



“You Learn Best When You’re in There”: ESOL Teacher Learning in the Practicum

This study relied on sociocultural understanding of teacher learning, which highlights how teacher candidates construct their own learning and adjust or extend their instructional values, priorities, and beliefs within their teaching contexts (Johnson, 2009). It used activity theory as a conceptual framework (Engeström, 1999) and explored how teaching practicum experiences contributed to 5 ESOL teacher candidates’ learning in a 13-month intensive MA TESOL program. Findings from the study illustrate that the teaching practicum made significant contributions to ESOL teacher candidates’ learning to teach in the program. Through the teaching practicum, teacher candidates (a) learned how to navigate in the school context, (b) learned about the nature of establishing relationships with the other members of the teaching community, (c) used the mediating artifacts with the support of mentors and supervisors, (d) found opportunities for constructing a mutually informative and dialogical relationship between theory and practice, and (e) gained closer understanding of ELLs.

Introduction

In the last three decades, the field of language-teacher education has directed primary attention to understanding language teachers as the learners of teaching and their learning-to-teach processes (Freeman, 2002; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Tedick, 2005). Scholars have examined how language teachers’ learning interacts with their beliefs, dispositions, and knowledge about language teaching and learning (Borg, 2006; Johnson & Golombek, 2003) and their professional identity development (Gaudelli & Ousley, 2009; Kanno & Stuart, 2011). There has been a growing emphasis on the sociocultur-

ally situated and complex nature of teacher learning within contextual dynamics that shape their understanding of their professional roles (Crandall, 2000; Johnson, 2009). Within this sociocultural conceptualization of teacher learning, the teaching practicum plays a significant role as teacher candidates' initial scaffolded and supervised professional experience in actual instructional contexts. More specifically, the teaching practicum marks the point where they start becoming apprenticed and socialized into the profession by negotiating and constructing their identities through their participation in the activities of the professional community (Lave & Wenger, 2001).

This article reports on a qualitative research study that used activity theory (AT) as a theoretical lens (Engeström, 1999; Johnson, 2009) and investigated five ESOL teacher candidates' (TCs) learning to teach English language learners (ELLs) in the teaching practicum. Before the presentation of the research findings, the following section provides a synthesis of background literature that discusses teacher learning and the practicum in TESOL teacher education and a summary of the AT framework.

Background Literature

Teacher Learning in TESOL

Research into TESOL teacher education has been moving away from transmission-oriented conceptualization of teacher candidates' professional learning for about three decades (Crandall, 2000; Johnson, 2009). This conceptualization assumes that educating ESOL teachers comprises transmission of theoretical knowledge coming from the fields of applied linguistics, second language acquisition (SLA), and language-teaching methodology to ESOL TCs (Freeman, 1989; Johnson, 2009), and it further assumes that this mere transmission will lead to teacher candidates' effective classroom practice. The move from this understanding has started with the introduction of sociocultural approaches to ESOL teacher learning, which is part of "a quiet revolution" (Johnson, 2000, p. 1) in TESOL teacher education.

Sociocultural approaches view ESOL teacher learning as socially negotiated and situated in the context, and reliant on what they know about themselves as teachers, as well as their students, subject matter, curricula, and setting (Johnson, 2009). TCs engage in pedagogical reasoning, justifying, decision making, and theorizing about their instructional practices, which foregrounds practitioner knowledge and inquiry, reflective practice, and critically reviewing, elaborating, and revising personal pedagogical theories (Burns & Richards, 2009; Crandall, 2000). They are active agents of their teaching and teacher learning and primary sources of knowledge about teaching. They are

not blank canvasses to be painted upon with theoretical and practical knowledge. When entering teacher-education programs (TEPs), they bring in their prior experiences, beliefs, values, aspirations, and imaginations about language teaching and learning which, as part of their fledgling teacher identity, constitute their initial “interpretive frame” (Olsen, 2010, p. 47). This frame interacts with the theoretical and practical knowledge they are exposed to during their experiences in the TEP. This interaction involves the negotiation and construction of their practically oriented personalized knowledge (Borg, 2003; Golombek, 1998), upon which they depend while planning and executing language instruction in their classes. Their learning “[emerges] out of and through experiences in social contexts,” through negotiation of meanings (Johnson & Golombek, 2003, pp. 729-730) as they traverse the practices of teacher education, take part in professional activities, and interact with ELLs, mentor teacher, other teachers, teacher educators, university supervisor, and parents.

The Practicum in TESOL Teacher Education

Also known as practice teaching, student teaching, internship, field experience, apprenticeship, practical experience, and clinical experience, *practicum* refers to one of the main components of the initial teacher-education curriculum. The practicum “usually involves supervised teaching, experience with systematic observation, and gaining familiarity with a particular teaching context” (Gebhard, 2009, p. 250). In most TEPs, the teaching practicum follows teacher-education courses as a capstone field-based experience in which TCs try out their teaching skills, take on professional roles, learn from experienced teachers, negotiate their growing pedagogical knowledge, and apprentice into the profession. In other words, as an essential and the most significant part of preservice teacher preparation (Crookes, 2003; Farrell, 2007), the practicum affords ESOL TCs with an actual workplace setting in which their evolving personal vision of language teaching goes through a reality check (Johnson, 1996b). It is expected to contribute to TCs’ “situation specific” knowledge “related to the context in which they meet a problem or develop a need or concern, knowledge that brings their already existing, subjective perception of personally relevant classroom situations one step further” (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999, p. 7).

