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Teacher Perceptions and Education Practice for English Language Learners

Abstract

This pilot research study examined teachers' perceptions on language acquisition and their education practice for English Language Learners (ELLs). The preliminary results show that most of the teacher participants have insufficient training in language acquisition and more than 50% consider special education or ELL self-contained classrooms would most benefit ELLs.

Keywords: perception, language acquisition, education practice, English language learner

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study is to examine teachers' perceptions on language acquisition and how their perceptions affect their education practice in terms of language instruction and placement for English Language Learners (ELLs).

Theoretical Framework

Many researchers, educators, and parents have an increasing concern that many students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, such as English Language Learners (ELLs), have been inappropriately identified for placement into special education, resulting in disproportionality and ineffective instruction (Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011; Gollnick & Chinn, 2013; Hardman, Drew, & Egan, 2014; Sullivan, 2011). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), ELLs represent the fastest growing subgroup in the dramatic demographic school population in the 21st century. Therefore, there is a need to conduct a research study to address the concern by investigating teachers' perceptions on language acquisition and their education practice (instruction and learning setting) for ELLs.

Perceptions and Education Practice

What is perception and how does perception affect education practice? Perception is “quick, acute, and intuitive cognition; a result of observation; a capacity for comprehension; physical sensation interpreted in light of one’s experience” (Perception, 2011). The definition clearly explains how one understands and interprets an object or individual person based on one’s knowledge and experience. However, one’s knowledge and experience are frequently affected by one’s own culture. Understanding how human perception works is important because perceptions vary with paradigms for problem solutions (Kuhn, 1962). In other words, our perceptions guide us to make judgments and decisions for problem solutions regardless of good or bad judgments and decisions. For example, when teachers identify a child’s strengths and education needs associated with his/her own linguistical and cultural background (assessment) and teach accordingly (instruction), if the child’s linguistical and cultural background is not well understood, a child’s strengths and education needs will not be appropriately identified. Consequently, it may create ineffective instruction and a misplacement where he/she doesn’t belong. For example, if a child from a certain cultural background can’t articulate a consonant /r/

sound as in “royal,” the child may be considered as having language or speech disorder and requires special education.

Disproportionality and ELLs

With the significant demographic changes in the U.S. school population, meeting the needs of diverse students particularly those of ELLs has represented a constant challenge for many teachers and/or administrators. For example, do teachers understand language acquisition process, so they can be more knowledgeable and assess the language difficulties that ELLs demonstrate (assessment)? In other words, do teachers have enough knowledge and experience to distinguish language difference from language deficit and provide effective instruction in the appropriate placement (general education or special education) for ELLs? ELLs have been reported to be over-represented in disability categories and placed in special education. Ahram, Fergus, and Noguera (2011) showed their concern about the detrimental effects for African American and Latino students being overrepresented in special education. Sullivan (2011) also reported that many ELLs have been over-identified as having language disorders and/or learning disabilities and placed in special education.

Language Acquisition Process

Is language acquired or learned? According to Chomsky (1957), language is acquired because every human being is prewired a language acquisition device (LAD). Chomsky’s viewpoint represents a nature model which has been well supported by innatists and neuroscientists. Chomsky’s viewpoint explains why children can learn language faster than adults without understanding grammatical rules. According to Skinner (1957), language is learned through imitation and practice and practice makes perfect. Skinner’s viewpoint represents a nurture model which has been well supported by behaviorists and empiricists. Skinner’s viewpoint explains why adults can learn language through understanding grammatical rules. Krashen (1982) concluded that language acquisition is a natural language development process where learning is informal and spontaneous without studying grammar. Language learning refers to a conscious learning process where learning is formal and analytical with efforts to study grammar. Krashen (1982) added that children’s 1st and 2nd language acquisition processes are very similar.

Is there a critical period for language development?

