Weaving English-Language Learner Instruction into a Differentiation Curriculum

Building Competence and Confidence

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In a graduate school seminar over fifteen years ago, my professor shared the forecast that in a few decades, the "majority" population in the United States (Caucasian) would become the minority (Tomlinson, 2004). I was intrigued and excited by this projection; little did I understand how profoundly it would impact my future university teaching. In fact, the "future is now" in my preparation of pre-service teachers; while the United States Census Bureau (2015) specifies 2045 as the year the current white majority will become a minority, the shift has already occurred in some areas of the country: "...non-white Americans are now the majority of the population in four states, as well as in the most prosperous and powerful U.S. cities" (Kight, 2019). If I am to prepare pre-service teachers for the classrooms they will enter, my instruction must embrace and celebrate that reality.

Context

My teaching, scholarship, and service revolve around the concept of *differentiation* at the secondary level. Teachers who differentiate "...provide specific alternatives for individuals to learn as deeply as possible and as quickly as possible, without assuming one student's road map for learning is identical to anyone else's" (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 4). My primary goal for teaching candidates is that they leave my courses equipped to engage, support, and challenge every student. While I have always embedded culturally relevant teaching into my course, I have primarily focused on shattering the pervasive deficit model of teaching African American students (e.g., Delpit, 2006; Edmin, 2016). In recent years, however, the changing population of U.S. schools has beckoned me to broaden my cultural lens and devote more attention to helping my students better understand how to challenge and support students who are learning English as a second (or third, or fourth) language. Candidates enrolled in my course are also embedded in an intensive practicum experience. While some are placed in the surrounding county (majority Caucasian population), others are placed in our very diverse city; over 50 languages are spoken by students in the city's middle and high schools. My ten years of public-school teaching experience did not expose me to this rich linguistic diversity, nor did the research and self- designed "practicum" experiences I engaged in during graduate school. In essence, I designed my course for one demographic, but I am preparing my future teachers for a new one.

Aims

As a professor of education, I understand the importance of staying abreast of emerging research in my field. I have read exhaustively about how to differentiate for adolescent English language learners (ELLs), attended conferences (e.g., TESOL), and even engaged in a semester-long research project studying middle and high schools known for their outstanding support and development of ELLs.

Further, I serve as an instructional coach and staff developer for a New York City high school dedicated to serving immigrant teenagers. In each of these professional experiences, I have grown in my understanding of how to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of adolescent language learners. Still, I struggle to authentically infuse these lessons into my teaching. I continually feel ill-equipped to do so, and – no matter how much I augment my course – I feel it offers my students insufficient preparation.

Perhaps this is because my teaching philosophy compels me to *model* the practices I advocate; I believe that if I want my students to understand something, I must create conditions in which they can experience it themselves, explicitly debriefing the experience afterward (Hogg & Yates, 2013). This works with the traditional components of differentiation: I can model *readiness* differentiation because my students need varied levels of support and challenge to meet the course's learning goals. I can model *interest* differentiation by offering students choices whenever possible. I can model differentiation for *learning preference* by varying the kinds of product options I accept. But I cannot effectively model differentiation for students learning English because all of my students speak English as their first language. Although I conduct simulations that allow students to experience what it feels like to be in a classroom in which the language of instruction does not match their own, *I cannot actually model linguistic differentiation* in the service of my teaching objectives.

This disconnect between my beliefs and practice colors my own level of comfort with equipping students to differentiate for ELLs. I believe I see my own hesitancy reflected in students' confidence; in formative assessments, they frequently cite "differentiation for ELLs" as a skill with which they lack confidence. Hence, for this self-study, I examined my beliefs and practices with the goals of enhancing my confidence – and subsequently, my effectiveness – in embedding ELL differentiation into my university course in authoritative, authentic and impactful ways. Specifically, I explored the following research questions: 1) *How does my journey toward expertise in ELL differentiation impact my students' journeys?* and 2) *How can I increase my confidence in ELL differentiation with the goal of bolstering my students' confidence and competence?*

