

Mandated to Learn, Guided to Reflect:  
Pre-Service Teachers' Evolving Understanding  
of English Language Learners

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On the first night of class each semester, before we open a textbook or begin our first discussion, I ask the students in my *Foundations of Structured English Immersion* (SEI) class to respond to a series of probing questions. The experience is titled, "The Initial Reaction Questionnaire" (IRQ), and I use it to highlight course topics that we will discuss as the course progresses. One of the first questions on the IRQ reads, "When you hear the words English language learner, what comes to mind?" I encourage the students to write down the first things they think of, remind them that there are no "right answers," and encourage them to be as honest as they can comfortably be. The purpose of the experience is to gather students' initial beliefs about English language learners (ELLs), which I then use as a starting point for reflecting on our learning during the course of our 15 weeks together. The IRQ allows the pre-service teachers and me to see what happens to their understandings about ELLs throughout the course. This experience of learning what pre-service teachers think, as evidenced by this reflective exercise, is the first of many experiences in the course that allow for pre-service teachers to acknowledge, examine, and renew their understandings about ELLs.

Pre-service teachers take the SEI course because they are mandated

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to do so. These students are working toward teacher certification in the state of Arizona. We often banter about this on the first night of class, when I pose the question to the class, "Why are you here?" Each semester, a few brave souls offer the response, "Uh, 'cause it's required?" With little understanding as to what the class is about or why they have to take it, students know that the course is a requirement for graduating with a teaching certification. All of them want to be teachers, but on this first day of class, few see themselves as future teachers of ELLs.

As a former teacher of ELLs, I believe that mandating all teachers to be prepared to teach ELLs is both promising and troubling. Given the rise in the ELL population over the past 20 years (Garcia & Jensen, 2009), the dismantling of specialized language programs for ELLs (Lucas & Grinberg, 2008), and the increase in the number of accountability measures (Crawford, 2004), there is a growing need for preparation programs across the nation to prepare all teachers for ELLs. Therefore, it is promising when states such as Arizona recognize this need and mandate that teachers be prepared to teach ELLs.

It is troubling, however, when the manner in which teachers are prepared lacks attention to teachers' beliefs about ELLs and their responsibility to teach them. Although research shows that what teachers believe affects how they learn and how they teach (Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1996), asking pre-service teachers (who are mostly White, middle class, and monolingual) to examine their beliefs and attitudes towards ELLs is not part of Arizona's state-mandated curriculum for preparing teachers to teach ELLs (Arizona Department of Education [ADE], 2007). Teacher educators such as myself must find ways in which to integrate this aspect of preparation into the mandated SEI coursework.

In this article, I describe pre-service teachers' understandings of ELLs and the ways that their understandings evolved through participation in our SEI course. To provide the context of this study, I begin with a brief review of recent policies in Arizona that affect the education of ELLs and the preparation of teachers who will serve them. I then review two areas of literature: (a) what teachers need as a means to be prepared to work with ELLs and (b) the use of reflection in teacher preparation. I follow the literature review with a brief discussion of the current tensions created by the mismatch between the literature and the Arizona mandates. In an attempt to balance these tensions, I explain how I designed my SEI course, describing my research approach and findings. In the final section of the article, I present the implications of my findings for teacher educators, teacher preparation programs, and policy.

### Arizona Context

A series of events led to the requirement that all teachers in Arizona must take coursework related to teaching ELLs, beginning with the passage of Proposition 203 in 2000. Proposition 203 effectively barred and dismantled bilingual programs in Arizona and replaced them with a program loosely defined as “Structured English Immersion”:

SEI means an English language acquisition process . . . in which nearly all classroom instruction is in English . . . Books and instructional materials are in English and all reading, writing, and subject matter are taught in English . . . no subject matter shall be taught in any language other than English, and children in this program learn to read and write solely in English. (Arizona Revised Statutes, §15-751)

Although the law clearly delineated that instruction for ELLs was to be in English, there was no operational definition of SEI provided by ADE for more than six years after the passage of Proposition 203 (Wright, 2010). As the state struggled to design and implement its SEI model, many educators were preoccupied with how these changes would affect ELLs, but few contemplated the massive changes that the proposition would mean for teacher preparation. In 2006, after ELLs had been in mainstream classrooms with teachers who may or may not have been prepared to teach them, the state mandated and developed SEI training for all teachers (ADE, 2007). These policies significantly affected pre-service teacher education programs and, in turn, pre-service teachers.

