

Chapter 2

Teachers Learning to Teach English Learners in an Online Community of Practice in an Urban District

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on a study that investigated the knowledge and skills for teaching English learners (ELs) that in-service teachers displayed during their participation in an online community of practice. Teachers' conversations were analyzed using a priori and inductive codes. Findings showed that teachers demonstrated an understanding of practices that support ELs in overcoming language demands that disciplinary content standards in the U.S. pose, including promoting ELs' participation, teaching language within content and in the four modes, assessing ELs' progress during instruction, and offering differentiated language scaffolds. The online community of practice offered in-service teachers an environment in which they engaged in learning tasks related to theories that they had learned and to their practice. Online communities of practice can facilitate information flow, peer collaboration, and content application in teacher preparation programs. However, tasks need to leverage technology tools affordances and to establish equitable participation expectations.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-5140-9.ch002

INTRODUCTION

Demographics of primary and secondary classrooms around the world are rapidly changing and becoming more linguistically and culturally diverse (Ball, 2010; Bartlett, 2015). In these more diverse classrooms, an increasing number of students face the challenge of learning content through a language that they have not yet mastered (Ball, 2010; Bartlett, 2015). Currently, most of these classrooms are taught by teachers who have not been trained to teach children who do not speak the language of instruction (Ball, 2010; Bartlett, 2015). In the U.S., the country in which this study was conducted, 4.6 million students in primary and secondary classrooms qualify as English learners (ELs) or as students who are in the process of becoming English proficient (McFarland, J., Hussar, B., de Brey, C., Snyder, T., Wang, X., Wilkinson-Flicker, S., Gebrekristos, S., Zhang, J., Rathbun, A., Barmer, A., Bullock Mann, F., and Hinz, S., 2017). Even when these ELs represent 9.4% of the K-12 student population, most teachers do not have formal preparation to effectively teach them the English language or disciplinary content in English (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2014). Moreover, many states in the U.S. have recently adopted learning standards that emphasize complex language and literacy practices that characterize the academic disciplines and that dramatically increase the linguistic challenges that ELs will face when participating and learning in disciplinary content classrooms (Valdés, Kibler, & Walqui, 2014). Therefore, finding effective ways to prepare pre-service and in-service teachers to teach the English language and disciplinary content in ways that address the learning needs of ELs has become an urgent matter in the U.S. and arguably in other countries around the world (Bunch, 2013).

In the last decade, teacher education initiatives have leveraged the logistical, pedagogical, and social affordances that technology offers in learning environments. In teacher education initiatives, technology use offers flexibility in program schedules and locations (Bennett, 2010; Shoffner, 2009), a variety of multimodal teaching tools (Bennett, 2010), and the possibility to capture artifacts of teachers' practices for different learning purposes (Kilbane & Milman, 2017). Moreover, technology can bring teachers from different backgrounds together (Williams & Warren, 2007) and offer them a conducive space to negotiate their perspectives (Pella, 2011). In the case of language teachers, technology based professional development can develop their awareness of the challenges that students' face when learning language (Wang, 2012; 2015); motivate them to address these challenges in their instruction (Shrestha, 2012; Wang, 2015); and when they are not native speakers of the language they teach, even improve their ability as users and teachers of this language (Shrestha, 2012). For all these reasons, technology has been used to connect teachers and create online communities of practice using discussion boards (Burgess & Mayes, 2008), reflection blogs (Luik, Voltri, & Taimalu, 2011), classroom videos (McLean & White, 2007), and social media groups (Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2009). With the mediation of technology, teachers are able to discuss problems of practice (Killeavy & Moloney, 2010), ask for advice or offer it (Burgess & Mayes, 2008); reflect on their practice (Luik, Voltri, Taimalu, & Kalk, 2011), and increase their sense of self efficacy (Vavasseur & McGregor, 2014).

However, most research addressing language teachers' preparation using technology has focused on preparing teachers as individuals (Wang 2012; 2015) –versus by engaging with others online- or on in preparing foreign language teachers (Shrestha, 2012). Only a few initiatives have leveraged the affordances that technology offers to prepare teachers who teach ELs (del Rosal, Conry, & Wu, 2017; Phillion, 2003; Ware & Benschoter, 2011; Ware, del Rosal, & Conry, 2017) by engaging with others online. Moreover, research in initiatives that have used technology to connect teachers in communities of practice to learn to teach ELs is even more limited (MacPherson, 2010). Addressing this gap in the

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