Throughout their practicum experiences, ESOL TCs usually receive support from two highly crucial actors: mentor teacher and university supervisor. More specifically, mentor teachers provide TCs with “one-to-one, workplace-based, contingent and personally appropriate support for the person during their professional acclimatiza-

tion (or integration), learning, growth, and development” (Malderez, 2009, p. 260). Although there is significant variance in how they carry out their roles in providing this support (Wang & Odell, 2002), mentor teachers are known to exert one of the strongest influences on the growth of preservice teachers during their field-based experiences (Farrell, 2009; Roberts, Benedict, & Thomas, 2014). University supervisors are experienced teachers hired by TEPs to evaluate TCs’ classroom teaching performance through observations, give feedback on their teaching, and help them develop a reflective stance toward their practice (Malderez, 2009). Usually playing the role of a liaison between TEPs and schools, supervisors coordinate the communication channel between the two to make sure TCs are having positive and professionally stimulating practicum experiences. Both mentor teachers’ and supervisors’ support is expected to help reflectively “articulate the particulars of their own classroom context; to examine their own reactions, thoughts, and feelings; and to account for the intricacies of their own teaching” (Johnson, 1996a, p. 766).

Establishing a sound framework for preparing ESOL TCs necessitates understanding how they conceive and theorize their early experiences in the schools and how these experiences influence their growth as ESOL practitioners (Johnson, 1996b). However, because of its complexity and context-bound nature, it is not easy to address the questions of what and how ESOL TCs learn for their teaching practice during their practicum experiences (Farrell, 2001). Earlier research examined ESOL TCs’ professional learning in the teaching practicum in various TESOL teacher-education contexts. Main foci in the earlier work have been the design, content, and implementation of the TESOL practicum (Richards & Crookes, 1988; Stoyhoff, 1999; Yan & He, 2010), TCs’ interactions with others during the practicum (Gan, 2014; Gebhard, 1990), challenges when facing classroom reality (Johnson, 1996b; Numrich, 1996), understanding of themselves as ESOL teachers (Atay, 2007; Brinton & Holten, 1989), TCs’ nonnativeness in English (McKay, 2000; Polio & Wilson-Duffy, 1998), diversity of practicum context (Kabilan, 2013; Selvi, 2012), the role of mentor teachers and supervisors (Canh, 2014; Farrell, 2008; Ochieng’Ong’ondo & Borg, 2011; Payant & Murphy, 2012), and TCs’ professional identity development (Dang, 2013; Gaudelli & Ousley, 2009; Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Trent, 2010; Yazan, 2014).

The above-mentioned work has provided some valuable insights on ESOL TCs’ practicum experiences and “the black box” of TEPs (Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 303), yet more research is still needed to better understand and theorize ESOL TCs’ learning to teach ELLs in the TESOL practicum (Canh, 2014; Farrell, 2008). Therefore, the

current study attempts to contribute to the existing literature by further shedding light on how ESOL TCS' experiences in the practicum contribute to their ongoing process of teacher learning.

Theoretical Framework: Activity Theory

Activity theory (AT) as a theoretical lens was first introduced by Leont'ev (1978), Vygotsky's follower, elaborated and expanded in a more detailed fashion by Engeström (1999, 2001, 2008), applied into the field of second language learning by Lantolf and Thorne (2006), and adopted in TESOL teacher-education research by Johnson (2009). The present study draws primarily on Engeström's understanding of the activity system and Johnson's application of AT into language-teacher learning.

AT represents an instrument devised to portray the way individuals' activities are intertwined and interlaced with one another, and how and where individual thinking emerges and is mediated in social contexts. Therefore, an activity system comprises seven interrelated components: *subject*, *object*, *outcome*, *community*, *rules*, *mediating artifacts*, and *division of labor*, which Engeström (1999) delineates in the following figure:

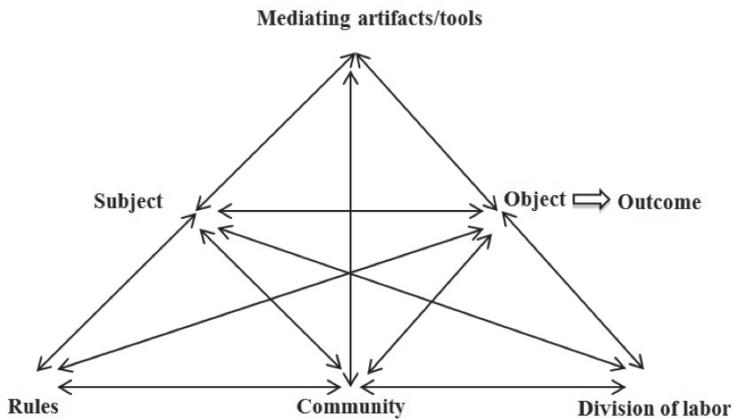


Figure 1. Human activity system. Adapted from Figure 1.2., p. 31, in "Activity Theory and Individual and Social Transformation," by Y. Engeström, 1999, in Y. Engeström, R. Miettinen, & R.-L. Punamaki-Gitai (Eds.), *Perspectives on Activity Theory: Learning in Doing* (pp. 19-38). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

In the activity system, *subject* refers to the individual or group whose agency the researcher chooses as the point of view in the analy-

sis (Engeström, 2001). “Object is the ‘problem space’ at which these activities are directed and that object is continuously molded and transformed into an *outcome* that is shaped by a host of *mediating artifacts*” (Johnson, 2009, p. 83). These artifacts or means are symbolic or material tools that mediate the actions of the subject in the activity system (Engeström, 2001). *Community* in an activity system is composed of participants whose activities are directed to the same general *object*, situating themselves as discrete from other communities (Johnson, 2009). *Division of labor* is closely affiliated with the collective nature of the activity. “The activity is divided into separate actions, each of which is then assumed by a particular individual in coordination with others” (Engeström, 1999, p. 72). *Rules* refer to regulational norms and conventions that impact the activity explicitly or implicitly and constitute certain limits and possibilities regarding the nature of interaction occurring in the activity system (Johnson, 2009).

