Secondary Teachers and English Language Learners (ELLs): Attitudes, Preparation and Implications

ELIANE RUBINSTEIN-AVILA and EN HYE LEE

Abstract: The education of language-minority students is a constitutional right. Throughout this article, the authors synthesize recent literature addressing two main questions: (1) What are secondary teachers’ attitudes toward English language learners (ELLs)? and (2) To what extent are secondary teachers being prepared to teach content effectively to this student population? Secondary teachers’ attitudes about ELLs vary, but are generally positive. The lack of teacher preparation—especially at the secondary level—to teach ELLs effectively is widespread. Thus, it is not surprising that secondary teachers feel ill-prepared to scaffold or differentiate instruction to meet these students’ language and academic needs. Since attitudes, preparation, and practice are interrelated, the authors also provide numerous implications for future practice at various levels: teacher-preparation programs, school district support, and classroom teaching.

Keywords: secondary teachers, English language learners (ELLs), teacher attitudes, teacher preparation

Language-minority students’ low academic achievement and high dropout rates across U.S. secondary schools (Major 2006) remains a cause for concern. The lack of teachers trained to teach English language learners (ELLs) and the absence of appropriate assessments and curricula tailored for this population account for ELLs’ continuous low academic achievement rates (Lopes-Murphy 2012). Therefore, it behooves all educators to keep in mind that language-minority students encompass a very diverse group, and that it is their constitutional right to be educated.

Most school programs designed to scaffold the linguistic and academic needs of ELLs, however, are found at the elementary grade levels (August and Shanahan 2006). Consequently, elementary teachers are likely to be better prepared than their secondary colleagues to meet the linguistic and academic needs of ELLs (August and Shanahan 2006). Secondary teachers’ academic preparation tends to focus on the development of their particular subject areas (mathematics, science, social studies, etc.)—not on language development per se. Therefore, single-subject teachers at the secondary level may find the task of placing language at the forefront of content instruction rather daunting (Rubinstein-Avila and Leckie 2014).

For secondary ELLs, second-language development is often compounded by their gaps in formal schooling (Rubinstein-Avila 2006). In order to do well in middle and high school, and have a chance at higher education, ELLs are required to master increasingly sophisticated language skills to succeed in their academic work (Valdés 2004). Moreover, an ELL student may be enrolled in 10th grade, despite having only completed 4th or 5th grade in her or his country of origin (Rubinstein-Avila 2006). Consequently, developing content knowledge at the secondary level can be a formidable challenge for many ELLs.

Eliane Rubinstein-Avila is an Associate Professor in the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Sociocultural Studies (Program in Language, Reading and Culture), College of Education, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ. En Hye Lee is a recent M.A. graduate from the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Sociocultural Studies, College of Education, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.
The two main questions this article addresses are: (1) What are secondary teachers’ attitudes or perceptions toward ELLs? and (2) To what extent are secondary teachers prepared to teach content effectively to ELLs? After addressing these two closely related issues, implications for various institutional levels (university, school districts, etc.) and for classroom teaching that may help put language in the forefront of content instruction (Rubinstein-Avila and Leckie 2014) are presented. In order to retrieve the relevant scholarly resources that addressed the two research questions posed herein, the authors searched for peer-reviewed sources across two encompassing academic databases: ERIC and Academic Search Complete. The following keywords and phrases were used to conduct the search: “teacher preparation,” “English language learners,” “staff development,” “high school,” and “middle school.” The search was also narrowed with terms such as “secondary teachers,” “attitudes,” and “perceptions.” The year of publication across the sources retrieved ranged from 2001 to 2012. Since the focus was on secondary teachers’ (middle and high school) preparation and attitudes toward ELLs, sources were excluded that focused exclusively on elementary-level teachers and ELLs. Most of the studies retrieved focused on middle school teachers and ELLs, which indicates a paucity of studies conducted at the high school level.

Why Is the Education of Secondary ELLs in the 21st Century More Crucial Than Ever Before?