Following the passage of Proposition 203, Arizona Board Rule R7-2-615 (Arizona Administrative Code, 2006) required that all teachers be prepared to teach ELLs. For teachers who received their teaching credential after August of 2006, this involves completing 90 seat hours (divided into two 45-hour blocks) of training. At the university level, this amounts to pre-service teachers’ taking two 3-credit courses related to educating ELLs in their preparation program. Without this coursework, they are unable to obtain their institutional recommendation from the university and are ineligible to receive a teaching certificate. While the SEI endorsement courses are offered at the university level, the curriculum for the coursework was developed by ADE. Additionally, ADE must approve all course syllabi and/or trainings that deliver the SEI curriculum for compliance with the state-mandated curriculum. Although ADE does not address how trainings/courses are to be delivered (in terms of learning experiences, texts/materials used, or assessment measures used), it does require strict compliance with the curricular hours attached to each objective. Table 1 illustrates the categories of the SEI curriculum and the hours associated with each.

The two SEI classes, as seen in the state curriculum, focus mostly on skills (strategies) for teaching ELLs. Out of the 90 hours of curriculum, 70 are devoted to “SEI strategies,” such as vocabulary development, grouping structures, and building background. There is nothing in the curriculum that addresses teachers’ attitudes or experiences related to linguistic diversity. In short, the mandated coursework does not view teachers’ beliefs about ELLs as a significant factor. The ADE curriculum essentially ignores current literature about the experiences with (Lucas & Grinberg, 2008) and positive attitudes toward linguistic diversity (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008; Téllez & Waxman, 2005) needed by teachers to be prepared to teach ELLs.

### Review of the Literature

#### ***Preparing Teachers for Linguistically-Diverse Learners***

For many years, the task of educating teachers for ELLs was discussed under the umbrella of preparing teachers for “diverse” populations. Language diversity was coupled with all types of diversity, including race, ethnicity, color, and socioeconomic status. In recent years, practitioners and researchers involved with the education of ELLs (August & Hakuta, 1997; de Jong & Harper, 2005; Lucas & Grinberg, 2008) have attempted to separate issues of linguistic diversity from the overarching research on diverse students. These researchers argue that preparing educators to teach ELLs involves specific competencies and dispositions related to linguistic diversity.

The move to emphasize linguistic diversity has resulted in a shift in the past decade’s literature, specifically in regard to the qualities that teachers need for teaching ELLs. Consensus across the literature indicates that teachers of linguistically-diverse students should have (a) experience with

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**Table 1**  
**Curricular Framework for the SEI Endorsement Course**

<i>Content Objective</i>	<i>Hours</i>
ELL Proficiency Standards	4 hours
Data Analysis and Application	3 hours
Formal and Informal Assessment	6 hours
Foundations of SEI	4 hours
SEI Strategies	49 hours
Parent/Home/School Scaffolding	3 hours
Flex hours*	21 hours

Note. \*ADE recommends that Flex Hours be put toward the SEI Strategies content objective.

language diversity, (b) a positive attitude toward linguistic diversity, (c) knowledge related to ELLs (e.g., their backgrounds, experiences, cultural norms), (d) knowledge of how students acquire a second language, and (e) skills for simultaneously promoting content and language learning in the classroom (Gándara & Maxwell-Jolly, 2000; Lucas & Grinberg, 2008; Lucas et al., 2008; Merino, 2007; Milk, Mercado, & Sapiens, 1992; Mora, 2000; Walker, Shafer, & Liams, 2004; Walqui, 2008).