AT rests upon the notion that individuals engage in a mediational process through their social interactions with others in the activity system and they attempt to reach their goals by making use of culturally constructed physical and symbolic artifacts and following the rules. This backs the premise that “human cognition is situated in and develops through the activities unique to the societies in which they have been constructed during their collective histories” (Johnson, 2009, p. 78). Therefore, the transformation of novices into competent members of the community hinges on the character and quality of their participation in activities and their use of mediational tools available in the activity system. When AT is applied to ESOL TCs’ learning in the teaching practicum, the *subject* is TC placed in the activity system of the practicum. The common *object* of this activity system is TCs’ learning to teach ELLs, which defines the orientation of the activity to achieve the *outcome*, namely, teacher preparation. The *mediational artifacts/tools* TCs use include lesson plans, unit plans, state standards, observation protocols, feedback forms, reflective journals, video recordings, and other pedagogical tools. The *rules* encompass the TEP’s regulations for the teaching practicum and the regulations, norms, and conventions governing TCs’ actions and interactions in the schools. The *division of labor* defines the responsibilities of the university supervisors, the mentor teachers, and the TCs, all of which are oriented toward the TCs’ learning to teach ELLs. The *community* is the community of the placement school where the TCs complete their practicum requirements and it involves all administrative and teaching staff and students.

In activity systems, development and transformation are driven by inner contradictions. They are structural tensions either between

the components of an activity system or between two or more activity systems (Engeström, 2008). The resolution of those tensions leads to an environment that contributes to the fulfillment of the desired goal. Thus, in an activity system, contradictions are considered to be the major sources spurring its members to move and change, thereby, to socially and cognitively develop (Engeström, 1999). Lantolf and Thorne (2006) present a new definition of learning relying on the notion of contradiction in the activity system. They view learning in the activity system as “a resolution ... to the tensions that produce changes in the conceptual, social and material conditions of one’s everyday life. These changes, in turn, create new contradictions (or opportunities for development)” (p. 209). In the activity system of the practicum, ESOL TCs’ learning occurs when they respond to and resolve the tensions in the system by using the mediational tools available. Their responses and resolutions are mostly shaped by the ways they navigate the other components of the system, such as rules, community, and division of labor.

Earlier work has so far used AT as an instrumental framework to better explore and understand language teaching and teacher learning. Scholars used it to examine language teachers’ practice (Cross, 2006), language policies, curricular mandates, and high-stakes assessment (Johnson, 2009; Kim, 2008), intercultural development of novice language teachers (Smolicic, 2009), preparation of diverse language teachers to effectively serve a diverse body of ELLs (Selvi, 2012), and TCs’ identity development in paired practicum (Dang, 2013). AT provides a framework to see potential tensions that ESOL TCs might encounter and have to handle as part of their teacher learning in the practicum context. For example, those tensions could be stemming from the lack of communication between TEP and mentor teachers in terms of the expectations from ESOL TCs or divergences in mentor teachers’ and TCs’ teaching philosophies. The present study used AT as its theoretical lens to scrutinize five ESOL TCs’ learning to teach ELLs in the context of the practicum.

Research Design

This study aimed to gain more insights into ESOL TCs’ conceptualization of their initial teaching experiences in the field and their impact on their development as ESOL practitioners (Johnson, 1996b). Those insights are needed to better orchestrate ESOL TCs’ teaching practicum and facilitate their teacher-learning experiences in the pre-service TEPs that constitute a significant part of the bedrock for their further professional learning (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Therefore, the current study addressed the following questions:

1. How does the teaching practicum contribute to ESOL TCs' learning to teach ELLs?
2. How do ESOL TCs respond to the contradictions while navigating and negotiating the activity system of the teaching practicum?

Participants

Five ESOL TCs were recruited for this study. They were all from the same cohort in a 13-month intensive MA TESOL program (IMP) at a research-intensive state university in the mid-Atlantic US. They were in this program because they wanted to become state certified to teach in the K-12 public school system. Apart from its intensive time frame of study, what makes this program particularly challenging as well as appealing for TCs is its two-semester teaching practicum (in both elementary and secondary settings) that they are required to complete concurrently with university-based course work. When they agreed to take part in this research study, they had already completed one semester of their teaching practicum either in an elementary or secondary setting, so they were able to share their experiences in the previous and current school placements. Table 1 provides a summary of the five participants.

Setting

The IMP is a 13-month intensive full-time program that leads to a Master's of Education (M.Ed.) in TESOL as well as eligibility for state certification to teach ELLs at the K-12 levels. It is an alternative TEP for individuals who hold at least a baccalaureate degree and intend to work at elementary or secondary schools. The IMP requires two semester-long practicum courses: one at the elementary level and one at the secondary level. The teacher candidates need to complete 42 credit hours: 36 hours of course work and 6 hours of school experience. When graduating from the program, they are granted a M.Ed. degree and eligibility for certification to teach ELLs in elementary and secondary schools in the state in which the program is offered. The student enrollment rate has historically been lower than in the other TEPs housed in the department, probably because of its intensive time frame. However, this low enrollment rate combined with institutionalized practices (such as the seminar class, having common beginning and graduating times, taking the same classes as a cohort) facilitates the formation and maintenance of sense of community and cohort in this IMP.

When ESOL TCs in the IMP are placed in a public school (usually in one of three school systems closest to the university) for their

Table 1
Study Participants

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Country of origin</i>	<i>Language background</i>	<i>Current practicum placement</i>	<i>Teaching experience</i>	<i>Postprogram goals</i>
Jane	USA	English; studied Spanish (not fluent)	Elementary ESOL	6 years (EFL and ESL)	Teaching for 2 years in public schools
Edward	USA	English and Spanish bilingual	High school ESOL	2 years of volunteering for adult ESOL	Teaching in public schools
Jennifer	USA	English; studies Spanish (not fluent)	High school ESOL	3 months teaching EFL	Teaching in public schools
Rebecca	USA	English and Spanish bilingual	High school ESOL	13 years of teaching English in Chile	Pursuing a PhD degree
Daniel	USA	English; studied French (not fluent)	High school ESOL	No experience	Teaching in public schools

Note. All names are pseudonyms.

practicum, they are matched with a mentor teacher and they are in charge of 50% of their mentor's teaching load. They observe their mentors' classes and other teachers' classes, co-teach classes with their mentors, plan and teach classes on their own that are observed by their mentors and university supervisor, attend school and district meetings with their mentor teachers, and do various other school duties (e.g., bus duty, hallway duty). The university supervisor observes them at least four times per semester, conducts pre- and postobservation sessions to give them feedback, and handles the issues arising in the public school context by playing the role of a liaison between the IMP and the public schools.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data set of this study was gleaned from in-depth individual interviews conducted with the five participating ESOL TCs. Qualitative researchers use interviewing as a data-collection instrument to learn about the things that they cannot directly observe, such as participants' behavior, thoughts, feelings, intentions, their interpretations about the world surrounding them, and past incidents that are im-

possible to relive (Merriam, 1998). In the current study, the interview data were generated through the interaction between the researcher and the participants, and they provided valuable and deep insights about the impact of the teaching practicum on the participants' professional learning experiences in the field and the way they conceive this impact.

