance and effort, thus producing poorer teaching and learning outcomes (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). Teacher self-efficacy has been predictive of achievement on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (Moore & Esselman, 1992) and the Ontario Assessment Instrument Pool (Ross, 1992). In addition, Watson (1991) has noticed greater achievement in rural, urban, majority Black, and majority White schools for students with efficacious teachers.
Researchers in education find few consistent relationships between characteristics of teachers and the learning of students. Teacher’s self-efficacy is an exception to this general rule (Woolfolk & Hoy, 1990). As previously discussed, research has shown a direct connection between self-efficacy and academic achievement: the higher the self-efficacy of teachers, the more successful their students were academically. Because of the predicted positive impact of self-efficacy on student learning, the present study chose teacher self-efficacy as the primary construct to determine whether or not professional development would bring about positive classroom results for LEP students.

Methodology

To assess the impact of professional development on teacher self-efficacy, the study employed a pre-test post-test design with no control group. Twenty-four teachers, all females with teaching experience ranging from 1 year to 38 years, participated in this study. With the exception of one Chinese American and one Hispanic American, all of them were White Americans. Six of the participants stated that they had never had LEP students in their classrooms, whereas five of them indicated that they had not had any LEP training prior to the program.

Data for this study consisted of responses on a survey that was given at the beginning and at the end of the FLE 5295 course. Both pre and post survey consisted of two parts. The first part included demographic questions about the participants’ years of experience in teaching and years of experience teaching LEP students. The second part included questions about participants’ perception of their abilities to teach LEP children. The rationale for this second part is that teacher efficacy is related to self-perception of competence rather than actual level of competence (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy,
and Hoy, 1998). Teachers were asked to rate themselves on a scale from 1-5, 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest perception of ability. Participants were also asked to explain why they rated themselves as they did. In order to obtain accurate responses, respondents were asked to not state their names anywhere in the survey. Below are the questions to both pre and post surveys.

Pre- and post-survey questions:

1. How many years have you taught?

2. Have you ever taught ESOL students? For how long?

3. When and where was the last time your received professional ESOL training?

4. On a scale from 1 to 5 (1 the lowest 5 the highest), where would you rate yourself regarding your ability to teach ESOL students? Please explain why?

Data analysis

The responses to the forth question in both pre and post surveys were examined to determine whether or not self-efficacy of teachers has changed after professional development. Pre and post survey responses to the quantitative part of question 4 were analyzed using a paired samples t-test through Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The process of interpreting the narrative responses to question 4 on why participants rated themselves as they did, which represented the qualitative aspect of the study, included the following steps. First, the researchers independently summarized the data into pre- and post-survey matrixes. The researchers then compared their respective matrixes together and created a final pre- and post- matrix for further analysis. These final pre- and post- matrixes were independently analyzed by both researchers for common patterns and themes (Patton, 2002). Finally, the researchers looked together at
the themes and patterns emerged from their independent analyses, and created a final set of agreed-upon patterns and themes.

Findings

As stated, a paired samples t-test was run to analyze participants’ pre- and post-self-perceptions of their abilities to teach LEP children. Table 1 presents the results of the t-test.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2.4167</td>
<td>.81650</td>
<td>-6.516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3.7604</td>
<td>.64048</td>
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* p < .000

As the table indicates, there was a significant difference between teachers’ pre and post perceptions of their self-efficacy. Teachers who participated in this professional development course perceived themselves more capable to teach culturally and linguistically diverse students than they had perceived before taking the course.

The qualitative analysis of narrative responses on participants’ self-ratings brought about the following patterns.
Pre-test

The analysis of narratives revealed two patterns that explained participants’ perceptions of self efficacy. Respondents communicated on the one hand, their lack of formal preparation regarding teaching LEP students, and on the other hand, their lack of experiences with ELLs. One participant wrote: “Our district has less than 1% LEP students so I don’t get the hands-on methods and foundations of teaching LEP in my opinion.”

The teachers addressed their lack of formal preparation and experiences with ELLs through various ways. For example, one of the participants based her rating on her experiences with trying to learn Spanish. Another participant explained that despite the fact that she had not had any formal preparation in teaching LEP students, her experiences teaching African American students influenced her self-rating.