### ***The Use of Reflection in Teacher Preparation***

Research recommends that becoming a professional teacher starts with the examination of one's own cultural assumptions and/or biases, which stem from our education, experiences with diverse groups, and our own student experience as part of a minority or majority population (Dall'Alba & Sandberg, 2006; Nieto, 2010). Drawing from this research, I have come to believe that learning experiences in teacher preparation courses should guide pre-service teachers to connect with their entering/beginning beliefs along with their assumptions and attitudes about diversity. I use a process called guided reflection to accomplish this. Narrative writing, autobiography construction, metacognition, and the use of metaphors about school, learning, and types of students are all helpful tools in this endeavor (Munby & Russell, 1990).

But simply identifying one's assumptions is not sufficient. Once pre-service teachers identify their assumptions, they need to be guided to consider how these assumptions "shape their starting points for practice" (Banks et al., 2005, p. 242). Reflection allows pre-service teachers to begin to understand their views about diversity and cultural differences (Smyth, 1989; Van Manen, 1995; Zeichner, 1994; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Guided reflection, as I use it in my course, provides pre-service teachers with opportunities to look at and understand the cultural and linguistic differences between themselves and language learners.

### **Tensions**

Although the SEI coursework does not require pre-service teachers to experience working with ELLs, or to examine their attitudes toward linguistic diversity, as a teacher educator, I consider it imperative that I create opportunities for pre-service teachers to reflect on their attitudes and beliefs about ELLs. Because students in my SEI course are undergraduates without an internship component to their coursework, opportunities for them to "experience" working with an ELL, or to even observe in an SEI classroom while they are taking the course, are limited. Therefore, I cannot ask students to reflect on their attitudes and

beliefs about ELLs as related to classroom experiences with language learners. What I can do is guide my pre-service teachers to reflect on their prior life experiences as a means to reflect on their present position on issues related to educating ELLs (Bransford, Derry, Berliner, & Hammerness, 2005). In this way, my course relies heavily on the use of guided reflection. Table 2 presents some of the learning experiences that I use in the course to guide students to reflect on their thinking.

These learning experiences, which embody creative ways to engage students in guided reflection, illustrate the ways in which I actualized

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**Table 2**  
**Course Components Designed to Emphasize Guided Reflection**

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<i>Component</i>	<i>Guided Reflection</i>
BLE/SEI Mock Trial	Allows students take on one another's perspectives and to see the ways they agree and disagree with ideas related to the benefits/drawbacks of BLE and SEI program models.
Course Texts/ Readings	Exposes students to ideas outside their beginning understandings, allowing them to reframe and transform their understandings.
Group Work and Discussions	Provides students with multiple opportunities to share what they know and listen to their peers' ideas. Students can examine the areas of difference and similarity as they expand their understandings.
Initial Reaction Questionnaire	Allows students to identify what they know about ELLs and how their understandings change.
Midterm and Final Self-evaluation	Provides students with an opportunity to reexamine their beginning understandings and asks them to state how their beginning understandings about ELLs have evolved, if at all. Students use course learning to explain how their understandings at the beginning of the course have been strengthened and/or have changed and why.
Quick Writes	Provides a weekly routine for students to document their understandings related to course topics and questions they have. Students revisit their Quick Writes on the Midterm and Final Self-evaluation to see how, if at all, their ideas have transformed.
Woodcock Munoz Proficiency Exam	Provides students with an opportunity to experience a language proficiency exam and to discuss what it means to be proficient in a language.

the mandated state curriculum in my course. Through the use of guided reflection, students have the opportunity to identify their dispositions toward ELLs and to think about their experiences with ELLs to date when they are mediating new learning in the course.

### The Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate pre-service teachers' beliefs about and understanding of ELLs. This study provides a description the preconceived beliefs of students who enter this course, which are based on their lived experiences. I show that students' understandings of ELLs are often based on deficit notions and narrow conceptions of English learners. I discuss how and why students understand what it means to be an ELL and demonstrate how, as the course progressed, students' understandings expanded and changed. The process of students' identifying their beginning beliefs and using them as a reflective tool throughout the course allowed pre-service teachers to build on their understandings while reflecting on their thinking. As the findings illustrate, students both broadened their previously narrow definitions and became conscious of the changes in their thinking about language learners.