My interaction with the participants started through the course for which I was serving as a graduate teaching assistant (GTA) in Spring 2012 semester. The entire data collection and management spanned more than three months (February 2012-April 2012) and included building rapport with the participants, conducting interviews, organizing transcribed data, and member checks. Because I had access to them through the course for which I was the course GTA, I invited all nine ESOL TCs who were enrolled in the IMP program in the 2011-2012 academic year. Six of them agreed to participate in my research study, but one of them dropped out because we could not find a convenient time for the interview in her fairly busy schedule. In my email invitation, I underscored that their participation would by no means affect their grade in the course (which was also noted in the IRB consent form) and they should not feel forced to participate because I was the course GTA. I conducted one in-depth individual interview with each participant (see the Appendix for sample questions), which lasted from 43 to 58 minutes, and I had gathered 266 minutes of interview data when I completed my data collection.

The interviews were voice recorded and transcribed verbatim. When transcribing the interviews, I simultaneously began the organization of the data and initial coding procedures, because in qualitative inquiry data analysis should start as soon as researchers recruit the participants and engage in the process of data gathering (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). When all interview data were collected and organized, I proceeded with iterative coding and placing coded data into categories, which made the analysis more rigorous, concentrated, and intense.

I used the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to develop tentative themes from the coded data by "identifying incidents, events, and activities and constantly comparing them to an emerging category to develop and saturate the category" (Creswell, 2007, p. 238). Relying on saturated categories, I started formulating finding statements to create the "story line" (Creswell, 2007, p. 67) that explained the five ESOL TCs' professional learning experiences in the practicum school depending on their experiences and comments. As analytic constructs, I used the components of the AT framework (i.e., subject, object, outcome, community, rules, mediating artifacts, and

division of labor) that helped me make sense of the TCs' experiences and shaped this "story line." I also wanted to make sure that my interpretations of the data as a researcher were valid and reflective of the truth according to the participants. Therefore, I carried out two member checks to validate my assumptions and understandings, namely, by sharing with my participants the transcriptions before the data analysis and the emerging themes before I finalized my list of findings.

Findings

The current study focused on the TESOL practicum, which is one of the most complicated and critical phenomena to explore in TESOL teacher-education research (Crookes, 2003; Graves, 2009). More specifically, it addressed the question of how the teaching practicum contributed to ESOL TCs' teacher learning at a workplace environment. Conceptualizing language-teacher learning as socioculturally negotiated and constructed through human interactions in the context (Johnson, 2009), this study examined five ESOL TCs' teacher learning by using Engeström's (1999) activity theory (AT). Findings from this study demonstrate that the teaching practicum was conducive to the five ESOL TCs' professional learning in five main ways: They

1. Learned how to navigate in the school context;
2. Learned about the nature of establishing relationships with the other members of the teaching community;
3. Used the mediating artifacts with the support of mentors and supervisors;
4. Found opportunities for constructing a mutually informative and dialogical relationship between theory and practice; and
5. Gained a better understanding of ESOL students.

The following is the presentation of those findings exemplified and substantiated by the participants' quotations.

Learning to Navigate in the School Context

Their practicum experiences enabled the five ESOL TCs to go through the process of learning the inner workings and dynamics of a school context that was similar to where they were becoming certified to teach. They were immersed in a workplace environment in which they had the chance to learn the way public schools operate and familiarize themselves with the potential issues with which teachers are grappling. Through their actions and interactions in the community, the ESOL TCs, subjects of the activity system, gained a nuanced understanding of what rules regulate the activity system of the teaching

practicum and how labor is divided among the community members. For example, Jane emphasized that understanding the way schools work was a significant part of her professional learning as a TC. She notes:

Because of my experience in high school and elementary school, I now know how the schools work, which is something you can't really learn in graduate courses and it is really much more important. It took me a long time in [name of high school] to really figure out who I need to go [to] to get this information, who supports me with this, aside from applying what I've learned in class in my classrooms. (Interview, Jane, 03/08/2012)

Jane learned the division of labor in the school context, which was important to her successful functioning in the school beyond her classroom practices. As part of her "professional acclimatization" (Malderer, 2009, p. 260) and integration into the community, she had to learn how to navigate the waters of a school context.

Edward had a tough experience that teemed with many hurdles when learning the rules of his school concerning student confidentiality. He described how school regulations and procedures blocked his progress on his graduate course assignment:

In high school, I had a very very difficult time getting through confidentiality barriers. In [course name], differentiating learning difficulties and language deficiency, my project was on an ESOL student with an IEP. I have come into whole lot of obstacles to see what have been done so far for this child. What support staff has provided for her. The school has rules to follow regarding confidentiality; I have had to go through very specific processes. Once again, time. I asked for permission and it took a long time for them to get back to me. Back and forwards. Bureaucracies caused me some problems. (Interview, Edward, 03/13/2012)

Although he felt annoyed, as a subject seeking successful functioning in this activity system, Edward had to encounter a tension between his own expectations and the school's confidentiality policies. He was expecting to have a smooth and quick process of accessing student information, but he had to endure "whole lot of obstacles," "very specific processes," and "bureaucracies." The rules of the activity system defined the restrictions and possibilities (Johnson, 2009) concerning his actions potentially conducive to the object of the activity, his teacher learning.