A great deal of research has confirmed the importance of the critical period for language development, including the fossilization of accent and pronunciation after puberty (Brown, 1980). The concept of "critical period" is based on Hans Spemann’s study on embryo transplantation. Many studies also point out that children and adults learn differently (Long, 1990; Paradis, 2004; Ullman, 2001) mostly due to brain lateralization (Rice, 2002) associated with the critical period. It is self-evident that when the brain reaches a certain level of maturation (puberty), a second language learning and acquisition becomes difficult and the ability of acquiring a native-like accent and pronunciation begins to degenerate (Acton, 1984)

Inclusion/Inclusive education and special education settings

Inclusion, which literally means “integration,” is an education for all regardless of disabilities. The concept of inclusion is developed according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)’s Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). Although inclusion is not mandated by IDEA and inclusion has been supported by research, court cases, and educators, many school teachers and administrators continue to struggle with effective inclusion implementation. One reason can be attributed to significant demographic school changes in recent years and teachers’ insufficient expertise to cope with rapidly increasing diversity (Tran, Patton, & Brohammer, 2018). Accordingly, if teachers and administrators do not have understanding about language acquisition processes and believe an ELL’s language difficulties are due to language deficit or deficiency, the ELL can be placed in special education interacting with children with disabilities or in the ELL self-contained classroom where ELLs may pick up pidgin English from each other.

Methodology

Research Questions

- (1) What's the current status of teachers' knowledge and experience in second language acquisition? Do teachers perceive ELLs demonstrating language deficit and believe a special education classroom or an ESL self-contained classroom best benefit ELLs for language learning?
- (2) Do teachers believe that there is a critical period for language development and how is that belief associated with the placement and instruction of ELLs?

Subjects

A total of 420 participants both current graduate students and alumni of School of Education of a College in New York, voluntarily participated in this pilot study (a 5-point Likert scale survey with 21 items through Qualtrics) in 2017-2018. Due to the nature of the study, only 222 participants were selected to represent the sample of the study because they completed the survey with almost no missing data. About 50% of the 222 participants (ages 20-63, 194 females and 28 males) are certified P-12 school teachers and the other 50% of the participants were paraprofessionals, substitute teachers, and/or graduate students.

Instrument

The language survey has 21 items constructed according to Literature Review with both qualitative and quantitative questions. There are 5 items for Experience (1-5), 7 items for Knowledge and Instruction (6-12), 3 items for Placement (13-15), 6 items for Perception (16-18 for language deficit view & 19-21 for language difference view). The boldface numbers indicate those reverse scored items on a 5-point Likert scale prior to computing the total score for a certain category.

Data Sources

Data collection began right after the IRB's approval for this pilot study. Initially, about over 6000 current graduate students and alumni of School of Education of a College in New York were invited to participate in this pilot research study conducted in 2017-2018. About 650 participants voluntarily responded to the survey within the data collection period. Among the 650 voluntary participants, 230 participants did not complete the survey and only 222 responses were completed with almost no missing data. The collected data for this study were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively based on the 222 responses. For quantitative analysis with SPSS (v. 25), Descriptive Statistics (Frequencies and Somers'*d* [symmetric]) were run to answer both research questions. All statistical results were evaluated at $p < .05$ to obtain statistical significance.

Results

- (1) What's the current status of teachers' knowledge and experience in second language acquisition? Do teachers perceive ELLs demonstrating language deficit and consider a special education classroom or an ESL self-contained classroom best benefits ELLs for language learning?

Here are overall preliminary results:

RQ (1.1)

Based on the findings, there is a concern about the current status of teachers' knowledge and experience in second language acquisition. The results show that most participants (76.1%) have never taken L2 acquisition courses and half of participants (51.4%) have no L2 learning experience but a large portion of participants (68.5%) have taught ELLs. In addition, many participants consider it challenging for teaching ELLs (39.6%) and working with ELL parents (34.7%). Evidently, there is a need to help teachers to understand second language acquisition, so they will feel more positive to work with ELLs and their parents (see Table 1). The qualitative findings of those participants who consider it challenging for teaching ELLs (39.6%) and working with ELL parents (34.7%) share common reasons, such as difficulty with pedagogy/differentiated instruction, language barriers and cultural differences, difficult to meet diverse needs, and parental involvement. Language barriers and cultural differences represent the most significant challenge.

Table 1
Teachers' Current Knowledge and Experience in Second Language Acquisition

Questions	Count	Total Count	Percent
Have never taken L2 acquisition courses	169	222	76.1
No L2 learning experience	114	222	51.4
Have taught ELLs	152	222	68.5
Challenging for teaching ELLs	88	222	39.6
Challenging for working with ELL parents	77	222	34.7

RQ (1.2)

Based on the finding, there is a positive correlation between total placement and total deficit view among 220 participants, which is statistically significant ($d = .189, p < .01$; see Table 2). This indicates that there is an overall deficit view towards the language difficulty that ELLs demonstrate and a special education learning setting or an ELL self-contained classroom will best benefit ELLs. For example, there is a positive correlation between LD and special education among 222 participants, which is statistically significant ($d = .198, p < .01$; see Table 3); LD & ELL self-contained classroom, which is statistically significant ($d = .242, p < .01$; see Table 4).