For the pre-test, the highest level of self-efficacy rating was 3, whereas the lowest was one. There was certain variability in justifying their responses between those who rated themselves as 1 and those who rated themselves as three. Participants who rated themselves as one referred only to lack of formal preparation. Those who rated themselves as three indicated some form of limited training for teaching LEP students and limited experiences with diverse learners including LEP students.

The overall analysis of the pre-test demonstrated that the participants came to this course with academic and experiential limitations.

Post-test

Participants’ self-ratings changed dramatically in the post-test narrative responses. Self-ratings ranged from 3 to 5. None of the participants rated themselves lower than they
had in pre-test. Only three participants’ ratings remained the same, both in pre- and post-tests.

The responses revealed two main patterns. First, the majority of the participants felt much more prepared to teach ELL students. Second, most participants realized the complexity of issues related to teaching ELLs, thus becoming more aware of the need for further educational and experiential opportunities for instructing ELLs.

Table 2 presents the distribution of the self-ratings in the pre- and post-test.

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Distribution of the self-ratings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-rating</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pre-test</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Post-test</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contrary to the patterns observed in the pre-test responses, post-test narratives indicated that their self-ratings were explained by their learning in the course. 17 of the 24 participants specifically stated that their learning in this course positively contributed to their overall knowledge and skills. Moreover, participants felt they needed to apply their knowledge in real classroom settings teaching LEP students in order to further advance their learning. One comment illustrated this pattern very succinctly: “This class was extremely helpful and informative, but just a beginning. Teaching is a very hands-on profession, and in order to really know how to teach LEP students, classroom practice is priceless.”
Another common pattern observed in the post-test was many participants viewed the course as the beginning of a very complex and long-term process of becoming an informed teacher of ELL students. Post-test comments from one of the participants eloquently exemplify this trait: “I would rank myself at a 4 because this course has taught me a great deal in regards to laws, strategies for instruction and assessment, and theories. I feel that I am much more aware and able to not only teach LEP students but also assist my co-workers to ensure student success. I doubt I will ever be a 5 because I will always want to learn more and find better strategies and theories to benefit my students.”

Participants explained their learning in this course in a variety of ways as they rationalized their self-ratings. Some of the participants directly stated that they became more knowledgeable and aware due to their learning in the course. Others stated that the course validated their practice and beliefs. One participant wrote: “I would rate myself 4. I have learned several new strategies to use with my LEP students as a result of this course. I feel more confident now after reading the text and subsequent research article. This course has validated many of my classroom practices and beliefs.”

The overall picture the post-test analysis depicted was that the participants filled a gap in their knowledge base regarding teaching LEP students, which resulted in increased confidence in their skills and knowledge. Also, as the participants acquired academic content, they recognized the necessity of learning more in this specific area and applying their knowledge in real classrooms.

Conclusions

As stated earlier, teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students brings certain challenges to schools and classrooms. Mainstream teachers with limited
knowledge on cultural and linguistic diversity often stereotype the culture of ESL students (Clair, 1995) and expect less academically from students who do not speak a standard variety of English (Byrnes, Kiger, & Manning, 1997). In addition, many teachers fail to create a warm and friendly atmosphere for their ELLs in their classrooms, which may affect students’ learning negatively (Faltis & Hudelson, 1994).

Interestingly enough, Clair (1995) stated that many mainstream teachers find professional development in ESL ineffective and unhelpful. However, the present study reveals a different picture regarding the effectiveness of ESL training. Both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data pointed out that the course expanded teachers’ knowledge concerning teaching LEP children and enhanced their perceptions of self-efficacy. The increase in their self-efficacy perception is an important finding as research suggests that the increase in teachers’ self-efficacy is very likely to affect their teaching and their students’ learning positively (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998).

It is also important to note the transformation in the frame of reference used by the participants to conceptualize their teaching of ELLs. Initially, participants used a variety of frames of reference in explaining their perceptions of self-efficacy as revealed in the discussion of pre-test narratives. However, after completing their professional development, the majority of the participants explained their perceptions using their learning in the course as their frame of reference. Hence, the knowledge base acquired through professional development became a consistent frame of reference for the participants in the study.

The findings confirmed the importance of providing professional development opportunities for teachers. As the current study indicated, professional development
activities can increase teachers’ self-efficacy in a given area and expand their knowledge base, which in turn affects their self-efficacy. The growing number of LEP students in Florida calls for qualified and efficacious teachers who are able and willing to provide quality education. Without a doubt, professional development activities can serve English language learners and classrooms well for this purpose.
References


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