Establishing Relationships in the Teaching Community

Through practicum experiences, the five ESOL TCs learned about the nature of establishing and maintaining professional relationships with their mentors and other ESOL or mainstream teachers in the school. As they interacted with other members of the teaching community at various levels, they had to acquire a thorough understanding of the norms, conventions, and expectations embedded in the school culture with regard to their professional relationships. This understanding facilitated their resilience (Gu & Day, 2007) and the way they followed their “own personal and professional path” (Flores & Day, 2006). For instance, the contradiction that Rebecca had to resolve with her mentor teacher taught her to be political and take the initiative in the way she operates in the school but to concurrently maintain her professional relationship with her mentor. She depicted the situation:

I had a difficult mentor situation in my first semester. I learned a very important lesson about playing politics, like nodding your head, agreeing and still doing what you needed to do within reason; it was a very difficult situation. If you wait around to get explicit directions from your mentor, you will be waiting around for fairly long time. I learned how to really be innovative with my schedule, with my work with the students, reach a point where I felt like I can take control of what I needed to do and what my kids needed to be done. (Interview, Rebecca, 03/28/2012)

As a consequence of this “difficult situation,” she reviewed her understanding of the professional relationship between her and her mentor and realized that she would not have to agree with her mentor all the time and expect explicit guidance from her in the practicum. She knew that she had to draw her own path and “take control of” her practice working with students. Then, she was able to positively adapt to this situation “in the presence of challenging circumstances” (Gu & Day, 2007, p. 1305). She was able to overcome the constraints and thrive socially and professionally despite the disagreement with the mentor and the lack of guidance.

Daniel also had to adjust his expectations from his professional relationships with the other professional community members. He learned the norms of working with mainstream teachers in the school culture, which primarily concerned their time dedicated to ELLs’ issues. He sounded very positive and characterized this as a learning experience:

Daniel: When I was getting used to levels of collaboration, I had pullout model ESOL, I pulled out two classes a day from 3-4-5th grade and then newcomers. We tailored our ESOL classes to what was going on in mainstream classes. For this purpose, we need to share ideas with the mainstream teachers. When I would try that, they had a limited time. A couple of teachers started getting annoyed. I have come to realize that time is an important resource for teachers.

Researcher: Then you stopped talking to them?

Daniel: Yeah. I started asking students more, less to the teachers. That opened my eyes to “Hey, teachers don’t have time to work together for every detail.” (Interview, Daniel, 03/30/2012)

Daniel encountered a tension between his vision of collaboration between ESOL and mainstream teachers and the reality emerging from his enthusiastic attempts for collaboration (Johnson, 1996b; Yan & He, 2010). Committed to his ELLs’ learning, Daniel expected to be working in close coordination and collaboration with the mainstream teachers who were teaching his ELLs. However, the way he made sense of division of labor in the education of ELLs did not match the mainstream teachers’ understanding. Then, he was resilient enough and demonstrated positive adaptation in spite of the challenge (Gu & Day, 2007), and he gathered his data more from his students and less from his mainstream colleagues.

Jennifer had completely different professional relationships with her two mentor teachers and she believed this was because of their divergent approaches to mentoring. In her comparison surfaces the contradiction between her view of good mentoring and what she experienced with one of her mentors. She juxtaposed the two mentor teachers:

I think ego really gets in the way. For my first mentor teacher, it was all about my mentor teacher, not about the students. Any extra work that I was doing, any extra clubs that I started, any extra tutoring I was doing, she was unhappy. She was like “Now I have a student teacher who is here to do my work for me.” So we had quite a bit, we had some problems. She really sort of resented any work that I was doing that was helping the students, that was taking off her workload. Whereas my second mentor, as long as I’m helping kids, whomever those kids may be, she is thrilled. So

I think it really depends on the way that the mentor viewed the program and my role as their student teacher. (Interview, Jennifer, 03/19/2012)

From this challenging experience, she learned that there could be big variance in the way mentor teachers view mentoring and enact their roles as mentor teachers (Ottesen, 2007; Wang & Odell, 2002) supporting TCs' learning to teach ELLs. She also realized that she could not assume all ESOL teachers would necessarily prioritize the education of ELLs in their professional relationships. She, however, believed that she should act selflessly in her relationships with the colleagues when it comes to facilitating students' learning.

Additionally, Jennifer's interactions with other teachers in the teaching practicum allowed her to attain a grasp of matters concerning her teaching practice in the public school system. She said:

It [the practicum] solidified my passion for helping students, but it made me hesitant in what I was getting into by going into the school system. I mean, all of the issues that come from the top to the bottom, working with other teachers, who are unhappy. So it's been good. It's been fairly real experience that I've seen the good, the bad, and the ugly in terms of school system. (Interview, Jennifer, 03/19/2012)

The realities of the school setting led her to hesitate in her decision to become a public school teacher, but they concomitantly made her cognizant of the issues surrounding the community of practitioners in the public school system. As a major "socializing agent" in the workplace (Flores & Day, 2006), the teaching practicum habituated her to the professional context in which she will face "the good, the bad, and the ugly" when serving ELLs. She thought that her practicum experiences were "real" enough for her to observe various aspects of the school system firsthand, that is, not only the rewarding part of being an ESOL teacher that fuels her motivation to teach, but also the frustrating part that is the source of teachers' unhappiness.

