



Title of Project:

How ESOL Teacher Candidates Construct their Teacher Identities:
A Case Study of an MATESOL Program

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Project Summary:

Importance of Research on Teacher Identity

During their initial formal preparation in teacher education programs (TEPs), ESOL teacher candidates (TCs) are expected to engage in teacher learning by constructing their pedagogical knowledge, dispositions, and skills through their experiences in university-based teacher education courses and field-based teaching practica. As they learn how to teach and grow professionally, they concurrently craft their teacher identities (Ronfeldt & Grossman, 2008), which constitute a basis and framework through which they interpret, value, and make sense of pedagogical theories and classroom teaching experiences (Bullough, 1997; Olsen, 2011; Sachs, 2005). Their emerging teacher identities orient them to what they value, how they interpret their experiences, and what instructional decisions they make. Teacher learning in TEPs and beyond is not inseparable from teacher identity formation (Tsui, 2011). The kinds of teachers they conceive themselves to be and the kinds of teachers they aspire to become have a deciding influence on their teacher learning. Also, as they learn more about teaching theoretically and practically, they constantly renegotiate and readjust their images of themselves as teachers and their image of the teacher they envision becoming. This makes it highly important to explore how ESOL TCs negotiate, imagine, take on, and enact their teacher identities while they are traversing the provisions of a TEP. More specifically, scrutinizing the ways in which coursework and practica are separately and jointly conducive to ESOL TCs' teacher identity formation is a significant research endeavor. Therefore, this dissertation research project addressed the following research questions:

- (1) How does university-based teacher education coursework in an intensive MATESOL program contribute to ESOL TCs' teacher identity construction?
- (2) How do field-based teaching practicum experiences in an intensive MATESOL program contribute to ESOL TCs' teacher identity construction?



Participants and Setting

This research was primarily aimed at investigating the contribution of university-based teacher education courses and field-based teaching practica to ESOL TCs' teacher identity construction. Therefore, I recruited the current ESOL TCs in an intensive MATESOL program at a mid-Atlantic research university as the main research participants. There were six ESOL TCs in the 2013-2014 co-hort in the program who constituted the participant pool in this study. All six were invited to take part in the study, and they all agreed. I collected data from all six ESOL TCs from the 2013-2014 cohort; one participant dropped just prior to the second individual interview. Then, I purposefully selected three ESOL TCs as the focal participants of my study whose data contributed rich insights to address the questions that guided this research project. Those three focal ESOL TCs were chosen based upon their availability to participate throughout the research, elaborate on their responses, provide depth to the data, and maximize variation in the teaching practicum contexts.

Data collection efforts included two rounds of in-depth individual interviews with the TCs from the 2012-2013 IMP cohort, observations of the classes they taught in their school-based practicum and their teacher education classes, and a review of the artifacts (e.g., reflection papers, online discussions) they produced in the IMP. I started managing and analyzing the qualitative data gleaned from those collection methods as soon as I started collecting them. First, I assigned codes to the aspects of data that were pertinent to my research questions (e.g., "interaction with mentor," "interaction with students," "interaction with supervisor," "challenge in practicum," "knowing students," "decision to become teacher," "own language learning," "applying theory," "roles taken," "roles assigned," "feeling like a teacher," "seen as a teacher,"). In the next round, I placed coded data into categories (e.g., "ESOL teacher perspective," "professional interaction," "ownership of students," "reflection," "identifying priorities"). Once I had categories of codes and in order to develop tentative themes, I used the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) by "identifying incidents, events, and activities and constantly comparing them to an emerging category to develop and saturate the category" (Creswell, 2007, p. 238). Drawing from those sharpened and saturated categories that I built upon my coding, I started formulating finding statements to construct the "story line" (Creswell, 2007, p. 67) that explicated the contribution of ESOL TCs' teacher education courses and the teaching practicum to their teacher identity construction.

Results

Through their teacher education courses, the three TCs engaged in teacher identity negotiation and construction. First, in the social spaces of the teacher education classes, they were afforded opportunities to build up and take on an ESOL teacher perspective. Their professors and peers valued their teaching practicum experiences in public school contexts and positioned them as experts of school contexts. In addition, they had professional interactions with their peers as apprentices of the ESOL community. Moreover, during their practicum experiences, their teacher identity development was supported through their mentors' sharing of power and ownership of students, having a designated workspace in the school, and experiencing various emotional states in relation to their teaching and learning how to handle them. Lastly, coursework and practicum collectively contributed to the TCs' teacher identity construction through guided reflection



opportunities across programmatic provisions, exposure to and acquisition of professional language of ESOL, and opportunities to identify what is important for them in the education of English language learners.

Relevance of Findings to Language Education and Implications

The skyrocketing increase and extensive diversification of ELLs in the U.S. necessitates a well-equipped cadre of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL)—teachers who are adequately qualified to serve a diverse population of students coming from various cultural, linguistic, and academic backgrounds. Preparing ESOL TCs who can effectively serve ELL populations entails consideration of the role of those TCs' emerging teacher identities in the way they learn to teach ELLs and perform their teaching in the classroom. Therefore, teacher educators and policy makers should consider the following implications as contributions of the present study: TEPs should (1) make TCs' identity development a conscious and intentional process throughout their programmatic provisions, (2) create safe spaces in the university-based coursework for personalized identity negotiation, (3) begin teacher preparation by identifying TCs' preconceptions, which form the basis for teacher learning and identity formation, (4) carefully select mentor teachers and provide them with professional development to bolster TC identity development, (5) guide TCs in exploring and attending to emotional experiences, especially during the teaching practicum, (6) augment reflective practices to support TCs' identity construction in coursework and practicum, and (7) provide support for beginning teachers' induction into the profession when they begin their paid career.



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