I designed the study around qualitative research, in particular, teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Hubbard & Power, 1993), as it afforded me, as a teacher-researcher, an opportunity to understand both the pre-service teachers' responses to course learning experiences (in particular, the guided reflective practices) and their attitudes toward and beliefs about ELLs based on their involvement with course experiences. This study was situated in a state-mandated SEI course that I taught for pre-service teachers. Typically, the pre-service teachers in the course were in their freshman or sophomore year in college and had designated themselves as education majors but had not yet started their core education coursework. Students were attending a large university in Arizona, taking the first of their two required SEI classes.

Although all the students in my course participated in the reflective learning experiences of the class, as a teacher-researcher, I sought permission from students to use their ideas (from class discussions and their class work) in this study. It was important for me to explain to my students what I was studying and why I was studying it as well as to invite their participation. Each semester, I explained the study to my students. I promised that participation would not include any out-of-course effort on their part and that, if they decided to participate, I would not identify them by name in any presentation of the data. I explained that, if they chose not to participate, it would not affect their grade in



the course. Finally, I told students that they could opt out of the study at any time, for any reason. Over the three semesters, the number of pre-service students who participated in the study totaled 72; fewer than 10 students declined participation.

Data were generated between August 2008 and December 2009. All data collection took place within my classroom with students who volunteered to be participants. I used a variety of data collection methods that allowed me to teach and conduct research simultaneously (Hubbard & Power, 1993). I collected anecdotal records, documented observation when classroom activities allowed me to do so, collected student work/artifacts from course learning experiences, and kept a personal teaching journal. These varied data collection methods enabled me to collect data while I taught and provided for triangulation in the data analysis process.

For the purpose of this study, I focus on pre-service teachers' responses to one question on the IRQ, "When you hear the words *English Language Learner*, what comes to mind?" as a means of collecting baseline data on pre-service teachers' initial understandings of ELLs. I relied on pre-service teachers' written work, observations of classroom discussions, anecdotal records, and my teaching journal as means to understand and illustrate any changes, and reasons for them, in participants' evolving definitions of ELLs.

I analyzed the data using Erikson's (1986) method of analytic induction. Moving from whole to part, I read and reread the data. Once I began to know the data as a whole, I stepped away from the data and wrote out some assertions. I used these assertions as arguments to represent what I believed to be true of the data *as a whole*. Next, I changed direction and started working deductively to see whether each argument was evidenced throughout the data. I looked for confirming support for assertions across semesters and across different data collection methods, basing confidence on those that were evidenced from multiple data collection methods and multiple semesters. This process shaped two main assertions that stood the test of qualitative research: trustworthiness and warrant (Erickson, 1986; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). For each assertion, I offer a vignette to illustrate the action of the assertion. Vignettes stemmed from course experiences that I observed while teaching. Although the vignettes are unique to particular semesters and groups of students, they illustrate the trustworthiness of the assertion across the data as a whole.

## Findings

Through the following two assertions, I describe how students



originally understood the term English language learner based on their personal experiences. I show that these understandings of ELLs were focused on deficit ideas, narrowly conceived and that spoke to a presumed notion of English proficiency. I also illustrate how, as the course progressed, students' definitions expanded and changed. Based on data collected throughout the course, I show that the students both broadened their previously narrow definitions and became conscious of the changes in their thinking about language learners. For each assertion, I offer a vignette, followed by a discussion to illustrate the supporting evidence in regard to participants' beliefs about ELLs, the reasons for those ideas, and the ways their ideas of ELLs evolved over the course.

***Assertion 1:***

***Drawing on their past experiences, students entered the course with deficit and narrow understandings of ELLs.***

“They’re just a bunch of gang bangers.”

Rob sits in an imaginary recliner, hands clasped behind his head, legs stretched out and resting on the table in front of him. His relaxed body image matches his chosen attitude for the class. Things aren't a challenge; he knows everything, or so he says.