Methods

Because the guiding questions for this self-study focus on examining my own beliefs and practices, my primary data source is a reflective journal capturing my thinking regarding the effectiveness of changes to my differentiation syllabus and associated learning activities. In this journal, I recorded the ELL-focused learning experiences I implemented throughout the semester, discussing both intent and the execution. I also debriefed in this journal following my professional development sessions with the ELL teachers I coach in my partner school. The secondary data for the study consists of student reactions, both formal (e.g., assigned reflections, student work samples) and informal (e.g., student comments and reactions). In order to engage in the critical conversations necessary to self-study (Loughran, 2006), several departmental colleagues served as "critical friends" (Schuck & Russell, 2005), asking questions, introducing new perspectives, and challenging my interpretations. Upon the recommendation of one of these critical friends, I included two additional data sources: a comparative analysis of 1) my syllabi and 2) student work from the year I first began purposefully infusing ELL instruction into my course (2016) and the current academic semester (2019).

Using qualitative content analysis (Patton, 2002), data from journal entries and syllabi comparisons were divided into two groups: 1) those describing curricular changes and the rationale for those changes (i.e., my "procedural journey"), and 2) those reflecting on my growth and "emotional

journey" (e.g., entries referencing confidence, goal-setting, doubt). Likewise, student reflections and products were separated into two groups: 1) those referencing confidence or demonstrating skill, and 2) those referencing insecurity or demonstrating misconceptions.

Guided by this analysis, I considered which approaches and attitudes helped students feel equipped to teach ELLs and which did not, including an examination of how my own confidence and instructional framing correlate with these results. Themes emerging from my analysis constitute my "findings" and are used to clarify and extend the analysis of the data as well as the research implications.

Findings

Four clear themes emerged from my analysis of the data and constitute my findings: 1) I have, indeed, changed my practice regarding instruction for English language learners; 2) my students are actually well equipped to teach ELLs; 3) students' lack of experience contributes to their feelings of incompetence; 4) I have reason to be confident in my qualifications for instructing pre-service teachers in differentiating to meet the needs of ELLs.

Finding 1

The first theme emerging from my analysis is that I have, indeed, changed my practice regarding differentiation for ELLs. In one self-study discussion with my critical friends, I expressed my feeling that I was not "doing enough" in this regard. They recommended that I examine my syllabus from 2016 (when I first started weaving ELL instruction into my course) with my current (2019) syllabus. A simple numerical analysis of the occurrence of the words *English Language Learners*, *ELLs*, *English learners*, or *students learning English* revealed an increased emphasis from 2016-2019. I analyzed the learning goals, essential questions, readings, and assignments and found increased ELL references in those sections. While the 2016 version included only six references (two in learning goals, one in readings, and three in assignments), the 2019 syllabus contained 14: three in learning goals, six in readings, and five in assignments.

The *nature* or quality of my teaching changed as well. My journal from September 18, 2019 contains the following reflection:

> Looking back on the first three weeks of school, I can see the fruits of requiring my students to more purposefully explore the importance of community for ELLs. Because I was more explicit in my instruction, I required students to be more explicit in their discussions of how each element of their Classroom Environment Plans supported the unique social and emotional needs of ELLs (I also weighted this portion more heavily this year). Most students insightfully discussed the unique importance of cultivating community for ELLs. While a few students still discussed surface-level accommodations (e.g. "Give them ELL dictionaries for translating survey questions" – UGH!), most students produced the best reflections I've ever received! For example, [Student X] reflected on the importance of proactively redefining **fair** as "equitable" rather than "equal": "ELL students may come into classrooms with preconceived fears of being expected to be on the same level as all of their peers.... For them to be in a classroom where it is explicitly stated that a 'fair' environment will be based off of what [each]

individual needs will really take a load off of their shoulders, leading to better performance."

The purposeful nature of my instruction (e.g., scenario- and video- analysis, class discussions based on carefully chosen texts) appears to have resulted in deeper reflection for students.