The rationale for pursuing this topic is twofold: (1) This fast-growing student population demands high-quality education—for the students’ sake and the for nation’s future social and economic success (Rubinstein-Avila 2006); and (2) secondary teacher preparation for serving ELLs has been relatively ignored (August and Shanahan 2006). Therefore, secondary teachers are likely to be unprepared to face the challenge of meeting the academic needs of ELLs. It is also important to keep in mind that language-minority youth today face a drastically different economic context than the booming economy many immigrant great-grandparents encountered. U.S. factory jobs, plentiful in the late 19th and part of the 20th century, employed masses of young, able-bodied new immigrants, most of whom had only a basic elementary education and pre-emergent English skills. However, many of those jobs have either moved overseas or no longer exist. In today’s economy, secondary immigrant and refugee (and second-generation) students need to develop sophisticated language practices to further their education—beyond high school—in order to pursue the type of employment necessary to support their future families and contribute to the economic fabric of society (Rubinstein-Avila 2006). Scholars seem to agree on at least one issue: The development of English as a second, or additional, language is a long-term process, which becomes more complex as students are exposed to content in high school and beyond (August and Shanahan 2006; Valdés 2004).

Secondary Teachers’ Attitudes and Perceptions toward ELLs

The synthesis of the sources reviewed revealed that secondary teachers hold a range of attitudes toward teaching ELLs but were overall welcoming (Reeves 2006; Yoon 2007). For example, in a survey study of 279 subject-area (public) high school teachers in a mid-sized southeastern U.S. city, Reeves (2006) found that of all the participating teachers, 75 percent reported that the integration of “ELLS created a positive educational atmosphere in their classrooms” (136). Most of the teachers surveyed (217 of 279) claimed they had ELLs in their classrooms at some point in their teaching careers. Yoon’s (2010) case study of two New York, public middle school English language arts teachers showcased contrasting viewpoints in regards to teaching ELLs. It is important to note that Yoon (2010) did not explicitly state her selection criteria for the two focal participating teachers.

One of the case-study teachers in Yoon’s study conveyed positive perceptions toward ELLs, embracing her students’ cultural differences and encouraging their participation in her class. This particular teacher took full responsibility for teaching the ELLs in her classroom, as evident in her statement: “I am a teacher of children; I don’t care if they are ESL, Special ed., regular ed. or gifted and talented children” (Yoon 2007, 222). The same teacher elaborated on the important resources ELLs bring to her classroom. In fact, she believed that the other students (i.e., fluent English speakers) had a great deal to learn from her ELL students’ varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds and experiences. Alternatively, the other English language arts teacher in Yoon’s (2010) case study felt that it was the English as a second language (ESL) teacher’s responsibility to “make their [ELLs’] time beneficial” (218). This teacher did not take responsibility for the student learning in his classroom, as evidenced by the following observation: “I have never seen myself as an ESL teacher” (218). It is, therefore, not surprising that the researcher had not observed the second teacher approach ELLs in his classroom or differentiate instruction to accommodate their English-language proficiencies (Yoon 2010).

In Walker, Shafer, and Liams’s (2004) survey of elementary and secondary-level teachers, of 28 schools across several school districts in a Great Plains state, teachers’ attitudes toward ELLs seemed to depend largely on the type of school and community context. For example, although teachers working with refugee students, in what the researchers termed “rapid-influx schools,” felt burdened about the integration of ELLs into their regular education classes, many understood
that English is not acquired within a single year (Walker et al. 2004). Several teachers in rapid-influx schools also stated that their ELL students strived to succeed academically, as conveyed in the following quote: “Many are highly motivated and strive for success unlike some of their American peers” (Walker et al. 2004, 150). Teachers in “migrant-serving schools,” however, where limited support for ELLs had been provided, expressed ambivalence toward ELLs. Many teachers conveyed deficit beliefs, characterizing ELLs as poor academic performers. Teachers in migrant-serving schools did not necessarily view diversity from a positive angle. In fact, one of the teachers in such a school reportedly posed the following question during an interview: “Diversity is not always a good thing, is it?” (Walker et al. 2004, 151).