I make my way up the 26 stairs to the 13th row, where Rob is lounging in the very back corner, the farthest possible seat from the front of the room. I hand him a green index card, with the words, “I love ELLs 😊.”

I crouch down next to him, at eye level. “Here’s your quick-write from last week,” I say as I pass him the card. Even though there were only a few minutes before class, I had to take this opportunity to talk with him about his simplistic and snide written reflection.

“Thanks,” he says, his perma-grin unfazed. With a slight chuckle he says, “Yeah, I love ELLs.”

“So, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about; I didn’t quite get this. We asked for everyone to write about how their definition of an ELL has changed since the beginning of the class. Tell me about this, ‘I love ELLs’; what’s this mean?”

Rob, still as calm as ever, says, “Well, I love ELLs; who doesn’t?” Laughing as he talks, his sarcasm stings like a slap in the face. Drawing the attention he seeks each week, a few students around us turn to get in on the conversation as it takes an uncomfortable direction. I know it’s my turn to respond, and I choose my words quickly but carefully. I am feeling the tension between Rob and me, two actors playing out a scene for an audience of students. “I get the sarcasm, the smiley face at the end is a nice touch, but what do you really want to say about what you have learned about ELLs?”

“What I’ve learned? I *already knew* about ELLs. I know them; they’re gang bangers. I went to high school with a bunch of them. They’re lazy;

don't want to learn English. One of my teachers, he had to teach the ELLs, he told us he thought they were too . . . just gang bangers, just a waste of his time." As he speaks, he looks around, smiling still, making eye contact with students who were listening in. He's sitting up in his chair now, gesturing with his hands as if to say, "Am I right, come on, somebody's got my back, right?"

None of the students bites. They appear as shocked as I am with his harsh words stated in such a lighthearted tone.

"Your teacher said this? Did you know any of them, were you friends with them? Isn't this just a stereotype? Can all ELLs be gang bangers?" My words stream out this time with less thought. Rob's expression is calm and cool; his wide smile still spread across his face. I can feel my blood boiling. My knuckles are starting to turn white as I tightly grip the chair for balance. How I can even be surprised by things like this after eight years of teaching courses related to ELLs, I am not sure.

Before he can respond, my co-teacher, miles away at the front of the room, is bringing the class to attention for the start of class. Rob starts to talk over her opening remarks and the noise of the 75 students' settling into class. My ears feel numb. I see his mouth moving but can't make sense of what he's saying. The students around us are torn between attending to the start of class and watching the train wreck unfolding right in front of them.

"Rob, class is starting. We can finish talking later." I knew that this encounter had gone far enough for the moment. The students' wide eyes told me that this conversation should continue in a different venue, at a different time. Rob was baiting me, pushing as far as he could to prove that his reality was the truth.

As I made my way back down to the front of the classroom, I shivered inwardly, disturbed at how entrenched Rob was in his past personal experiences, at how much he believed that his experiences were the only truth out there.

*Students' understandings were based on their past experiences with ELLs.*

"I know ELLs; I went to school with a bunch of them."

Rob was an outspoken student in the group, and although all students did not view ELLs as gangbangers, the vignette above illustrates a key theme in students' beginning understandings about ELLs: They "knew what they knew" about ELLs based on their prior experience, or lack thereof, with English learners. Students justified their ideas based on where they grew up, with whom they attended school, or the friendships that they maintained. For instance, one student cited where she grew up as the reason for knowing that ELLs were "Spanish-speaking Mexicans." She stated, "I am from California and grew up about 10

minutes from the border.” Students who were open about their lack of experience with ELLs also described their experiences as justification for “knowing nothing” about them. As one student explained, “I never had the chance to experience anything related to ELLs throughout my entire academic career, as I attended private, Catholic school for both elementary and high school. All of my classmates were all native-born English speakers.” On the IRQ, students described the term ELL as one that they “had never heard before” because they lived in the “upper class area” or indicated that they did not see ELLs because “they just went off into their own class; we didn’t really know what they did in there.”