Building on the foundation of community, I purposefully wove ELLs into everything else I did; accordingly, I moved the "explicit" or "dedicated" ELL week to earlier in the semester (Weeks 5-6; it had been Week 10); this set me up to weave that content throughout the rest of the semester. In addition, I split the "explicit" week into two pieces. Week 5 addressed the technical aspects (second-language simulation, stages of language development, and a plethora of strategies for supporting ELLs). I showed authentic examples of each strategy as used by the teachers in my partner school, and had students develop their own applications in their content- based groups. To end class, I moved students to their "exceptionality groups" (interest-based groups charged with researching a specific disability such as dyslexia, ADHD, Autism Spectrum, emotional and behavior disorders) to determine how the ELL strategies we had examined that class period could also help their chosen special population.

This purposeful synthesis allowed for even more integration in Week 6; I moved the WIDA (ELL level/assessment) system to the "assessment" week (Week 6) in order to give it more time. We examined a student WIDA report and plotted the student's development and needs for each domain (listening, speaking, reading, writing) on a reporting sheet. We then referenced the strategies we had examined during Week 5 and selected those that would help our student move "up" one level. We ended up with a comprehensive list which would, I think, have impressed any of ESL teachers I work with in the field. My goal in doing this was to foster a sense of agency. Rather than *reading* about assessing student levels, students actually *did* it, albeit as a simulation, engaging in the practices and dispositions used by teachers in the "real world" of school.

In between Weeks 5 and 6, however, I was feeling uneasy. I was not satisfied with the depth of the exceptionality groups' connections (those reported to close Week 5). I reflected on this in my October 1, 2019 journal entry:

> The strategies groups referenced today merely skimmed the surface of what we've explored thus far. NONE of the groups mentioned the social-emotional piece we examined throughout the first three weeks of class! Further, they focused on approximately five of the ten strategies we had examined during [Week 5]and pulled virtually nothing from the readings. I don't think I can plow forward into the WIDA levels next week without helping them solidify all they have gleaned from class thus far.

Thus, students began Week 6 by reading Jennifer Gonzales's (Cult of Pedagogy) blog post entitled, "12 ways to support ELLs" (https://edtechbooks.org/-vYPdwww.cultofpedagogy.com/supporting-esl-students- mainstream-classroom/). I asked students to record each of the author's 12 principles and indicate whether it was "new" or "old" information; if old, they listed where they had first encountered the principle (e.g., class discussion, readings). The student work sample featured in Figure 1 is representative of the connections most students made. The asterisks indicate which principles I thought would be new to them: the following week's topic focus on the principles and models of successful co-teaching with

resource teachers (e.g., special-education, ESL).

Ultimately, student work on this task revealed students' ability to make connections between the ideas and materials we had examined in the course thus far. In addition, that work prepared them to explore collaborative models of teaching that support ELLs.

Table 1

Excerpt from a Student Sample of Week 6 Opening Reflective Exercise

Principle Number	Summary of Principle (from Blog)	New or Old Information – If old, cite source (class? book?)	Strategic Take-Away
1	Make it visual.	Old – Class	Postcard or graphic organizers
2	Build in more group work.	Old – Book	Have students work in groups frequently
3*	Communicate with the ESL teacher.	New	Co-teaching activities
4	Honor the "silent period".	Old – Class	Provide proper wait time
5	Allow some scaffolding with the native language.	Old – Class & Book	Provide worksheets in native language in addition with English
6*	Look out for culturally unique vocabulary.	New	Communicate with ESL teacher to check for double-meaning words
7	Use sentence frames to give students practice with academic language.	Old – Class	Sentence frames, folders
8	Pre-teach whenever possible.	Old – Class	Provide materials to ELLs before the rest of the class so that they can preview
9	Learn about the cultural background of your students.	Old – Class	Get-to-know-you activity/ building community activities during the first days of school.
10	But don't make a child speak for his entire culture.	Old – Class	Encourage multiple students input when discussing culture
11	Show them how to take themselves less seriously.	Old – Class	Encourage growth mindset
12	But always take them seriously.	Old – Class	RESPECT

Student work on this task and others combined to tell the story of Finding 2.