Support From Mentors and Supervisors

The five ESOL TCs learned new mediating tools (e.g., lesson plans, classroom-management techniques) and tried out the ones they already knew with their supervisors' and mentors' support. As the subjects of the activity, they needed the other community members' guidance and advice when experimenting with the tools that mediate their actions and interactions in the activity. For instance, when

asked about the most helpful component of the practicum for him, Edward highlighted the value of the supervision and assistance that he received from his mentor teacher. He explained:

Well, having a mentor, having a good mentor. It's been very helpful. I don't know when else in my career will a teacher help me write lesson plans, writing an objective, working with classroom management. If you have a good mentor, you have someone helping you in every step of the way; if I had started as a teacher with none of that, I would have bad habits for years and I'd never know that they were bad habits. I mean it's been wonderful. Because you can tell people you want them to correct you, but when you are, you know, coworkers and professionals, it's more awkward to, whereas the mentor's job is to help me with my faults as a teacher. (Interview, Edward, 03/13/2012)

His mentor scaffolded his learning to teach and facilitated his apprenticeship into the profession (Lave & Wenger, 2001). Edward specifically focused on having an experienced teacher who was willing to mentor him and correct his mistakes before he started teaching on his own. "Being supportive of [his] transformation ... and of [his] acceptance into a professional community" (Malderez, 2009, p. 260), his mentor helped him with his "faults as a teacher" in creating and using such mediating tools as lesson plans, lesson objectives, and classroom-management techniques.

Jane found her university supervisor very supportive of her immersion into teaching K-12 in an actual classroom with adequate guidance. She recounted her experience:

I'm grateful to [my university supervisor]. This whole procedures thing. Creating procedures in your classroom. "Like every day we're gonna do this warmup, and every day this is for your folder." That was new to me. I never had to do that. It was a lot less formal, when I worked with adults. She gave me the structure that I needed to think about at the beginning. She told me my strengths and always gave me suggestions. We didn't always agree but it didn't matter. Again it was respect and flexibility to kind of "Let's put this on the table and decide what is gonna work because you work with the kids every day." (Interview, Jane, 03/08/2012)

Through healthy communication and constructive feedback sessions, Jane learned from her mentor a new mediating tool, namely classroom routines, which helped solidify her lesson structure. This was a

significant shift in her understanding of teaching K-12 students, because she had had “a lot less formal” structure when teaching adults. Her mentor teacher’s suggestions, flexibility, and mutual respect led Jane to explore the nature of effective language teaching in her context and learn the instructional strategies used by effective language teachers (Crandall, 2000).

Constructing the Relationship Between Theory and Practice

Their engagement in teaching practice in an actual classroom environment afforded the five ESOL TCs with opportunities for fostering and sustaining a symbiotic, “dialogical, ongoing, cyclical, catalytic relationship” between the theoretical and practical sides of teaching (Sharkey, 2009), which mutually inform each other. The simultaneity of course work and practicum in the intensive MA TESOL program (IMP) offered more mediational spaces to reflect on their daily teaching, assisting or co-teaching with their mentor teachers, and observing experienced teachers’ lessons. Their reflective processes were facilitated through their concurrent access to school settings through their practicum and educational theories through their teacher-education course work (Selvi, 2012). Thereby, they were able to contextualize their teacher knowledge (Golombek, 1998) when they “take class experiences into work and work experiences into the classroom” (Interview, Jennifer, 03/19/2012). For example, in his comments, Daniel underscored the role of the practicum in contextualizing and concretizing his growing theoretical knowledge. He expounded:

You can tell me about a kid who can’t read, but until you see that happen and deal with what happens, nothing can really prepare you. You may read books all day about something, until you are in that moment. You learn best when you’re in there. I think internship is a nice transition between getting halfway between being a student teacher and to being a teacher. (Interview, Daniel, 03/30/2012)

He believed that his practicum experiences promoted the development of his situational teacher knowledge (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999) about ELLs, which he needed while transitioning through this “limbic stage of becoming” an ESOL teacher (Gaudelli & Ousley, 2009, p. 931). He needed to be “in that moment” so that he could focus on “certain characteristics of the situation ... important to the question of how to act in the situation” (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999, p. 7). Given that the object of the activity in which Daniel was situated as a subject

was teacher learning, his specific focus on situations and cultivating situation-based knowledge were conducive to the achievement of the object.

Rebecca also accentuated the significance of the teaching practicum in helping her make sense of the theoretical knowledge and implement it in her lessons. She explained and exemplified her understanding of the theory-practice relationship:

Our learning starts in class, but then I am able to put into practice what I've been studying in class. For example, if I've been studying about the communicative approach and different ideas, and task-based learning and different things, and hopefully I get the opportunity to do that in class, to design a lesson and apply, do lessons that are communicatively based, that may have ideas such as task-based learning. So because that informs my practice, because you can talk about a lot of things, and may sound good on paper, but no one knows how to put that in practice in real-life classroom, with real students, who come from a variety of backgrounds and a variety of educational background, it is a whole different story. ... I need to know what theory that's gonna inform my teaching practices; if I choose to do grammar-translation method, I need to know why. ... "Why did I do that? Well, this is the reason why I did that." (Interview, Rebecca, 03/28/2012)

Her comments illustrate that Rebecca valued theoretical knowledge because it informs her teaching practice in the classroom and she found the practicum instrumental in providing her with a "real-life classroom" environment with its complexities. In her conceptualization, classroom teaching practice "is a whole different story" from the discussions of teaching in teacher-education courses that "may sound good on paper." Also, the methods and strategies function as mediating tools that orient her actions and interactions in the activity system. However, she needed to use her pedagogical thinking, reasoning, and justification (Golombek, 1998; Yazan, 2014) when selecting those tools in specific situations emerging in everyday teaching contexts.