Along with citing their geographical proximities to ELLs and a lack of experience to justify their ideas, some students talked about personal experiences with ELLs, such as those cited by Rob. Students who attended high schools with high ELL populations shared stories about being the “minority in school, even though I spoke English!” These students, like Rob, spoke of ELLs as undesirables. They saw ELLs as people who took away from their opportunities in school, saying, for example, that teachers had to spend all their time with the English learners or that classes were boring because “teachers re-explained things to the kids who didn’t understand English.” Students talked about ELLs as the cause of restricted course offerings, describing how AP classes were not available because teachers were overloaded with ELL classes.

Despite the fact that students’ definitions stemmed from a wide variety of experiences, there were commonalities among their perceptions of ELLs. Students’ definitions were deficit based, narrow minded, and presumed common definitions of fluency.

*Students’ understandings were deficit based.*

“Honestly, being an Arizonian (since we are so close to the border),  
I think of someone who is Hispanic as only speaking Spanish.”

Students defined ELLs as foreigners, immigrants (illegal), or “different.” When students described a national identity for an ELL, it was most often “Mexican,” quickly followed by “Spanish speaking.” Students stated that ELLs were “a recent issue in Arizona, with Hispanics coming over.” They defined ELLs based on the ways that they were different from English speakers, including differences in language, homelands, and legalities. There was no mention of similarities that ELLs could have with English-proficient students. Students failed to recognize that not all ELLs are Spanish-speaking, even in the southwest. They also did not acknowledge that some ELLs come to the U.S. due to political or religious persecution.

Students’ understandings focused on the fact that ELLs did not

speak English, yet failed to include what ELLs do possess: abilities in their native language and knowledge of their cultures. There was no mention of the skills or resources (e.g., native language proficiency, cultural identities) that ELLs bring with them.

*Students' understandings were narrow.*

“When I hear *English language learner*, I think of a foreign student or immigrant who is not proficient in English.”

Students viewed ELLs as being comprised of newly-arrived learners. They described ELLs as “just moved to the U.S.” or “recent immigrants,” illustrating their perception of ELLs as students who obviously do not speak English. Students did not imagine that ELLs could have been raised in the U.S. and still start school not knowing English.

When students mentioned an age in conveying their perception of a language learner, it was always “a young child.” Students presumed that ELLs entered school in the early grades, when it would be easier to pick up the language. Although there were many pre-service secondary teachers in the class, no one mentioned that ELLs could be in high school.

Students focused on the spoken aspects of language, stating, “ELLs are students that can't speak English.” This evidenced a lack of consideration about other areas of language, such as reading and writing. Their definitions focused solely on the speaking aspect of language, i.e., ELLs are kids “that cannot speak English.”

*Students' understandings held inherent notions of fluency.*

“I think of a person who does not speak fluent English.”

Notions of fluency abounded in students' beliefs about ELLs. Students saw an ELL as someone who is not yet proficient, who does not speak fluent English, but none of the students defined what it meant to be proficient. It seemed that the students were comfortable with an inherent notion of proficiency, presuming that others held the same idea as to what it means to be proficient in a language.

From the first night of class, students' understandings of the term ELL were filled with issues of political strife (ELLs = illegal immigrants), narrow ideas of ELLs (ELLs = Spanish-speaking Mexican students), and a blind faith in the use of “English proficiency” as a benchmark for identifying what ELLs lack. I point out these themes in students' thinking, not to highlight the limitations of their knowledge but, rather, to emphasize that students enter the course with common and predetermined beliefs about ELLs.

Moving beyond how and why students originally defined the term ELL, I assert that students made conscious changes to their beginning understandings about ELLs. Students' last assignment for the course was to complete a final self-evaluation of their learning. I asked students to think back on their original understandings of ELLs and to describe how, if at all, their beliefs had evolved. To this end, students described how their original thoughts had been strengthened or changed. Based on data from this final assignment, I developed Assertion 2.

***Assertion 2:***

***By the end of the course, students became aware of how their original understandings of ELLs had developed.***

“If I were asked this today . . .”