Finding 2

My students are actually well equipped to teach ELLs. Their responses and work on assignments demonstrate that – not only do they possess a storehouse of strategies for meeting students' needs – they are able to select and *use them* in context. For their midterm, students delivered presentations on their chosen exceptionality. One of the rubric criteria was to discuss how their exceptionality strategies could simultaneously be used to support ELLs. My reflective journal from November 14, 2012 records the following:

> I am pleasantly surprised by the connections students made between serving students with their chosen disability and serving ELLs. They made purposeful and fluid connections and discussed not only "what" strategies to use but the "why" behind using them. In past years, students seemed to neglect this portion of the assignment, maintaining a laser focus on their exceptionality (probably because working with special-needs students is a great source of anxiety for so many of them). This year, only

one group lost points on the "ELL connections" portion of their midterm rubric. Most groups discussed meaningful overlaps, often throughout the presentation rather than in one spot/slide. I'm encouraged!

The midterm previewed what I would discover through an analysis of student work on their final projects. At the suggestion of a critical friend, I analyzed the final projects for my 2016 course and compared them to those from my 2019 course. The final project is a lesson plan renovation and a flexible grouping plan. Students choose a lesson plan developed in an earlier class and "renovate" it to make in more accessible and appropriate for all learners. They then design three future tasks that would require students to work in different grouping formations to meet student needs, solidify community, and provide equitable learning experiences. My analysis revealed that, in 2016, students discussed meeting the needs of ELLs an average of 9.4 times per project. In many cases, they grouped them homogeneously, which is not recommended practice for students learning English (Ferlazzo & Sypnieski, 2012). My 2019 course, in comparison, discussed supporting the needs of students learning English an average of 14.3 times per project. Further, they discussed more flexible groups, focusing on student need rather than label, to drive grouping decisions.

Even more encouraging are comments I hear from students in the field. One science candidate sent me the following email (personal communication, January 24, 2020):

> Hello! I wanted to share with you a really cool tool...At the link below, you can upload any document (smaller than 10 MB), and translate it into a desired language: https://edtechbooks.org/-yUgQwww.onlinedoctranslator.com/en/translationform I am using this with a phases of matter sorting activity. I have an ELL biology class where the students speak Spanish, Swahili, and Kurdish. I'm translating the activity into each of those languages, so if they want the practice of sorting in their native language first, then sorting the English version, they can do that. I've attached a .pdf example to this email as well.

This student's message is especially encouraging because – in class the previous semester - she was incredibly apprehensive about her ability to serve English language learners. In an assignment reflection, she stated, "I'm not sure how to manage the time it feels like some of these accommodations would take or how some of the "Can-Do's" [WIDA descriptors] transfer to science." During that same semester, she had been placed in a county high school for her practicum and taught no ELLs. This semester, however, she was placed at our city schools, and – once she met her students – her hesitancy disappeared. This student was not alone in hinging her sense of efficacy on her exposure; in fact, this trend emerged as my third finding.

Finding 3

A lack of experience working with English language learners leads to student feelings of apprehension and insecurity. As I analyzed student responses from a reflection on their confidence in teaching ELLs, a clear connection between exposure and confidence emerged. At the close of Week 6, students completed a reflection rating their confidence in implementing ELL strategies (on a scale of 1-10) and explaining why they rated themselves as they did. As illustrated in Figure 2, two distinct patterns emerged from the analysis of those 36 responses: 1) those who rated themselves highly

credited their confidence to *experience* (n=11), and 2) those who rated themselves lower cited a *lack* of experience (n=19). A small number (n=5) cited other obstacles (e.g., speaking only English, content-specific fears) or demonstrated misconceptions.

Table 2

Representative Responses from Students Regarding their Confidence in Reaching ELLS and the Reasoning Behind their Rating

Confidence rating is 7 or above. Cite Experience working with ELLs (n=11)	Confidence rating is 7 or below. Cite a lack of ELL experience (n= 19)	Confidence rating is 6-7.5. Cite specific obstacles or demonstrate misconceptions (n=5)
10 - Working with ELL students is one of my all-time favorite things. I love learning new strategies so I'm excited to learn everything I can! 8 - I feel fairly confident as long as I form connections with the students. I taught citizenship class to help ELL students every day. Once I get past the initial buy in, [so that] I have confidence and they have trust, many of these tools seem useful	5- While I know strategies and how to use them to support the students, I am worried about actual implementation and recognizing what is the best strategy. I think I need actual experience using the tools to feel more confident. 6/7 – I feel like I am good with everything on paper. Although I haven't had any experience with ELLs really so I am not sure how it will go in a real classroom setting	7 - I still have fears about simply not being able to speak any other language but English and that being an intimidating factor for me 7 - ...a lot of these [strategies] apply to English and History, but not as easily to math. I worry that I may not do enough.