Preparation for Teaching Secondary ELLs

Generally speaking, secondary single-subject teachers receive limited preparation for teaching content to ELLs throughout their teacher-preparation programs, and as a result are likely not to use the instructional strategies needed to teach this population effectively (Rubinstein-Avila 2003, 2006; Berg, Petron, and Graybeck 2012; Gándara and Contreras 2009; Newman, Samimy, and Romstedt 2010; Reeves 2006; Walker et al. 2004). Secondary teachers also hold different views toward participating in professional development that is designed to scaffold the teaching of content for this student population (Newman, Samimy, and Romstedt 2010; Reeves 2006; Walker et al. 2004; Yoon 2007).

Walker et al.’s (2004) study, mentioned earlier, found that 87 percent of the teachers had never received professional development or training in working with ELLs. This may explain why the authors claimed that these teachers “often feel overwhelmed when an ELL is first placed in their classroom” (Walker et al. 2004, 142). A common response among teachers was: “We are burdened enough with adapting for everyone else and we have enough on our plate already” (141). Teachers in this study also tended to attribute their unwillingness to adapt their instruction for ELLs to lack of time” (141).

Given the lack of teacher preparation Walker et al.’s (2004) unearthed in this study, it was not surprisingly that they also found a critical lack of awareness about the academic needs of ELLs among the teachers surveyed. The authors claimed that in general the teachers in this study held an “ideology of common sense” (145) toward teaching ELLs. For example, one of the participating teachers, who claimed to have no formal training to work with ELLs, stated that she felt confident about teaching ELLs: “Common sense and good intentions work fine” (Walker et al. 2004, 145). Walker, Shafer, and Liams found that 51 percent of the participating teachers in their study were somewhat resistant to the much-needed professional development. In fact, 17 percent stated that a certificate in teaching ELLs was unnecessary.

Similarly, Reeves (2006) found that 90 percent of the 279 high school content-area teachers surveyed in a mid-size city in the southeast had received no training to work with language-minority or ESL students. Only 17 participating teachers had received such training (e.g., college coursework, inservice workshops, or seminars). In this study, the majority of the respondents admitted they were unprepared and claimed that they lacked adequate training to teach this student population effectively. Still, almost half (45%) of the participating teachers expressed no interest in receiving more preparation to work with ELLs. It cannot be denied that secondary teachers’ inadequate preparation to work with this student population is likely to contribute to their limited awareness of these students’ academic strengths and needs.

It is essential to examine these findings from multiple perspectives. Teachers are saddled with many (state and local) demands and pressures on their instructional time during an era in which monetary compensation and job security have not kept up with what is demanded of them. It is, therefore, not entirely surprising that many teachers across studies expressed feeling overwhelmed and burdened and showed mixed feelings about undertaking professional development (which generally occurs after hours and often with no monetary compensation) to enhance their knowledge base.

Conclusion and Implications for Future Practice across Multiple Educational Contexts

The synthesis of the scholarly sources retrieved revealed that secondary teachers’ attitudes toward ELLs, and their view toward participating in professional development, were not uniform. While some teachers expressed concern, interest, even enthusiasm about teaching ELLs, others conveyed lukewarm, even deficit-oriented, views. It is clear that solving this issue will require great collaborative efforts, which will include encouraging teacher agency and responsibility (Dong 2004; Newman et al. 2010). With the advent of the Common Core Standards, educators at all levels will be expected to provide secondary ELLs the linguistic and academic scaffolds required to achieve academic success (Rubinstein-Avila and Leckie 2014). This challenge can only be tackled through efforts spanning multiple teacher preparation programs, intense and continuous district-level staff development, and through the efforts of individual teachers. The following sections expand on these various levels.