Table 2

Total Placement and Total Perception

Directional Measures

			Value	Asymptotic Standard Error ^a	Approximate T ^b	Approximate Significance
Ordinal by Ordinal	Somers' d	Symmetric	.189	.048	3.967	.000
		TPdef Dependent	.190	.048	3.967	.000
		TPlacement Dependent	.189	.048	3.967	.000

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

Table 3

LD & Special Education

Directional Measures

			Value	Asymptotic Standard Error ^a	Approximate T ^b	Approximate Significance
Ordinal by Ordinal	Somers' d	Symmetric	.198	.057	3.442	.001
		Q16_P_def_LD_16R Dependent	.197	.057	3.442	.001
		Q14_Kn_PI_SpEd_14R Dependent	.198	.058	3.442	.001

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

Table 4

LD & ELL Self-Contained Classroom

Directional Measures

			Value	Asymptotic Standard Error ^a	Approximate T ^b	Approximate Significance
Ordinal by Ordinal	Somers' d	Symmetric	.239	.061	3.924	.000
		Q16_P_def_LD_16R Dependent	.237	.060	3.924	.000
		Q15_Kn_PI_ELL_SC_15 R Dependent	.242	.062	3.924	.000

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

(2) Do teachers believe that there is a critical period for language development and how is that belief associated with the placement and instruction of ELLs?

A large portion of participants (82%) believe that understanding the concept of critical period is important but the association between understanding the critical period and the inclusive setting is not statistically significant ($d = .036, p > .05$; see Table 5). Rather, there is a positive association between understanding the critical period and the disagreement in placing ELLs in the special education setting, which is statistically significant ($d = .127, p < .05$; see Table 6). This indicates that there is a tendency to place ELLs in special education despite teachers' belief that there is a critical period for language development. The results of the study also show that there is a positive association between understanding the concept of critical period and learning an ELL's culture, which is statistically significant ($d = .117, p < .05$; see Table 7). This indicates that understanding critical period for language development and an ELL's culture can help ELLs improve language learning.

Table 5
Critical Period & Inclusive Education

Directional Measures

		Value	Asymptotic Standard Error ^a	Approximate T ^b	Approximate Significance
Ordinal by Ordinal	Somers' d				
	Symmetric	.034	.060	.563	.573
	Q8_L2_Kn_Cr_im Dependent	.032	.057	.563	.573
	Q13_L2_Kn_PI_Inclusive Dependent	.036	.064	.563	.573

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

Table 6
Critical Period & Special Education

Directional Measures

		Value	Asymptotic Standard Error ^a	Approximate T ^b	Approximate Significance
Ordinal by Ordinal	Somers' d				
	Symmetric	.117	.059	1.974	.048
	Q8_L2_Kn_Cr_im Dependent	.108	.055	1.974	.048
	Q14_Kn_PI_SpEd_14R Dependent	.127	.064	1.974	.048

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

Table 7
Critical Period & Learning ELL Culture

Directional Measures				Asymptotic Standard Error ^a	Approximate T ^b	Approximate Significance
Ordinal by Ordinal	Somers' d		Value			
		Symmetric	.132	.060	2.174	.030
		Q8_L2_Kn_Cr_im Dependent	.152	.069	2.174	.030
		Q12_L2_Kn_In_ELL_Cul Dependent	.117	.054	2.174	.030

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the study, we can draw a conclusion. First, there is a need to help teachers understand second language acquisition, so they will feel more positive to work with ELLs and their parents. Second, there is a total deficit viewpoint towards ELLs associated with the placement of special education or self-contained classroom, which is statistically significant. Third, there is a critical period for language development but it is not associated with inclusive education, which is statistically significant. These results do not conflict with each other because these results help us understand teachers' perceptions on language acquisition and their education practice for ELLs.

Educational Implications

The results of the pilot study have evidenced teachers' perceptions on second language acquisition and education practice in New York. They are the indicators for the improvements of language instruction and placement for ELLs. The results of study have also further provided some insights for teacher education preparation programs with current education concerns (disproportionality issues) for ELLs.

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