As demonstrated with the science student discussed in Finding 2, students' low ratings have the potential to change when their context changes. Ideally, I would request that all students taking my differentiation course be placed at a city school so that class content and their teaching context can facilitate more confidence. That decision, unfortunately, is out of my control. I can, however, share what I've learned from this study to encourage students that they are indeed prepared, even if they don't feel like they are.

Finding 4

Perhaps Finding 4 is the most important to have emerged from this study: I do have reason to be confident in my ability to prepare preservice teachers to meet the needs of ELLs in their classrooms. This first began to dawn on me during one of my visits to my partner ELL high school in New York City. On October 4, 2019, I enthusiastically recorded the following in my reflective journal:

> I feel so invigorated by the time I spent with teachers at [NYC high school]. I really needed to be there – I forget how much it encourages me.... When I look back through the day's notes and the seven teachers with whom I consulted, I'm surprised by what I contributed. It makes sense that I could help [Teacher 1] structure his project work, help [Teachers 2 and 3] make their performance products more authentic, and help [Teacher 4] pull small groups and design independent work for other students; these suggestions spring from my areas of expertise in instruction and assessment... BUT

helping [Teacher 2] decide how to add language scaffolds to his assessments..., pointing [Teacher 5] to resources for assessing students' speaking skills, helping [Teacher 6] "chunk" her instruction linguistically, and helping [Teacher 7]... support his struggling SIFEs [Students with Interrupted Formal Education].... These are areas in which I have no formal training. Does being "self-taught" count more than I realized? Or does this all just boil down to what good, responsive, differentiated instruction is, regardless of whom you're teaching? In any case, I'm surprised and grateful I can help these teachers when they are trained in TESOL and spend all day with their ELLs.

When I work with teachers at this school, I coach them in strategies to help them surmount the obstacles they face in making school "work" for English learners. They, in turn, share their products with me – sometimes for feedback, but sometimes just to celebrate. I share these models with my students with excitement, but students often respond with angst. I think I understand now from whence this angst springs (a lack of context). I may need to work on my approach, and I can never stop growing, but I believe my expertise is sufficient to prepare my students for their linguistically-diverse future classrooms.

Conclusion

This study offers an examination of an important concept in teacher education: that of educators continuing to grow in their delivery of content that extends beyond their personal experience and doing so without feeling like *imposters*. "Imposter syndrome" (Clance & Imes, 1978), a phenomenon common to high-achieving women, is characterized by "pervasive feeling of self-doubt, insecurity and incompetence despite evidence that you are skilled and successful" (Robinson, 2017, para. 1). Two strategies for combatting imposter syndrome include 1) looking at the evidence and 2) celebrating successes (Robinson, 2017). Self-study presents the ideal opportunity for both. Through my engagement in this self-study, I have realized the importance of examining actual data to more objectively evaluate my qualifications and my teaching.

Hopefully, this approach will help me combat "imposter syndrome" in both myself and in my students.

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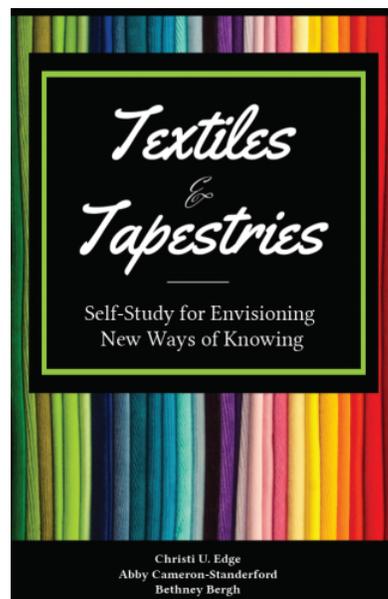
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