University and School-District Level Implications

We call for greater collaboration between university teacher-preparation programs and local school districts in order to support new and seasoned secondary
teachers’ effectiveness in teaching ELLs. An example of such collaboration took place during a yearlong program created by secondary educators at Ohio State University after implementing a needs analysis survey across six public school districts in Ohio (Newman et al. 2010). The program encouraged teachers’ participation by providing incentives such as covering the costs of tuition and textbooks and offering participants graduate-level college credit toward either a TESOL endorsement or a Master’s degree in foreign and second-language education. Rather than working with individual teachers, the program only accepted district cohort teams (Newman et al. 2010), and collaboration between program developers and school districts was highly emphasized, “foster[ing] a shared vision and responsibility among all teachers in school districts” (159) and emphasizing the importance of working within an existing ESL infrastructure (i.e., including districts as partners). Certified ESL personnel and ESL teachers engaged collaboratively in peer coaching, and participating teachers were expected to continue their collaboration after the completion of the program (Newman et al. 2010). We applaud these authors’ urgent call for university-based professional development programs to improve secondary content instruction for ELLs.

We also call for more widespread quality university programs to address the needs of ELLs at the secondary level. For example, a secondary teacher-preparation program at Queens College, New York, developed a required course for all preservice teachers titled “Language, Literacy, and Culture in Education” (Dong 2004). The course was centered around the principles of second-language acquisition; the course also focused on raising awareness about the needs of ELLs and encouraged teachers’ sensitivity toward “differences in language, backgrounds, expectations, needs, roles, and values” (Dong 2004, 202). In addition to learning about the processes of second-language development, modifying instruction to meet ELLs’ language and academic needs, and becoming more knowledgeable about students’ backgrounds, Major (2006) proposes that secondary teachers become cultural mediators on behalf of language-minority students. She defines “cultural mediation as a process of planned intervention in which teachers and administrators act as cultural brokers between the mainstream culture of the United States as it exists in our schools and the minority home cultures of immigrant children” (Major 2006, 29), claiming that it is “the key to school adjustment and academic achievement of language minority students in secondary schools” (29).

Classroom-Level Implications

It is crucial for secondary teachers—especially those who are English monolinguals—to develop empathy toward their ELLs’ language barriers in order to increase their understanding of students’ second-language acquisition process and development (Dong 2004). Moreover, teachers’ knowledge of their students’ prior academic experiences, and their possible academic gaps, are likely to help scaffold their learning (Berg et al. 2012; Rubinstein-Avila 2003). While we do realize that it is not always possible, teachers ought to strive to make meaningful connections between the new concepts being taught and students’ life experiences (Berg et al. 2012). Furthermore, secondary teachers can implement many subtle instructional changes that are likely to encourage ELLs’ interactions (building on their oral language proficiency) with peers and active participation in class. Following are just a few suggestions:

- Assess students’ language and academic proficiency informally to guide necessary changes to required assignments (differentiation).
- Provide scaffolds for written assignments, such as sentence starters (when necessary).
- Have students work in dyads, pairing an ELL/bilingual student with a fluent English-speaking peer.
- Have small cooperative groups working together to solve problems (Berg et al. 2012; Rubinstein-Avila 2013; Sox and Rubinstein-Avila 2009).
- Allow ELL/bilingual students to communicate about the content with bilingual peers in their native language in order to provide them the opportunity to share ideas, discuss complex concepts, and convey their understanding in their dominant language (Berg et al. 2012; Rubinstein-Avila 2006, 2013; Rubinstein-Avila et al. in press).
- Be explicit about the use and differences between academic and everyday discourse (Lopes-Murphy 2013; Valdés 2004).
- Turn on English captions when viewing documentaries and video clips for greater accessibility (Rubinstein-Avila 2006).

Finally, given the growing numbers of students in secondary classrooms with varying academic levels, meeting the needs of language-minority students is not a small feat (August and Shanahan 2006, 2008; Lopes-Murphy 2012). It is important, however, to keep in mind the stresses that many secondary ELLs experience, both in and out of classrooms. Finally, the (K–12) education of language minority students is a constitutional right, regardless of students’ legal status and/or prior formal schooling.

REFERENCES