Understanding ESOL Students

The teaching practicum facilitated the participants' integration into a real-life teaching setting where they interacted with ESOL students and got to know them more closely. Through this interaction, they were actively involved in the education of ELLs as they took on and enacted their professional identities as ESOL teachers (Yazan,

2014). They had a firsthand experience establishing good working relationships with their students and attained an increased understanding of who ELLs are in this country and what unique situations or experiences they have been through. This was conducive to their strengthened awareness as fledgling ESOL practitioners, which is intertwined with their practically oriented personalized knowledge (Borg, 2003). For example, during her high school placement, Jane had a positive experience building rapport with her high school ELLs and learning from them about them. She said:

The most important experience has been connecting with my students. That sounds probably cheesy but it's true. Especially in high school, I really got connected to my students. It didn't happen overnight. It took a few weeks and by the end of my second quarter I really was there because I wanna help them as individuals, not just make sure they spoke my language. ... I cared really about them; they meant a lot to me being my students in a public school. I feel like getting to know them and seeing their progress, doing my best to show them that I'm genuinely trying to help them. I feel like I learned the most from them to be honest. Just about like, I hadn't worked for high schoolers before, I didn't really know. ... They taught me a lot, they taught me what to expect from high school students and I kept really high expectations for them, and they met them; that was really impressive. (Interview, Jane, 03/08/2012)

Her commitment to ELLs' education surfaced in her comments, especially the "caring" side of her ESOL teacher self. This commitment was an indication of how seriously she took the object of the activity in which she was situated. Her desire to learn to teach ELLs, her resolution toward the object, fueled her endeavors to get connected to her students and make them see her as a genuinely caring ESOL teacher. Also, her interactions with ELLs provided her a dialogic space to negotiate her knowledge of students as an ESOL teacher in this context (Freeman & Johnson, 1998) and her expectations from them. In this example, Jane was creator of her knowledge and theorizer of her practice (Johnson, 2000), which relied on and contributed to her "interpretive frame" (Olsen, 2010) as a budding teacher.

Rebecca shared one incident from her last day in the high school placement that had an impact on what she should know about her students. It taught her an important lesson about students' individual differences. She reflected on it:

Rebecca: On my last day of teaching high school, I had a student who cried that I was leaving. She was a student that didn't really seem to be paying attention in class and never really seemed connected to what was going on. It showed me that even when you don't realize it, you are having an effect on those in the classroom.

Researcher: Could you elaborate on the "effect on those in the classroom" part?

Rebecca: Well, it reminded me not to be frustrated with a student because they aren't responding the way that I might like. Just because they aren't actively, or overtly engaged—raising their hands, etc.—doesn't mean that what I am doing isn't having an effect on them. I guess it helped me be more accepting of that each student arrives in the classroom with their own manner and personality and that it's okay. (Interview, Rebecca, 03/28/2012)

Rebecca's example is supportive of the idea that real-life classroom experiences and interactions with students contribute to TCs' construction of their own pedagogical knowledge. It was within this incident or interaction that she had to revisit and revise her knowledge and belief as an emerging ESOL teacher, the object of the activity. It was a moment of transformation for her and reshaping of her existing knowledge and belief (Johnson & Golombek, 2003). She gained a deeper understanding of her students, which seemed to have led to a shift from what she "might like" to the personality with which "each student arrives in the classroom."

For Jennifer, one of her main goals in her practicum was to construct her knowledge of ESOL students in the US public school context. She was concerned about her lack of experience teaching ELLs, so she remarked:

I was just expecting to learn how to teach ESOL kids. Really I had no prior experience other than one semester in Prague. ... That's been really important to me. I mean, really getting to know ESOL kids coming from different backgrounds and their situation. A challenge for me, but until now I wasn't so in tuned with what it was like to be an English language learner in the United States. (Interview, Jennifer, 03/19/2012)

She was quite mindful of the fact that her ELLs, contrary to the ones in Prague, will be a highly diverse student body from numerous ethnic, linguistic, and educational backgrounds. The object of the activity

is at stake here again. That is, she expected her teacher learning to be mediated and fostered in real-life classrooms where she could be exposed to ELLs' unique stories and situations. The limitations and possibilities of her teaching primarily hinged on this exposure, so she wanted to advance her integration into the US public school context by responding to her "challenge."

Discussion

This study used activity theory as a theoretical lens and investigated five ESOL TCs' professional learning at practicum settings where they tried out teaching ESOL, immersed themselves into a school context, engaged in professional relationships, and had firsthand experience serving ELLs. The findings of this study corroborate the earlier work on the TESOL practicum in that initial field experience has a significant impact on becoming an ESOL practitioner, and professional learning at the workplace is a highly complex process (Farrell, 2009; Gan, 2014; Gebhard, 2009; Selvi, 2012). The findings also build upon and add to the ongoing discussions about ESOL teacher learning during initial teacher education and beyond.

When they are placed in the activity of the TESOL practicum, how TCs make sense of their practice depends on a constellation of complex and multifaceted processes that figure into their ongoing teacher learning. In other words, deeper understanding of what shapes TCs' actions, reactions, and interactions in the activity system entails TCs' negotiation of rules, division of labor, mediating tools, community, and object. As subjects at the epicenter of the activity, TCs enter their practicum schools with their emerging pedagogical knowledge, expectations, passions, aspirations, fears, and vulnerabilities. They have in mind a tentative imagination of the contours of their professional growth (Flores & Day, 2006) and bring in their own version and interpretation of what ESOL TCs should learn and do during this scaffolded practice teaching. However, this imagination and interpretation interact with the dynamics, realities, and challenges of the instructional context (Farrell, 2008; Gan, 2014). This interaction could be a source of tension between their personal professional vision and contextual possibilities and constraints (Canh, 2014; Johnson, 1996b; Yan & He, 2010). Their responses to tensions solidify the identities they (re)enact as emerging ESOL practitioners. For example, further learning and resilience emerged from Rebecca's disagreement with and lack of guidance from her mentor teacher and Daniel's tension with mainstream teachers.

Furthermore, ESOL TCs needed other community members' support and guidance when using and appropriating the mediating

tools available and creating new ones for their own use. This support coming from expert teachers was essential for TCs as apprentices in their transition from being graduate students to being teachers, as in the examples of Edward and Jane. However, this support should be through communication characterized with constructive feedback, flexibility, and respect, which gives space for the negotiation of the rules, division of labor, and the object by community members. More specifically, such communication acknowledges ESOL TCs as creators of their knowledge and theorizers of their practice who constantly engage in pedagogical reasoning and decision making in their teaching settings (Johnson, 2000). For example, Jane's supervisor's comment is illustrative of this sort of liberating communication that foregrounded Jane's knowledge of ELLs: "Let's put this on the table and decide what is gonna work because you work with the kids every day."