“It’s weird, right? Reading back over these? Wow,” Jill says while picking up a card, reading it, and exchanging it for another. For tonight’s class, I have passed back students’ weekly “Quick Writes,” asking them to read through them, think about them, and talk with their peers about what they see and feel in their previous reflections.

Small groups are dispersed throughout the room with their past Quick Writes spread out in front of them. Although not every group is enthralled with the process (I can see some students sending text messages with their phones haphazardly hidden below the tabletop and laptops open with the blue and white Facebook header across the top of the screen), Jill’s group is hard at work. The three girls sit side by side along the long narrow table that is bolted to the ground. They have forced their chairs and bodies to contort so they can arrange themselves in a semi-circle for the group discussion. Colored index cards are spread over their portion of the work space, evidence of ten-plus weeks of reflective writing that they have completed since the beginning of the course.

Referring to the first week’s prompt, “What do you think of when you hear the words English language learner?” Allie holds up her card for the other two to see. “Look at this—look at how short it is! All I wrote was ‘someone who doesn’t speak English.’ If we were asked this today, I think I could write for pages about it. ELLs are so much more than kids learning English.”

“Here’s mine,” Stacey says, picking up a green card. “Someone who doesn’t speak English fluently.” She starts to chuckle. “Remember when we took that language test? We didn’t know the answers. We speak English, but couldn’t pass the test; we’re probably ELLs!”

I’m glad to hear that it was time well spent to have the class take the Woodcock Munoz English Proficiency Test typically given to ELLs to determine English abilities. The class had been aghast at how many questions they had missed, even though they were all native English speakers. It appeared that the experience challenged their notions of

what it means to be proficient and the “best” way to assess students’ English abilities.

*Students’ final self-evaluations indicated that they were aware of the changes in their thinking.*

“On my Initial Reaction Questionnaire, I wrote that I felt an ELL was anyone who is learning the English language. That was literally my answer. It was short and brief. I think the reason for this was because I was ill-informed. Honestly, I had no idea what an ELL student was.”

When I asked students to look back at their ideas about ELLs from their first day, they discussed their thought processes behind their original answers. The reflective practice of rereading their earlier beliefs gave students an opportunity to explain their metacognitive processes over the course of the class—their thinking about their thinking. Students noted their original definitions were “short and shallow,” that they had “never really thought about” ELLs prior to the class. Students described their understandings as narrow, general, and vague and stated that, when they hear the term ELL now, “So many things come to mind.”

Students were admittedly surprised at how limited they were in their thinking. They described experiences in class that were “eye openers” and said their original beliefs were “naïve and ignorant.” Overall, students attributed their “ill-informed” ideas to their lack of experience or to being “blinded” by their experiences.

*Students’ understandings moved beyond narrow ideas and deficit thinking and toward ideas of acceptance and understanding.*

“The most important thing I learned in this course is that I am biased and slightly racist when it comes to bilingual education. I never realized this before, and I feel horrible for not knowing all the facts before evaluating non-English speaking peers.”

Students’ final evaluations described how they had moved beyond narrow and deficit thinking: “Before, when I thought of an ELL, I used to think of an illegal immigrant.” Students admitted that they viewed ELLs as a group and did not consider them on an individual level. One student commented reflectively on his beginning definition of ELLs:

I did not consider students from other cultures; I did not consider the obstacles that students entering from other countries would have to endure while being thrust into classrooms without any real background in English. But what I have come to understand and what is really hard to accept as an American citizen is that roadblocks are being placed in

the way of people who come to this country who sincerely want to contribute to our society. It amazes me that in a country that was founded on a premise that "All men are created equal," and in a country where almost everyone is a descendant of immigrants, people with covert agendas are still being able to practice a kind of soft racism.

The students in the course also came to realize that it was important not only to know who ELLs are but also to know the struggles or challenges that they face:

I have gained a lot of insight as to what they go through, how to handle their situation in the most effective way possible and what to do as a teacher to make them feel more welcome and comfortable in our school. They are kids just like the kids who speak English: They need to be taken care of, loved by parents, teachers, and other peers.