ESOL TCs in the IMP studied the issues surrounding ELLs in the US and discussed the instructional methods and strategies to work with this exceedingly diverse student body. The practicum was instrumental for them to contextualize and implement what they learned from teacher-education courses in the classroom setting. Simultaneity in the IMP further facilitated the interaction between "work and class," in Jennifer's words. However, this interaction becomes more complicated when we acknowledge ESOL TCs as pedagogical knowledge constructors and incorporate in the equation the impact of their varying conceptualizations of the theory-practice relationship (Peercy, 2012). For example, in Daniel's conceptualization of theory and practice, the former refers to the knowledge *about* ESOL students and their learning and comes in the form of facts and generalizations pulled from "books," whereas the latter is embedded *only* in the teaching setting and denotes experiencing particular teaching incidents to use that knowledge. He highly valued building his situational knowledge (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999) while engaging in classroom teaching. Also, Rebecca believed the methods and strategies she was introduced to in teacher-education courses informed her classroom practice, but she had to be able to explain and justify her instructional decisions when putting them in practice. She regarded instructional reasoning significant and valuable as a teacher. Therefore, although the teaching practicum afforded them the experience to explore the link between theory and practice, this exploration varied in all the TCs' cases depending on how they view the relationship between the two and what they value in their teaching and teacher learning (Peercy, 2012).

The premises of activity theory (Engeström, 1999, 2001, 2008) provided an instrumental framework in capturing a variegated portrayal of ESOL TCs' learning to teach as apprentices in the context of

the practicum. The five ESOL TCs had to handle and resolve contradictions or tensions, which furthered their professional learning in the activity of the practicum. The findings in this study brought attention to the central importance of support from the other community members (e.g., mentor teacher, university supervisor; Payant & Murphy, 2012) and of the TCs' agency, initiative, and resilience (Gu & Day, 2007). For example, Rebecca positively adapted in response to the repercussions of her "difficult mentor situation." Learning the politics of collegial relationships with her mentor, she clung to the ultimate focus of her teaching and teacher learning, which is ELLs' education. Also, when Daniel's attempts to collaborate with mainstream teachers were discouraged because of their hectic schedules, he strategically figured out another source of information, which was his own students who were receiving pullout support. Both Rebecca and Daniel stayed resilient in the face of onerous circumstances, and they took the initiative for their own teaching and teacher learning; that is, they moved on toward the object of the activity system. Therefore, the subject's actions and interactions in the community are shaped not only by the rules and division of labor but also by their strategic maneuvers to resolve contradictions. Last, the findings in this study also pointed out how ESOL TCs reframed and redefined what the object of the activity system meant for them during their time in the teaching practicum setting. More specifically, as they spent more time in the teaching setting and gained more perspective as ESOL teachers regarding the contextual demands and resources, they tended to shift their main focus from their relationships with mentor teachers to serving the ELLs they were responsible for. Although their collegial relationship with mentor teachers was still part of their practicum experience as a whole, they became primarily interested in and committed to teaching and learning to teach their ELLs. This shift in their focus demonstrates a significant evolution in their identities as teachers during the teaching practicum (Kanno & Stuart, 2011).

Conclusion

Teacher learning occurs when ESOL TCs actively engage in the negotiation and construction of their own teacher knowledge, which is oriented in a complex manner by biographical trajectories, preconceptions, and future aspirations (Johnson, 2009). As a venue for initial, scaffolded teaching practice, the practicum is unanimously accepted as an essential constituent of TESOL teacher education (Crookes, 2003; Farrell, 2008; Gebhard, 2009). This supported workplace experience significantly affects TCs' learning to teach ELLs as they experiment with classroom teaching, enact their ESOL teacher

identities, socialize into school culture, interact with colleagues and ELLs, and navigate the school system. However, ESOL teacher learning in the practicum is still underexplored and there have been recent calls for more research on it (Canh, 2014) to better understand ESOL TCs' conceptualizations of their early teaching experiences (Johnson, 1996b).

This study demonstrates that the AT framework could be a valuable tool to be embedded in TESOL practicum design. For example, TESOL teacher educators can use the AT constructs to facilitate ESOL TCs' conceptualization of the teaching practicum as a system marked by potential contradictions to deal with and by dynamic interaction among its components. Thereby, in line with the sociocultural turn in TESOL professional education, the AT framework can serve as a social tool to guide ESOL TCs' reflection on their teacher learning experiences in the teaching practicum setting. This tool can provide a lens to broaden the reflective processes of ESOL teacher learning and to conceptualize reflection and teacher growth as a social achievement that is constantly impacted not only by individual TCs' agency and efforts, but also by social factors embedded in the context and shaping their experiences.

This study investigated five ESOL TCs' learning to teach ELLs in the practicum by using Engeström's (1999) activity theory. The findings pointed out that during the practicum, TCs had the opportunities to:

1. Explore the intricacies of the school system;
2. Engage in collegial relationships with other teachers;
3. Try out guided use and construction of mediating tools;
4. Reinforce the link between theory and practice; and
5. Accomplish closer understanding of the unique ELL student body.

The tensions they encountered and resolved with or without support in the practicum opened spaces for them to negotiate their teaching and teacher learning. Through this negotiation, TCs were, therefore, creators of their pedagogical knowledge and theorizers of their classroom practice (Johnson, 2000).

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Appendix

Sample Interview Questions

1. Could you tell briefly about your educational and linguistic background?
 - a. As a student (before and after being a grad student, as an L2 learner)
 - b. As a teacher (if you are currently teaching)
2. What are your career plans when you graduate from the program?
3. What is the most fruitful part of the program so far in terms of preparing you for your future plans? Why?
4. How do you think the teaching practicum has contributed to your learning to teach English language learners? What opportunities do you think it has provided for you as an emerging ESOL teacher?
5. Could you tell about the challenges that you have encountered during your teaching practicum? How did you handle them?