As students grew in their desire to understand ELLs, they came to acknowledge that ELLs brought with them native languages and cultures that needed to be preserved: "ELLs should be allowed to keep their culture and their language even in the mainstream classroom." Students started seeing an ELL not just as "someone who can't speak English" but as a person. These growing understandings motivated them to consider ways that they could teach and positively influence children's lives: "I have learned that culture does not have to be an obstacle to overcome for students of different backgrounds but can actually lead to greater learning opportunities and a stronger community."

*Students' narrow understandings of ELLs broadened.*

"My definition has changed dramatically to become much more broad. Every ELL is different, each coming from different countries, cultures, backgrounds, families, and personal experiences."

This statement, made by one student, struck me as significant because I witnessed the ways that students tried to expand their definitions to include the specific differences that they had learned about the group labeled as ELL. The end of the course demonstrated students' growth as they described ELLs in ways that were "more specific and broadened at the same time." The students moved beyond their limited vision of an ELL as a young, recently arrived, Spanish-speaking Mexican. Students' revised definitions stated that an ELL could be someone who spoke Spanish, but not necessarily: "ELLs come from a variety of backgrounds and are not just Hispanics." They broadened their definitions to go beyond young kids: "I did not consider the fact that there are many English language learners that do not start learning English until high school because they move to the United States at an older age." They also be-



came aware that not all ELLs were recently arrived immigrants, that they could be someone who “was raised in America but started school not knowing any English.”

While students’ updated definitions still held to ideas of proficiency without defining what it meant to be “proficient,” they broadened these definitions to acknowledge that English language learners could have “varying degrees of language abilities.” They also noted that there were different types of language that students needed to learn, besides academic English. They acknowledged that ELLs might need access to social language. Students came to understand that there is a lot more to learning a language than just knowing how to speak it, stating, “I now know that there are many different types of English that ELLs have to learn, including conversational and academic English.” Students’ original definitions focused on English language learners as people who were learning *how to speak* English. At the end of the course, their definitions broadened to include the fact that ELLs were learning many things, not just how to speak English.

Students also shared ideas about ELLs that went beyond language: “I now wonder what cultural changes [ELLs] may have to cope with while learning a completely new language at the same time.” They acknowledged that ELLs were learning new customs, new cultures, and, possibly, school norms and that they needed “all the assistance they can get.” Students became aware that, to fully understand who ELLs are, they needed to see everything about them: “There are all kinds of needs that must be met and explored to efficiently teach these students.”

At the beginning of the semester, the students were quick to define the term English language learner. Yet, when prompted to do so again at the end of the course, the groups problematized the idea of defining such a diverse group with one label: “The biggest growth in my definition of an ELL is how broad the description of this type of student really is. I do not think there can really be an exact definition that does the term ELL justice.” As students expanded their ideas about language learners, it became increasingly more difficult for them to write a definition that was sufficiently broad and specific at the same time. Students began to question the notion of a one-size-fits-all ELL label.

### Final Thoughts

Although relying on one stand-alone course to address preservice teachers’ attitudes and dispositions towards ELLs can be problematic (Mills & Ballantyne, 2010), this study shows that, within one course, when given the opportunity to do so, students moved beyond narrow

ideas and deficit thinking about ELLs. At the end of the course, students recognized their limited thinking and were able to expand the way they define the term English language learner.

As a teacher-researcher, I believe that it is my job to offer pre-service teachers the time and space needed to examine their thinking. I cannot change my students' beliefs or attitudes. I can only create opportunities for students to acknowledge what they believe, recognize why they believe what they do, and offer counter-stories to challenge and renew their understandings. Ultimately, a change in attitudes and beliefs is the responsibility of the learner.

In states that mandate that *all* teachers be prepared for teaching ELLs, it is imperative that teachers who deliver such preparation embed in the course opportunities for future teachers to examine the intersection of their life experiences and new learning about ELLs. I advocate that it is time well spent.

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